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Kendall/Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF

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When I asked the shaman Yongsu’s Mother how things had changed, she said:

Nowadays the mountains just don’t have the same power to give us inspiration [myŏnggi] anymore. . . . Back around the time of the Korean War, the mountains’ power was fierce! If we shamans went to pray on the mountain, then the gods would tell us everything. If our gods told us today that a certain person would visit us tomorrow, then sure enough, that person would arrive, just as they’d said. And if some polluted person came to us [for a divination], if a woman was worried about her child, if a husband and wife had quarreled, if a daughter-in-law had run away, then the gods would show us these things, bright and clear. That’s how it was. Nowadays, we have to make a thousand prostrations to the gods and ask them, “Should this particular family do such and such?” In the past, it just came to us without our even asking. . . . You could be sleeping and then suddenly bolt up and run outside as if someone were calling you. Or you might be on your way somewhere and pass a house where, unbeknownst to you, there was some trouble, some problem in the family. The gods would send you right on inside. They would give you inspired speech and you would just burst out with it, telling the family, “Do this, do that.” There have even been cases where shamans brought the dead back to life. When you stop to think about it, there’s nothing like that anymore. Even though people still talk about powerful inspiration, it’s not what it used to be.

Like many South Koreans of her generation, Yongsu’s Mother bifurcates “the old days” from “now,” “around the time of the Korean War” (yugio sabyŏn chŏnbu). The empowered shamans of her remembered past, her collective “us” (uri ne), preceded her own initiation by at least two decades.
As in so many other reminiscences, in South Korea and in other places, Yongsu’s Mother evokes her own childhood as a touchstone of cultural authenticity (R. Williams 1973):

Around the time of the Korean War, there weren’t so many shamans like me. It was rare for the spirits to claim someone as a shaman. During the war, the mountains were fired upon and bombs dropped from the sky, so the gods on the mountain had nowhere to go. . . . People were running for their lives. Do you think the gods wouldn’t run away too? They came down into people. Nowadays so many people have the gods descend to make them destined shamans [naerin saram]. Today, even the sacred mountains [myŏngsan] are being stripped and leveled, stripped and leveled, to make roads, to build apartments. That’s why the mountains give less inspiration now than in the past. . . . The gods on the mountain used to live on the pine needles, but now they can’t because the mountains are being stripped and leveled. So don’t the gods just descend into human beings? . . . In the past, if you wanted to seek out a shaman, then you would have to walk twenty ri,¹ thirty ri, but nowadays, here’s one, and there’s one, and there’s another one. They’re everywhere.

Yongsu’s Mother echoes other voices in other places with nostalgia talk so familiar that the reader may have heard it all before, if not in Korea then somewhere else: the shamans of today do not measure up to their predecessors. The instruments of modern warfare, capitalist opportunism, and ecological appropriation have disenchanted the sacred landscape and set the old gods to flight. Filtered through our own comfortable dichotomies, we might easily miss what Yongsu’s Mother is actually telling us, for even in a nostalgic mood, this shaman is emphatically not describing Levi-Strauss’ “world on the wane.” By her account, the dilution of the mountains’ power explains the unprecedented frequency of initiation kut in recent years and the subsequent proliferation of shamans.

Yongsu’s Mother lives in an East Asian tiger economy where commodities are both copiously manufactured and avidly consumed. She describes recruits to the shaman profession as the products of divinely inspired mass production, with an echo of Walter Benjamin’s notion (1969) that the “aura” of a painfully exacted work of handicraft dissipates in assembly line goods. Yongsu’s Mother makes enchantment a relative condition, not foreclosed by the familiar litany of modernity, secularization, and rational-
ization but diffused and transformed. The individual shaman’s power may be less remarkable than that of legendary shamans long ago, but more gods are currently descending into more South Koreans, creating more shamans than ever before.

This study concerns Yongsu’s Mother’s present and its not-so-distant past. It asks how shamans and their clients have absorbed the profound changes in South Korean life over the last thirty-odd years and how, as Yongsu’s Mother does, they continue to make sense of the ground that moves beneath their feet. It describes shamans making sense in a place where common sense would not place them at all, not in villages, although some remain there, but in the high-rise cities of a relatively affluent South Korea, working with clients who are arguably middle class. It naturalizes a statement like “South Korea is a technologically sophisticated industrial society that has shamans” without using the word “still,” instead taking the juxtaposition of “shamans” and “technologically sophisticated industrial society” as a commonplace and not an irony and describing why this is so.

