Preface

Clanging cymbals and the steady thump of an hourglass drum draw women and children to the gateway of a Korean house. They know from the flood of sound in the alleyway that the shamans are doing a *kut,* and a *kut* is high entertainment. This account of shamans and housewives begins with a *kut.* My own interest in Korean women's rituals began with a *kut,* a boggling event in color, sound, and costume. To plunge into the *kut* means to be overwhelmed, amused, and possibly bored. Most spectators experience this gamut of responses. Women are the most numerous and enthusiastic participants, both as loquacious shamans and as delighted, slightly tipsy spectators. Sometimes the women drag their reluctant menfolk into the center of the action, tugging at their clothing or pulling them by their ears. These are the same women who, on village lanes and city streets, walk demurely behind their husbands. Why, then, do women dominate the world of *kut,* and what place do *kut* and the many other rituals women perform hold in Korean social and religious life?

This is an ethnography of Korean women's ritual realm—the rites that demarcate it, the supernatural beings who inhabit it, and the shamans who diagnose its vicissitudes and heal its ills. The rituals women perform in public and private, alone or with the help of shamans, reveal a complex system of belief and practice encapsulating significant notions of household, family, and kin. Some scholars consider these events the survivals of an ancient faith discarded by civilized men

and perpetuated by their more superstitious wives. Others suggest that these rituals give women, as shamans and clients, cathartic release from oppressive patriarchy. Both of these interpretations are circular. The social subordination of the Korean woman is accepted as axiomatic, then proven again in her religious enthusiasm. Missing is an appreciation of the participants and of the cultural assumptions that motivate them. Whether as shaman or housewife, Korean women wield positive powers. In cooperation, they perform socially essential ritual work. Their religious activities are a measure of Korea's distinctiveness within the Confucian world.

I describe in these pages the system of belief and practice I found among women and shamans in and around Enduring Pine Village, Republic of Korea. Since I focus almost exclusively on ritual life, I fear that the women of Enduring Pine Village will appear obsessed with the machinations of gods and ghosts. They are not. They make rituals quietly on appropriate occasions, then again, more vociferously in affliction. Ritual responsibilities occupy a small corner of village women's busy lives, but they hold that corner. The women know ample ghost stories for a leisure hour, but in the hurried conversations of everyday they speak of food prices, the latest school fee, children, and neighbors.

The ethnographer risks both melodrama and romanticism. I present the *mansin* as a professional who performs her services for pay. Those who consider the shaman a stock type for melodrama, an avaricious exploiter of the peasantry, might find evidence for such in these pages. That is neither my intention nor was it my impression. Those who deem the *mansin* a fraud might pounce on such lapses as a shaman asking for her rubber shoes in the midst of trance. But the village women who evaluate her performance have different standards of satisfactory trancing than the Western connoisseur.

More likely, I might be charged with romanticizing what I describe. The Western ethnographer seeks exotic customs while some village women discard rituals as bothersome, expensive, and, to their minds, useless. I will discuss some of the considerations that inform this choice. Risking both romanticism and melodrama, I describe what I saw and heard, shaded by professional training and individual perception. Where possible, I provide free translations of the women's own explanations. Eliciting these explanations was not always easy. Egged on by kinswomen and neighbors, a woman giggled and blushed to tell

the anthropologist how the *mansin* had exorcised a ghost from her child. With the women I knew best, the response was different. They considered me an ignorant young female in need of a practical education rather than a foreign scholar who would judge them. They spoke with authority and some pride in their knowledge of gods and rituals.

I carried some anthropological assumptions to the field and held onto them through the researching and writing of this study. I assumed that the different rituals men and women perform would reveal, through their form, content, and expressed objectives, the different perimeters of men's and women's concerns and authority in households and families. I assumed that a woman's dealings with different categories of the supernatural would have corporeal parallels in different kinds of social relationships, and that stressful relations with the supernatural would provide metaphoric clues to stressful relations among the living. My interpretations, informed by these assumptions, are distinguished in the text from the quoted wisdom of shamans and other village women.

Korean expressions are romanized according to the McCune-Reischauer system. Following Korean convention, surnames precede given names. Korean scholars who publish in English as well as Korean often adopt personal romanizations for their own names, which I have also used when referring to their work. Since most American libraries catalogue Korean-language works according to McCune-Reischauer romanizations, these have been added to the bibliography where bilingual or Korean-language works are cited. For example, Lee, Kwang-kyu [Yi Kwang-gyu]; Yim, Suk-jay [Im Suk-che].

A few other conventions are my own. Koreans commonly use the term *mudang* for both shaman and hereditary priestess, and this is the term most often used in English-language accounts of Korea. Since the term is not only imprecise but also derogatory, I refer to *mudang* only when citing sources that do not make a clear distinction between shaman and priestess. I prefer the more polite and localized title *mansin* (pronounced man-shin), the term I used to address the shamans I knew.

Mansin have professional nicknames, the Chatterbox Mansin, the Boil-face Mansin, the Town Mansin. By Korean etiquette adults are not addressed by their given names. Village women are identified as the mothers of village children, Yongsu's Mother, Okkyŏng's Mother, Munae's Mother. I use these baby-mother *(aegiŏmma)* titles for the

mansin and village women I knew best. Some women are known by where they live, the Tile-roof Auntie, the Hilltop Auntie, the Beside-the-Road Mansin, or by what they do, the Noodle Shop Auntie, the Rice Shop Auntie. Any woman is politely an aunt or a grandmother, depending on her age. All of the names given in the text are fictitious.

Throughout I refrain from such condescending qualifiers as "Korean women believe, or think, that . . ." I describe the workings of the supernatural as they were described to me, rendering a belief system in its own terms, "A god was angry because . . .," "She was possessed by her grandmother because . . ." I let the women of Enduring Pine Village present themselves in their own words. They have little enough chance to address a broader audience, and they have much to tell us.

Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits completes a long journey from an early inspiration, through the research and writing of a dissertation, to the preparation of a book. I am indebted to the many people I encountered along the way, many more than I can mention here. My oldest debt is to Dr. Lee Du-hyun, who first introduced me to the world of shaman ritual and tempered my youthful enthusiasm with wisdom and patience. This book is dedicated to him in appreciation of his years of generosity to foreign scholars.

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