

TIME, CRYONICS, AND CULTURAL IMAGINATION IN KOREAN AND AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *THE PERFECT SOCIETY* AND *THE DOOR INTO SUMMER*¹

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Abstract

This article is an undertaking of a comparative analysis of two representative science fiction works from Korea and the United States, Mun Yun-seong (문윤성)'s *The Perfect Society* (완전사회) and Robert Heinlein's *The Door into Summer*, with a particular focus on cryonic narratives and their treatment of time. Drawing on Darko Suvin's concepts of cognitive estrangement and novum, alongside Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, the study examines how differing cultural values shape narrative structures, character motivations, and imagined futures. The analysis demonstrates that while both novels employ cryonic preservation as a shared novum, they assign it distinct meanings that reflect contrasting cultural orientations, particularly in terms of collectivism versus individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and temporal orientation. The findings suggest that Korean science fiction articulates time and human existence through a collective and future oriented framework, whereas American science fiction foregrounds individual agency and personal fulfilment. The article concludes that integrating cultural theory with science fiction studies offers a productive framework for understanding East-West differences in science fiction and provides a valuable foundation for further comparative research on Korean science fiction within global literary discourse.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Authors and temporal imagination in Korean and American science fiction

This study comparatively examines the works of two foundational figures in Korean and American science fiction, Mun Yun-seong and Robert Heinlein, with particular attention to how each author imagines time through speculative narrative. While both writers employ the motif of cryonic preservation, they do so within markedly different cultural and historical frameworks, producing contrasting visions of the future and divergent understandings of human existence across time. This chapter outlines their literary backgrounds and genre practices, focusing on how their science fiction articulates distinct models of temporal imagination.

1.2. Mun Yun-seong and historical time

Mun Yun-seong (1916–2000) is widely regarded as the author of the first full-length science fiction novel in Korea. Born in Gangwon Province, he experienced a turbulent youth during the Japanese colonial period, including expulsion from Gyeongseong Second High School after resisting a Japanese teacher. Although he published the short story *Cheek* in 1946, his sustained engagement with literary production emerged relatively late [Mun 2018].

At the age of fifty one, Mun Yun-seong won the first prize in the inaugural mystery fiction contest with *The Perfect Society*, which was published as a novel in 1967. Often recognised as Korea's first full length science fiction novel, the work exerted a decisive influence on the formation of Korean science fiction as a literary genre. Mun Yun-seong consistently advocated the fusion of mystery and science fiction, emphasising what he termed the scientification of mystery fiction. His narratives are characterised by careful scientific design and logically structured plots. His representative short stories include *An Incident in Denver* and *World Cup Special Operation* [Mun 2021], while longer works include the novel *Judgment on Japan* [Mun 2019].

Crucially, Mun Yun-seong's science fiction approaches the future as an extension of historical time rather than a rupture from it. In *The Perfect Society*, cryonic preservation functions not merely as a technological device but as a means of projecting a human subject across a long historical continuum. The protagonist's suspended body becomes a vehicle for observing the transformation of society over an extended duration, foregrounding questions of collective survival, social order, and historical responsibility. Mun Yun-seong's temporal imagination thus emphasises continuity, sacrifice, and the weight of history in shaping future human existence.

1.3. Robert Heinlein and biographical time

Robert A. Heinlein (1907 to 1988) is a central figure in twentieth century American science fiction, known for expanding the genre's thematic range and popular appeal. A graduate of the United States Naval Academy, Heinlein frequently incorporated his military experience into narratives that explore political systems, social organisation, and individual freedom through speculative frameworks.

His major works include *Starship Troopers* (1959), which examines citizenship and militarised society, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), which interrogates social norms and religion, and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966), which depicts revolutionary struggle in a lunar colony. Across these works, Heinlein repeatedly foregrounds individual agency, autonomy, and rational choice as defining features of human progress.

In *The Door into Summer* (1957), which incorporates the motif of cryonic preservation, Heinlein presents a markedly different temporal imagination from that found in Mun Yun-seong's work. Cryonics operates as a mechanism for reclaiming personal time rather than preserving collective history. The protagonist's movement into the future is motivated by individual loss and recovery, and the narrative treats time as a resource that can be strategically navigated in order to restore disrupted personal trajectories. Heinlein's future is thus closely aligned with biographical time, privileging personal fulfilment, romantic resolution, and technological optimism.

Taken together, these two authors exemplify contrasting temporal imaginations within science fiction. Mun Yun-seong frames the future through long historical duration and collective responsibility, whereas Heinlein conceives of the future as an extension of individual biography and personal agency. These divergent approaches to time provide a critical foundation for the comparative analysis of cryonic narratives developed in the following sections.