In response to so much that has been written to set down and “preserve” Korean shaman traditions, as in amber, I emphasize the open and mutable parts of shamanic practice, both how gods and ancestors articulate the changing concerns of clients and how the ritual fame of these transactions has itself been transformed by such developments as urban sprawl, private cars, and zealous Christian proselytizing.

The book is a qualitative exploration of changes in shamanic practice since I began my work as an anthropologist in a place called Enduring Pine Village more than thirty years ago. During that early fieldwork, I spent nearly two years in the company of the shaman, or mansin, I call Yongsu’s Mother, her colleagues, and her clients, listening to divination sessions, minor exorcisms, prayers, and gossip and following the shamans to kut, their most spectacular ritual. I also spent time with ordinary village women who spoke of their own dealings with the world of shamans and kut. These conversations and observations became the substance of my first book, *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits* (1985). Korean shamans captured my anthropological curiosity with the ways that they and the gods and ancestors they manifested conceptualized and commented upon other dimensions of social life in and around a South Korean village. This same curiosity has drawn me back over the intervening decades to witness their engagement with South Korea’s multiple economic, social, and political transformations over that same span. I have chosen the word “engagement” carefully because I do not mean “survival,” “preservation,” or “revival.” Korean shamans are not struggling to reconstruct nearly vanished practices,
as in Siberia or Central Asia, where shamans were effectively suppressed for many decades.² Although Korean shamans were harassed by political regimes, both colonial and national, for most of the twentieth century and have a generally adversarial relationship with South Korea’s Protestant Christian population today, reports of their inevitable demise are overstated.

Unlike many books on sale in South Korea and more than a few in English, this one makes no claim to a comprehensive statement about “Korean Shamans” or “Shaman Religion.” The Korean shaman world is a vast, diverse, and fluid place, and no single study can do justice to its entirety without reducing it to an inventory of signature ritual traditions. My true subject is change as refracted through the work of Korean shamans and the motley conversations I had with them over the last several years.

Otherworldly improvisation

Broadly speaking, shamans are religious practitioners who engage the spirits on behalf of the community, either through encounters during soul flight or by invoking the spirits into the here and now of a ritual space, conveying the immediacy of these experiences with their own bodies and voices.³ While heroic male shamans have dominated the literature (Eliade 1964; Lewis 1969), a majority of Korean shamans are women. Indeed female shamans predominate or are at least present and active in several other less well-known traditions (Tedlock 2005). The gods choose a Korean mansin and announce her destiny through a period of torment: ill health, madness, and other misfortune. When a woman accepts her calling, she mounts an initiation ritual in the hope that the gods will open her “gates of speech” (malmun) to inspired words from the spirits, enabling her to practice as a fully realized mansin. Korean shamans interact with gods and ancestors by divining their presence and will, by doing a variety of small rituals to placate them and sustain their favor, and by performing kut to feast and entertain them. Kut address affliction, send ancestors to paradise, and secure blessings and prosperity for client households. More than merely incarnating the deities and the dead, mansin call upon the spirits’ power to purify, exorcise, heal, and bring good fortune. Like many who write about these women and men in Western languages, I have called the mansin “shamans,” doers who engage the spirits in Shirokogoroff’s sense of the shaman as a “master of the spirits,” not merely their vessel or “spirit medium” (1935, cited in Jakobsen 1999, xiii). In Korea, “mastery” might be softened to “the ability to petition, entice, pacify, and effectively persuade the gods.
As a central premise of this study, the shaman’s assumed ability to speak from “out there,” to bring new material in the shape of visions or in the voices of spirits, makes shamanic traditions less an archaic survival (cf. Eliade 1964) than a dynamic domain of popular religious practice. As performance-centered rather than liturgical events, shaman rituals reveal a condition of nonfixate, of open possibility (Atkinson 1989, 12), of an emergent space where, in Schieffelin’s terms (1985), the real work of ritual takes place. Shamanic practices are thus a particularly fluid, adaptable, and, in many places, tenacious domain of popular religious expression. Accounts from Mongolia to the Amazon rain forest speak of shamans who act within and sometimes upon changing historical milieus, from colonization to ecological degradation. And like shamanic or mediumistic practitioners in other places, Korean shamans incorporate new, sometimes radically contemporary imagery into their work (cf. Balzer 1996a, 1996b; Humphrey 1999; Roseman 2001, 2002; Taussig 1997).

