

Arts of Asia Lecture Series Fall 2019
Seeking the Divine: The Lesser-Known Religious Traditions of Asia
Sponsored by the Society for Asian Art

How is a *Mansin* like a Painting: The Work of Shamans in Korea
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Relevant contextualizing dates for this lecture (Korea has a much longer history):

Koryŏ (Goryeo) Dynasty (918-1392)

Chosŏn (Joseon) Dynasty (1392-1897)

Korean Empire (1897-1910)

Colonization by the Japanese Empire (1910-1945)

National Division (originally intended as temporary) and Military Governments 1945-1948

Republic of Korea (“South Korea”) (1948-present)

Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (“North Korea”) (1948-present)

Korean War (1950-1953)

Military Coup d’état in the South (1961)

Restoration of democracy in the South (1987)

Seoul Olympics (1988)

Key concepts:

Shaman: This word comes to us from the Tungus people of Siberia. Scholars use “shaman” to describe religious practitioners who engage the spirit world for the benefit of the human community. Active engagement with the spirit world distinguishes the shaman from a spirit medium who is a passive vessel of a god’s or spirit’s presence. The shaman’s own body is the medium of communication that makes this connection a visible presence in ritual settings through trance behavior, manifestations of the spirit, and/or inspired speech. Typically gods, spirits, or other energizing entities choose a shaman and inflict them with illness or madness until this calling is recognized and the shaman is properly initiated.

***Mudang* (무당, 巫堂):** Common and very broad term for shamans and other religious practitioners in Korea who engage the spirit world for the benefit of human communities, usually through the medium of their own bodies. To do this work, *mudang* use music, song, dance, and other performance skills to secure the benevolent regard of gods and placate restless ancestors. In dynastic times, “*mu*” were considered outcasts who nevertheless, were called upon to perform socially necessary work.

Mansin (만신, 萬神): Within the broad category of “mudang,” *mansin* best fit the definition of shamans who are chosen by the gods they serve. *Mansin* must be able to manifest the gods present through speech, mime, and other dramatic gestures that accurately communicating the gods’ will in ritual setting. Among *mudang*, traditionally only *mansin* kept painted god pictures in their shrines. *Mansin* come from northwest Korea and from the Seoul region but today, women from all over South Korea are initiated and train as *mansin*.

Kut (굿): This is the most elaborate ritual performed by *mansin*. Gods and ancestors appear in sequence, with a team of *mansin* manifesting them in appropriate costumes. Typically, *kut* involve music, dance, performance, and copious offerings. *Kut* are held to address family crisis, seemingly intractable illness, financial trouble, to send ancestors out of hell, along the road to paradise, as a periodic acknowledgement of gratitude to the gods. These are therapeutic rituals where grievances and anxieties are addressed; they are also valued today as a Korean theatrical form.

Sin (신, 神): Commonly translated as “spirit,” or “god.” I will use “god” in this lecture as other anthropologists do when writing about popular religion in East Asia. Some *sin* are historical figures, some are broad categories of god, ie. “General” or “Spirit Warrior,” roles that may be inhabited by particularly powerful ancestors in the *mansin*’s or her client’s family.

Popular Religion: I will use this word in a broad and general sense for the practices of those South Koreans who are not Christians and who might, as the need arises, consult *mansin*. A Korean popular religious world view includes Confucian ethics, a Buddhist sense of morality and the afterlife, notions of cosmology adapted from ancient Chinese practice, and a common understanding that human beings honor different obligations and cautions regarding gods, ancestors, and ghosts. Such a worldview is not unique to Korea but with local colorations, is found throughout East Asia. Most contemporary adherents of popular religion simultaneously live within the logic of a modern scientific worldview, as many Christians do.

Background reading:

About *mansin* and god pictures:

Kendall, Laurel, *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1985).

Kendall, Laurel, Jongsung Yang, and Yul Soo Yoon, *God Pictures in Korean Contexts: The Ownership and Meaning of Shaman Paintings* (Honolulu, University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015).

General:

Hwang, Kyung Moon, *A History of Korea* (New York: Macmillan, 2016).

Robinson, Michael E., *Korea’s Twentieth Century Odyssey: A Short History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007).