2. Cryonic protagonists and the ethics of time

Building on the discussion of historical and biographical time in the previous chapter, this section examines how cryonic preservation functions as an ethical and experiential model of time in the two novels. Rather than treating cryonics as a neutral technological device, this chapter conceptualises it as a form of time ethics, that is, a narrative framework through which the future, responsibility, and human existence are morally organised.

The cryonic protagonists, Wu Seon-gu in *The Perfect Society* and Dan in *The Door into Summer*, undergo temporal suspension and subsequent temporal displacement, yet their experiences diverge sharply along three analytical axes: purpose, temporal experience, and ethical orientation.

2.1. Wu Seon-gu and cryonics as collective time ethics

The protagonist of *The Perfect Society*, Wu Seon-gu, is selected by the United Nations to undergo cryonic preservation before the outbreak of World War III and IV. His temporal suspension, lasting 161 years, is undertaken voluntarily and explicitly framed as a sacrifice for the future of humanity. Cryonics here functions as an ethical commitment to a collective future rather than a strategy for personal survival or advantage.

Upon awakening, Wu Seon-gu enters a future society in which men no longer exist and social order is maintained through advanced technology and strict collectivist regulation. Individual freedom and personal desire are subordinated to systemic stability. Wu Seon-gu's temporally displaced body thus becomes a witness to long term historical transformation, positioning him not as an active agent seeking restoration of his former life, but as an observer embedded within an unfamiliar social order.

From the perspective of time ethics, Wu Seon-gu's experience is characterised by historical observation rather than biographical restoration. His suspended body bridges past and future, enabling reflection on the consequences of collective choices across extended duration. The ethical dimension of his cryonic state lies in sacrifice, endurance, and responsibility toward humanity as a whole. Cryonics in this context organises time as a shared historical continuum, within which individual identity is reshaped by collective survival and social continuity.

2.2. Dan and cryonics as personal time recovery

In contrast, the protagonist of *The Door into Summer*, Dan, undergoes cryonic preservation for explicitly personal reasons. An inventor and entrepreneur in 1970s America, Dan chooses temporal suspension after experiencing betrayal and dispossession. His cryonic state lasts approximately thirty years and is motivated by the desire to reclaim a disrupted personal trajectory rather than to contribute to a collective future.

Dan's temporal displacement into the future functions as a mechanism for biographical restoration. Time is treated as a resource that can be strategically navigated in order to recover lost opportunities, relationships, and personal autonomy. Unlike Wu Seon-gu, Dan does not experience cryonics as ethical sacrifice, but as a means of regaining control over his own life. His actions after awakening are oriented toward resolving personal grievances and restoring emotional fulfilment.

Within this framework, cryonics embodies an individual centred time ethics grounded in self-realisation, autonomy, and technological optimism. Temporal suspension allows Dan to bypass an unfavourable present and re-enter history at a more advantageous moment, reinforcing a conception of time as flexible, instrumental, and subject to individual agency.

2.3. Comparative perspective: Purpose, experience, and ethics

Although both protagonists undergo temporal suspension and re-emerge in future societies, their cryonic experiences articulate fundamentally different ethical models of time. Wu Seon-gu's cryonics is oriented toward a collective future, structured around long duration, historical observation, and sacrifice. Dan's cryonics, by contrast, is oriented toward personal recovery, privileging short term displacement, biographical continuity, and self-realisation.

These differences are not merely narrative variations but reflect deeper cultural imaginations of time. In *The Perfect Society*, time is conceived as a collective horizon that demands ethical responsibility beyond individual lifespan. In *The Door into Summer*, time is framed as a personal asset that can be reclaimed and reorganised in service of individual fulfilment.

This contrast establishes cryonic narratives as a crucial site where cultural values concerning time, agency, and ethics are made visible, preparing the ground for the theoretical analyses developed in the following sections.

3. Cryonics, novum, and temporal reorganisation in science fiction

3.1. Cognitive estrangement, novum, and time

Darko Suvin defines science fiction through the twin concepts of cognitive estrangement and novum. Cognitive estrangement refers to the intellectual distance created when readers encounter a world that differs from empirical reality while remaining governed by rational and coherent principles. This estrangement does not aim at escapism, but rather at critical reflection, allowing readers to perceive familiar reality from an altered perspective [Suvin 2016].

The novum is the structural core of this process. It denotes a scientifically or technologically grounded innovation that differentiates the fictional world from the reader's own and organises the narrative according to a new logic. Importantly, the novum is not merely a speculative invention or a decorative motif. It is the element through which science fiction reorganises perception, prompting readers to question established assumptions about society, history, and human existence [Suvin 2016: 79–101].

Although Suvin's concept of the novum has often been applied to technological artefacts or futuristic settings, this study emphasises that the novum can operate at a more fundamental level: the level of temporal organisation. From this perspective, cognitive estrangement arises not simply from unfamiliar machines or devices, but from altered experiences of time that disrupt conventional understandings of duration, continuity, and historical progression.