To perform kut, Korean mansin dress in the gods’ costumes, invoke the gods into the here and now, and perform them into being in appropriate sequence with music and abundant offerings. Learned procedures, songs, chants, and mime structure the kut, but the shaman’s performance also assumes an element of spontaneous possibility as the mansin dances and mimes manifestations of the gods and ancestors and speaks on their authority. She divines, performs dramatic play, and improvises on the basic structure of chants to mesh with the client’s own situation and the immediate circumstances of the ritual. As in other kinds of improvisational performance, turns of phrase that provoke laughter and particularly effective bits of mime tend to be repeated from one performance to another and then borrowed from one shaman to another. An assumed openness to visions and inspiration permits contemporary imagery. Chants evoke the ghosts of those who died in automobile accidents, on motorcycles, in airplanes, or—in the wake of 9/11—in skyscrapers. Gods promise that they will bring customers who pay “with cash and not credit,” and a shaman’s vision of raising a “building” becomes a more generally auspicious prognostication for different kinds of successful real estate endeavors such as my own purchase of a modest co-op apartment in New York. The ability of mansin to effectively mobilize words and actions to address contemporary concerns is the subject of chapters 5 and 6.

As skilled improvisers, Korean shamans (and their spirits) have much to tell us about the particular iteration of South Korean society that came into being in the late twentieth century. This characterization would seem
to contradict Ake Hultkrantz’ (1997, 2) much cited notion of the shaman as a “conservative factor in culture” and the shaman’s ritual enactments as a stabilizing source of tradition. A similar premise, that this is something old, fragile, in need of preservation, caused Korean shamans to be elevated as government-designated Human Cultural Treasures, beginning in the 1980s. My emphasis on the emergent quality of shamanic ritual does not belie the wealth of cultural knowledge contained in Korean shaman practice, the performance skills and ritual lore required of a fully realized Korean shaman, or the wealth of cultural knowledge she must master. While I describe shamans and their spirits as “agents of cultural production,” they bear no resemblance to the “New Age” shamans, “neo-shamans,” or “core shamans” who mobilize an eclectic spirituality for new cosmopolitan seekers. The Korean mansk I know would be horrified at the thought. In chapters 3 and 4, I discuss the unsteady balance between skill and inspiration, training and improvisation, in the career of a Korean shaman, and in chapters 5 and 6, some of the ways Korean shamans use their gift to address the specific needs and anxieties of their clients. New theatrical business and divine speech make sense to clients and other shamans when the spontaneous utterances of gods and ancestors are not only immediately personal and of the moment but also consistent with the sorts of things that shamans, gods, and ancestors have been saying and doing in Korea for a very long time.

Re-enchanting modernity

Since the sixteenth century, when Siberian shamans first appeared in Western travelers’ accounts, observers have been both repelled and fascinated by shamans’ capacity to make visible their encounters with spirits through spectacular breaks with quotidian reality—ecstatic movement, animal cries, and seemingly inexplicable feats (Flaherty 1988, 1992). As projective sites for fantasies of Otherness, shamans have been regarded as agents of the devil or purveyors of superstition, but also as seductive masters of magic (Hoppál 1989; Kehoe 2000; Taussig 1987), a romantic gloss that redounds to the benefit of some savvy contemporary shamans (Joralemon 1990; Laderman 1997). As the purported icons of ancient pasts, shamans bolster such quintessentially modern phenomena as the construction of ethnic and national identities and the commodification of spiritual experiences.

