

Preface

In the late 1970s, I lived in a Korean village and wrote about a shaman I call “Yongsu’s Mother” and her colleagues and clients. In the intervening decades South Korea became an urbanized, high-tech, and relatively prosperous place, and all of us got older. This book contains observations on a changing world of shaman practice in the years before and after the turn of the millennium, with some backward glances to that first fieldwork of thirty years ago. In this account, I make a case for shamans *inside* Korean modernity, not only as the adversarial objects of modernity talk but, more significantly, as doers who engage anxious moments in the present tense through drum song, divine prognostication, and humorous repartee.

Most of the shamans in this book are *mansin* (pronounced “mahn-shin”), charismatic shamans, who perform the regional traditions of Seoul, and nearly all of the shamans in this book are women; I use the pronoun “she” with only rare exceptions. I have known some of these women since my first fieldwork in the 1970s, but others are new acquaintances whom I met either through my old contacts or during observations in commercial shaman shrines beginning in the 1990s. Although all of the major rituals that I describe are in the Seoul style (*Hanyang kut*, *Hansöng kut*), some of my conversation partners practice other traditions. Some are either refugees from North Korea or southerners who were initiated into regional traditions brought south by refugees or earlier migrants. These shamans would also be called *mansin*, but others, from central Korea or further south, would not. The term “*mudang*” is more widely known and covers both the *mansin* and the hereditary *tan’gol mudang* of Korea’s southern provinces, but “*mudang*” can be derogatory and I avoided using it in my first book. Besides, it is imprecise. More than thirty years ago, a distinguished Korean folklorist complained that a variety of exorcists, diviners, and other popular religious practitioners who do not perform *kut* were inappropriately called *mudang* (Yim 1970). In the present, the question of who is a *mudang* has only become more muddled. Although the term is now used very broadly, many shamans, including some of my old acquaintances, have taken to

calling each other “*posal*” (bodhisattva) in the manner of women who tend Buddhist temples, while others resent this seeming equation of their work with that of the *tongja posal*, diviners who are assisted by dead children. Shaman advocacy organizations sometimes use the term “*musogin*” (people who do *mu*, or shaman practices) and sometimes refer to their membership as *sindo* (believers) or *musindo* (believers in the ways of *mu*), approximating a language of organized religions. One articulate young shaman expressed impatience with verbal circumlocutions in a manner that recalled the full-circling of politically correct language on American university campuses: “A *mudang* is a *mudang*.” Thus while I sympathize with those who would enjoin me to “use the term they use themselves,” the matter is not so simple, and “shaman” is no more nor less adequate than any other option, particularly where the speaker’s remarks imply broad generalization, as in “we *posal*,” “young *mudang* today,” or simply “us.”

I distinguish “gods” (*sin* [pronounced “shin”], *sillyŏng*) from “ancestors” broadly speaking (*chosang*), as *mansin* do, and the term “spirits” (*sin*) for the whole collectivity, as *mansin* also do (“You’ve come back to learn more about the *sin*, haven’t you?”). Some Korean Christians have objected to my calling the shamans’ deities “gods,” since they are not ontologically transcendent beings in the Judeo-Christian sense. I agree with S. J. Tambiah’s critique that distinctions between “sovereign deity and manipulable divine being were the product of a specific historical epoch in European history and its particular preoccupations stemming from Judeo-Christian concepts and concerns” (1990, 20–21).

This study takes place in the Republic of Korea, or in the Korean language Taehan Min’guk, commonly referred to as South Korea. Liberated from the Japanese Empire at the end of World War II, Korea was divided into northern and southern sectors and occupied by Soviet and US armies, respectively. Cold war politics and the Korean War (1950–1953) froze what was originally intended as a temporary expedient into two distinct polities. Some units of generalization, like “Korean history” or “Korean shamans,” extend beyond the thirty-eighth parallel and require the unmarked term. “Korea” as an idealized nation transcendent of current politics appears, mirage-like, at different points in this account.

In the text, Korean names are rendered in Korean order, surname first, unless the reference is to the work of a scholar who has published in English with conventional English name order. I use McCune-Reischauer romanization for Korean terms and names except where another spelling is common (e.g., “Seoul”) or where an author has a preferred spelling known to me (e.g., “Dawnhee Yim”).

Shamans and other conversation partners appear under pseudonyms with a few exceptions. The shamans who performed Chini's initiation *kut* chose to appear under their own names in the video Diana Lee and I made of that ritual, a preference perpetuated in prose. I also make passing reference to the Cultural Treasure shaman, Kim Geum-hwa, and to a few other well-known shamans, citing high-profile public events and publications, including those of their own authorship, but I did not seek interviews with these already well-documented stars.