3.2. Cryonics as novum: From technology to temporal reorganisation

Both *The Perfect Society* and *The Door into Summer* employ cryonic preservation as their central novum. At a technological level, cryonics functions as a scientifically plausible mechanism that suspends biological ageing and enables human survival across extended temporal intervals. This aspect fulfils Suvin's requirement of rational plausibility and situates both narratives firmly within the tradition of science fiction.

However, the estranging force of cryonics in these works does not primarily stem from its technological novelty. Cryonic preservation has long been a familiar motif in science fiction, and for experienced readers it no longer constitutes a radically new invention. Its significance instead lies in how it reorganises time, reshaping the relationship between past, present, and future, and redefining the ethical position of the human subject within temporal continuity.

In *The Perfect Society*, cryonics produces cognitive estrangement by displacing the protagonist into an extended historical duration. Wu Seon-gu's temporal suspension does not enable the recovery of a previous life, but rather positions him as an observer of large scale social transformation. Time is organised as a collective historical continuum, within which individual biography loses priority. The estrangement experienced by the reader emerges from encountering a future structured by unfamiliar temporal ethics, where survival, responsibility, and identity are defined in relation to collective history rather than personal continuity.

By contrast, *The Door into Summer* reorganises time at the level of individual biography. Dan's temporal suspension allows him to bypass an unfavourable present and re-enter the future at a moment aligned with his personal goals. Time is treated as a flexible and instrumental resource that can be paused, resumed, and optimised through technological intervention. Cognitive estrangement here arises from the redefinition of personal time as something that can be strategically managed in order to restore disrupted life trajectories.

These contrasting uses of the same novum demonstrate that cryonics functions less as a technological spectacle than as a narrative device that reshapes temporal experience. In Suvinian terms, cryonics produces cognitive estrangement not primarily through technology, but through altered experiences of time. The novum operates by reorganising temporal perception, whether by extending history beyond individual lifespan or by rendering biography recoverable through technological mediation.

3.3. Temporal estrangement and cultural imagination

Viewed through Suvin's theoretical framework, both works can be regarded as coherent and effective examples of science fiction. Yet their shared novum generates distinct forms of cognitive estrangement because it is embedded within different

cultural imaginations of time. *The Perfect Society* mobilises cryonics to interrogate collective history, long term survival, and ethical responsibility beyond the individual. *The Door into Summer*, on the other hand, employs the same novum to explore personal freedom, emotional fulfilment, and the continuity of individual life.

Suvin's concepts thus provide a critical bridge between the technological premise of cryonics and the culturally differentiated temporal structures identified in the previous chapters. By focusing on temporal reorganisation rather than technological novelty, this chapter demonstrates how cryonic narratives function as sites where time itself becomes estranged, opening space for reflection on the ethical and cultural dimensions of human existence in imagined futures.

4. Cultural dimensions and the organisation of time

4.1. Hofstede's cultural dimensions as a narrative framework

To further examine articulation rendered by cryonic narratives to culturally differentiated experiences of time, this chapter draws on Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory [Hofstede 2001]. While Hofstede's model was originally developed within the field of social psychology to analyse value patterns across societies, this study does not treat it as a description of fixed national character. Instead, Hofstede's dimensions are employed heuristically, as a framework for reading how cultural values are narratively constructed and embedded in fictional worlds.

In this context, Hofstede's theory serves as an interpretive lens rather than a deterministic model. The analysis focuses on how selected cultural dimensions are translated into narrative structures, character motivations, and, most importantly, conceptions of time within science fiction. Among Hofstede's dimensions, two are particularly central to the present discussion: individualism versus collectivism, and long term versus short term orientation. These dimensions directly shape how future time is imagined, owned, and ethically organised in cryonic narratives.

4.2. Cultural dimensions and temporal imagination in the two works

When applied to *The Perfect Society* and *The Door into Summer*, Hofstede's framework illuminates how cultural values are mapped onto distinct temporal orders rather than merely onto social behaviour.

4.2.1. Individualism versus collectivism and the ownership of future time

In *The Door into Summer*, the narrative is grounded in an individualistic temporal imagination. Dan's decision to undergo cryonic preservation reflects a conception of future time as personally owned and recoverable. The future functions as a space into which the individual can strategically re-enter in order to restore disrupted life

trajectories. Time is treated as a resource subject to personal choice, management, and optimisation, reinforcing an ethic of individual agency and self-realisation.

By contrast, *The Perfect Society* constructs a collectivist temporal order in which future time is not owned by the individual but by society as a whole. Wu Seon-gu's cryonic suspension is undertaken for the sake of humanity's survival, and his awakened existence is subordinated to collective continuity rather than personal fulfilment. The future here is a shared historical horizon, ethically organised around sacrifice and responsibility. Individual biography is absorbed into collective time, and personal desire is suppressed in favour of long term social stability.