Shamans and spirits in South Korea muddle the logic of an older social science that made disenchantment the teleology of rational capitalist economies and modern nation states. Between Weber’s assertion (1958) that the modern, rational market has no place for spirits and Eliade’s romantic view
(1964) of shamans as practitioners of primordial religion, shamans are not supposed to be here at all. In the anthropology of popular religion, prior logics are already well muddled where witchcraft, spells, and enchantments are deployed against the vicissitudes and inequities of new markets and the precariousness of new states.9 Because the South Korean ethnographic present of this story happens to be both more affluent and more economically well developed than most contexts where popular religion is typically researched, it permits an even more strident affirmation of the durability of enchantment than would be possible in most other places (so far)—Taiwan, Singapore, and Japan would be other obvious exceptions.

“Authenticity” concerns me only insofar as, and indeed because, the notion of cultural authenticity is a contemporary South Korean concern, as it is in many places that have experienced recent urbanization and industrialization (Bendix 1997). A chorus of laments for vanishing Korean traditions has accompanied more than a century of Korean modernity, a chorus that Yongsu’s Mother and her colleagues sometimes join. The next chapter describes why this is so.

Writing on a new blank page

In 1989 and 1992, Diana Lee and I attempted to capture on video a kut like the one I had described in my first book, a large 1970s country party that articulated the concerns of a still-rural extended family, their kin, and neighbors, a kut like the one described in the first part of chapter 2. I describe one of these kut in chapter 1 as well. We assumed that we would film whatever kut Yongsu’s Mother and her colleagues happened to be performing, and that it would resemble the kut I had already described, in effect making my prose visual. But the kut that we found ourselves recording were held in different settings for different kinds of people, in a different social ambience from those I had seen before. I began to write about these changes, starting with a short conference paper that grew into a full-blown project, bringing me back to Korea in 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, and 2005. I caught up with Yongsu’s Mother and her colleagues, observing their work and talking to the mansin and their clients about past and present. Business anxieties loomed large in the kut these shamans performed, and to see if this observation held beyond their immediate circle, I spent the summer of 1994 visiting four different commercial shaman shrines and several shamans’ advocacy associations. Because the fates of petty entrepreneurs were indeed a prominent theme in most of these kut, the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, known in South Korea as “the IMF Crisis” or simply “the IMF,” brought me back
to the shaman shrines in 1998, and again in the new millennium when the crisis was past. I describe the shamans’ and spirits’ responses to a changing economic climate in chapter 5. I was able to follow over several years of recent South Korean history not only old friends and acquaintances but also several younger shamans whom I had met early in this new research.

The specter of nostalgia

Nostalgia stalks any project written with retrospective glances. It appears in this work in several forms: as a sentiment evoked by my conversation partners (about the diminished powers of mountains and shamans, for example), as a spectral presence in works that present Korean shamans as symbols of national “pastness” (cf. Morris 2002, 86), and as the anthropologist’s own liability of long-term familiarity with a place. Nostalgia has itself become a topic of academic inquiry, defined as the longing for a place of memory, or imagined memory, as the palpable sense of loss and mourning that some see as an inevitable consequence of the spatial ruptures imposed by what Rosalind Morris calls “the aching chasm” of modern and postmodern conditions (Morris 2002, 86; D. Harvey 1989; R. Williams 1973). Nostalgia adheres to inquiries into things “folkloric” and “traditional” on the presumption that “vanishing” worlds of village authenticity validate a common national past (Ivy 1995). As Susan Stewart and Marilyn Ivy describe it, nostalgia traffics in the ironic necessity of feeling loss, without which there could be no desired act of longing and no concomitant measure of progress (Stewart 1984, 23; Ivy 1995, 10 n. 17). In South Korea, for the sum of such reasons, a modern history of rupture by colonial occupation, war, national division, urban migration, and rapid industrial transformation renders nostalgia nearly inevitable and has made the study of folklore and tradition an impassioned South Korean pursuit. These endeavors have had much to say about Korean shamans, as described in the next chapter.

Svetlana Boym’s characterization is apt: “Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship” (2001, xiii). Anthropologists may be particularly susceptible. We sustain long-distance relationships with the places we study, our sentimental attachments buoyed by the memory of an intense first encounter as youthful field-workers. I recently read Professor Seong-nae Kim’s Korean-language translation of my first book, in which I stated, “For the Chón family kut, one must imagine a traditional Korean country house” (1985, 1). I had written of a one-story house with heated floors and sliding paper doors, two rooms separated by
an open veranda and set behind a wide courtyard encircled by a wall and gate. In the Korean language in another time, my graduate student attempt to evoke in New York what I had experienced in rural Kyŏnggi Province the previous year had become something else entirely, a statement nearly as exotic to an urban South Korean readership as it would have been to my Columbia University dissertation committee thirty years ago. Today it would take some effort to locate such a house in Kyŏnggi Province, where villages and rice fields have been given over to the high-rise apartments and mega-marts of burgeoning satellite towns. For a contemporary Korean readership, “traditional Korean country house” connotes vanished time or folk village re-creations. It is impossible to write these changes without recourse to words like “disappeared” and very hard to avoid that pan–East Asian cliché of apartment blocks gobbling up rice paddies with its connotation of a “vanished way of life.” An unintended nostalgia insinuates itself into a long acquaintance with a field site.

But even in the 1970s I had made choices that privileged a rural past tense. It was a traditional Korean country house, distinguished from urban neighborhoods of walled-in low-rise buildings, town houses, and new apartment block communities. Although I had lived in Seoul as a Peace Corps volunteer and had my first encounters with shamans there, I wrote a research proposal that described an imagined village setting as a place where I could observe quotidian social fields and the domestic dramas that might sometimes explode into rituals of shamanic healing; Victor Turner’s work (1968, 1969, 1974) was influential in my research design. But I was also taken with the notion, then current, that anthropologists worked in villages and, with the only slightly out-of-date (in 1976) assumption that South Korea was a predominantly rural place, best studied in a village setting. When I lived in Enduring Pine Village, it did seem refreshingly free of the shabby approximations of Western culture one found in Seoul in those days, or as I probably saw it at the time, there was less Western detritus to get in the way of real ethnography. In truth, it was easier to wander into households and join intimate conversations in the village than it would have been in the city, far easier in the 1970s than in subsequent decades when television is broadcast all day. When the South Korean electronics industry put wide-screen color televisions within reach of Enduring Pine Village families, it rendered conversation with an American anthropologist who speaks far-from-perfect Korean a less entertaining pastime than during that first field trip.

The relationships that inform this more recent study are fractured as a measure of how we all live now, episodic meetings over a stretch of several years, rituals performed apart from extended communities of kin and
neighbors, and interviews arranged by cell phone to accommodate the busy schedules of shamans. It is difficult not to wax nostalgic over the intimacy and leisurely pace of that early village fieldwork. As the memory horizons of the middle-aged claim various representations in South Korean popular culture (Abelmann 2003, 102), including museum exhibitions, even a foreign anthropologist is tempted to muster legitimacy from this same stock of memories—“a traditional Korean country house,” for example. This is small compensation for growing old, and I remind myself that, in the 1970s, people spoke of “the old days” as something that I had already missed completely.

As in my first book, I am still trying to do justice to the ethnographic present where and when I find it, to the various ethnographic presents that I encountered through the 1990s and into the new millennium as the sites of a living and transforming shamanic practice. I am aware that what I characterize as a dynamic popular religious form includes increasingly abbreviated rituals and that the buoyant village parties I described in the 1970s have become rushed private ceremonies held in rented commercial space. The following pages include several encounters with contemporary shamans who, like Yongsu’s Mother, wax nostalgic about the skill and inspiration of old shamans, now dead, the lost and forgotten content of rituals, now condensed and simplified, or the deference that youthful apprentices were once expected to show their elders, the deference the speaker showed her spirit mother in the distant past. As their honest scribe, I risk the very value judgments that I have eschewed in ethnographic writing. To escape the eerie replay of nostalgic loss and mourning, I write both with and against the grain of nostalgia, “with” to understand how contemporary shamans and their clients remember and imagine their past inside a larger South Korean story, and “against” by reminding myself and my reader that, in the 1970s, shamans were already the stuff of nostalgia and that this was almost certainly true in the 1920s and 1930s, when colonized Koreans first turned their attention to national folklore (R. L. Janelli 1986; Robinson 1988). Raymond Williams, Marilyn Ivy, and Svetlana Boym have noted, each in his or her own way, that “tradition” dies multiple deaths and its mourning accompanies each stratigraphic layer of lived modernity (Boym 2001; Ivy 1995; R. Williams 1973). A full appreciation of that lived modernity involves some analysis of these different layers and the place of shamans and nostalgia within them, the task of chapter 1. If the ethnographic present has a future tense, it includes the possibility of finding our shamans and our magic in such places as the South Korean urbanscape, the work of subsequent chapters.
Transformations and the work of shamans, gods, and ancestors