4.2.2. Long term versus short term orientation and temporal duration

The contrast between long term and short term orientation is most clearly reflected in the duration and meaning of cryonic suspension. In *The Perfect Society*, Wu Seon-gu remains in temporal suspension for 161 years, a duration that symbolically aligns with a long term oriented worldview. Time is conceived as extended, cumulative, and oriented toward sustainability and historical continuity. Cryonics thus becomes a mechanism for enduring history rather than escaping it.

In *The Door into Summer*, Dan's cryonic suspension lasts approximately thirty years and serves a fundamentally different function. The relatively short duration reflects a short term oriented temporal imagination, in which time displacement is used to solve immediate personal problems rather than to secure collective futures. The future is not a distant historical project but a near horizon that promises rapid restoration of individual satisfaction.

4.2.3. Power, uncertainty, and temporal control

Differences in power distance and uncertainty avoidance further reinforce these contrasting temporal structures. *The Perfect Society* depicts a future society governed by strict regulation and hierarchical control, reflecting a preference for predictability and stability over temporal openness. Time is tightly regulated, and deviation from established order is minimised to preserve systemic continuity.

Conversely, *The Door into Summer* presents a more flexible temporal environment in which uncertainty is embraced as an opportunity for innovation and personal reinvention. Dan's navigation of the future demonstrates a willingness to engage with temporal uncertainty, treating change not as a threat but as a condition for individual freedom.

4.2.4. Gender order and temporal ethics

Finally, the gendered structure of time is explicitly foregrounded in *The Perfect Society*, which imagines a female only society and stages a crisis of traditional masculinity. Wu Seon-gu's temporal displacement exposes the instability of gender

roles across historical duration, linking masculinity to questions of continuity, reproduction, and cultural memory. In contrast, *The Door into Summer* does not foreground gender as a central temporal problem, focusing instead on universalised themes of romantic fulfilment and personal agency.

Conclusion

This study has examined the ways how cryonic narratives in Korean and American science fiction articulate culturally differentiated experiences of time. Through a comparative analysis of Mun Yun-seong's *The Perfect Society* and Robert Heinlein's *The Door into Summer*, the article has demonstrated that cryonic preservation operates not merely as a speculative technological device, but as a narrative mechanism through which time is ethically organised, culturally imagined, and differentially owned.

This study shows that cryonic narratives function as cultural models of time rather than merely speculative technologies.

In both works, cryonics reorganises the relationship between past, present, and future, thereby revealing how cultural values shape temporal experience and human agency.

Three principal findings emerge from this analysis.

First, the two novels construct fundamentally different temporal orientations through the same novum. *The Perfect Society* situates cryonics within a framework of long historical duration and collective responsibility, whereas *The Door into Summer* mobilises cryonics to restore individual biography and personal continuity.

Second, the cognitive estrangement produced by cryonic preservation arises not primarily from unfamiliar technology, but from the reorganisation of temporal experience itself. Estrangement emerges from contrasting temporal ethics, namely, whether time is conceived as a collective historical burden or as an individual resource to be managed and reclaimed.

Third, cultural values such as collectivism and individualism, as well as long-term and short-term orientation, are translated into narrative structures that determine who owns the future, how far responsibility extends across time, and which forms of life are valued within conditions of temporal displacement.

The article makes two theoretical contributions.

First, by rereading Darko Suvin's concept of the novum through the lens of temporal reorganisation, it shifts the analytical focus of science fiction studies from technological novelty to altered experiences of time.

Second, by applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions as a heuristic framework for analysing narrative constructions of cultural values rather than as a model of national character, the study demonstrates how cultural theory can illuminate the ethical organisation of time in speculative fiction without resorting to cultural determinism.

This study is necessarily limited by its focus on two works and a selective theoretical framework. It does not seek to exhaust the diversity of Korean or American science fiction, nor does it suggest that cultural values correspond neatly to national boundaries. Future research would benefit from extending this temporal approach to a broader corpus of science fiction, including contemporary texts, other cultural contexts, and additional theoretical perspectives such as narrative temporality and reader response studies.

At the same time, it is important to note that science fiction in East Asia, including China, Korea, and Japan, has developed rapidly since the 2010s, demonstrating sustained literary innovation as well as growing popular influence. In this context, comparative studies that examine Eastern and Western science fiction through multiple analytical lenses, such as time, ethics, culture, and narrative structure, acquire particular scholarly significance. This article represents one such attempt, using cryonic narratives as a site through which different cultures imagine and organise time. Although based on a limited set of texts and theoretical tools, it is hoped that this approach will serve as a modest foundation for further advances in comparative science fiction studies, particularly those engaging with East Asian science fiction within a global framework.

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