Chapter 1 describes a late nineteenth-, twentieth-, and early twenty-first-century intellectual terrain where notions of shamans and their work as objects of “superstition,” “culture,” and “religion” have waxed and waned. I consider how some of the shamans I have encountered position themselves against these labels, and the stakes they claim in the characterization of what they do as “folklife” or “religion.” This discussion appears early in the book to avoid teleological readings of shamans performing on proscenium stages or organizing themselves into an official “religion” as the logical end point to my story. Such a reading would obscure the vitality of grassroots shamanic practices in South Korea today.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 deal with “shamanship.” They describe how shamans enact kut, how they are empowered to do this work, and how notions of effective shamanship are being transformed and contested in contemporary South Korea. Two kut provide the “memory horizons” of chapter 2, a “then” in 1977, and a “closer-to-now” from 1992. The 1977 “crazy kut,” with several others that I observed during my first fieldwork, helped me shape my description of the shaman world. The 1992 kut, and others like it, caused me to confront how that world had changed, provoking some of the themes that I will be tilting with in this study: the implications of different ritual time and space, the prominence of business anxieties as a problem for shamans and spirits, and the question of “real” (chinja) versus “phony” (öngt’ori) shamans.

The ability to speak the words of the spirits (kongsu) is central to shamanic practice, and the opening of a prospective shaman’s “gates of speech” (malmun) is the central task of an initiation ritual. Chapter 3, “Initiating Performance,” tells the story of a bashful, reticent initiate, Chini, and the initiating shamans’ struggles to open her gates of speech. My analysis of hours of video, recorded by Diana Lee and Kim Asch, and the opportunity to discuss the outcome of this kut with Chini, her initiating “spirit mother,” and the other participating shamans brought me as close as I have come to understanding what a shaman is supposed to experience during kut and how shamans balance performance skills and inspiration to manifest their gods.

Chapter 4, “The Ambiguities of Becoming: Phony Shamans and What Are Mudang After All?” continues the theme of initiation and apprenticeship as old shamans and young apprentices reflect upon what it means to become a shaman today and how older patterns of apprenticeship have fared across a generation gap.
Chapters 5 and 6 are concerned with “gods and goods,” with clients, shamans, and spirits in the contemporary South Korean marketplace. Chapter 5, “Korean Shamans and the Spirits of Capitalism,” describes the kinds of problems that a universe of clients brought to shamans before, during, and after the financial crisis of late 1997. More than a sociological measure of who the clients are, this chapter shows how their anxieties, the product of both South Korean and global forces, were rendered meaningful within a schema of divine and ancestral causality. “Of Hungry Ghosts and Other Matters of Consumption,” chapter 6, concerns the performed interactions between clients, shamans, gods, and ancestors and how material objects, including new consumer goods, figure in this play. In Alfred Gell’s terms (1988), this chapter describes a “technology of magic” worked through material offerings of cash, food, drink, and clothing to secure the gods’ blessings for clients. In contemporary kut, offerings include new, sometimes luxurious commodities like imported whisky, as the gods and ancestors articulate contemporary moral dilemmas about having and desiring.

The rapid growth of the city of Seoul, both upwards and outwards, in the second half of the twentieth century produced an urbanscape where little seems permanent or even very old. Chapter 7 takes the reader into the mountains that Yongsu’s Mother evoked, to the shrines and sacred sites that constitute a shamanic landscape. It describes the peregrinations of some venerable old shrines, forced from their original locations by urban development, and the flowering of new commercial shrines on other mountain slopes. If urban development has reduced sacred terrain, cars and good highways have expanded the shamans’ access to sacred sites within South Korea. Some shamans have even made pilgrimages to Mount Paektu, on (North) Korea’s northern border, traveling through China to the accessible Chinese slope of this most sacred Korean mountain. Circuitous pilgrimages to Mount Paektu underscore the irresolution of a divided Korea, “the country broken at the waist,” and shamans pray on a distant mountain as part of an unfolding Korean story.