

# Seoul, the Widow, and the *Mudang*: Transformations of Urban Korean Shamanism

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Does Seoul, a city of eight million inhabitants, one of the planet's ten megalopolises, still have shamans? Can there be a place for shamanism in a country like South Korea, which is striving to be modern? Can shamanism survive at all in a country where the successes of Christianity have been celebrated by Westerners? Can it adapt itself to religious pluralism? What is shamanism's role in the urban setting? How does the fast pace of urban life affect its rituals? How is shamanism presented in the mass media? Is it beginning to emerge from the centuries-long ostracism imposed on it by official ideologies?

These questions will be explored in this article on the basis of data gathered on-site in the city of Seoul between the years 1982 and 1991. We will attempt not only to highlight several important facts but to grasp the overall process of transformation that the city is imposing on shamans and shamanism.

## Shamanism and Organized Religions

The Korean constitution formally proclaims the freedom of religion. It is the job of the Ministry of Culture (before 1990 known as The Ministry of Culture and Information) to gather data on the various religious groups and to calculate their membership. In 1983, the number of believers was estimated to be 15,585,000 out of a population of 39,929,000 or approximately 39 per cent. The figures in the following table<sup>1</sup> should not be taken literally but as orders of magnitude:

1. Korean Overseas Information Service, Ministry of Culture and Information, *A Handbook of Korea*, 7th edition, Seoul, Samhwa Printing Co. 1988, p. 130. The fifth edition of the same work gives considerably different figures (1983, p. 207), which causes some doubt as to the validity of the information.

	PLACES OF WORSHIP	PERMANENT MEMBERS <sup>3</sup>	FOLLOWERS <sup>2</sup>	
Buddhism	7,244	22,000	7,507,000	48%
Confucianism	232		786,000	5%
Catholicism	2,342	4,500	1,590,000	10%
Protestantism	21,000	32,000	5,337,000	34%
Other religions			365,000	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,818</b>	<b>58,500</b>	<b>15,585,000</b>	

Shamanism is not included the Ministry of Culture's statistics because it is not considered a religion (*kyo*) by the administration. However, a rough estimate of the number of "permanent members" can be made on the basis of membership (approximately 43,000 in 1983) in the union<sup>4</sup> of shamans. This amounts to more than one shaman per thousand people. The number of shamans is greater than the number of any single group of "permanent members" in the census. Therefore the group of believers who support them is probably more numerous too, even if they are neither organized nor officially acknowledged.

Thus shamanism, amidst the religious pluralism of South Korea, is doing quite well. It can even be argued that shamanism, more than other religious groups, is like "a fish in water" not only because of its polytheistic character (which predisposes it to acknowledge the existence of other gods), but also because it has not – at least in historic times – presented itself as a dominant ideology that excludes all others.

### Jesus Christ Does Not Speak Korean

To illustrate both the multiplicity of religions found in the capital and the ease with which members move from one religion to

2. The category of "followers" designates believers, adepts, etc.. Each religious association discloses their number to the Ministry of Culture and Information.

3. The category of "permanent members" comprises monks, priests, pastors and all others whose livelihood depends exclusively on the offerings of the faithful.

4. *Kyongsin hoebo*, 1984, 4. p. 4. This is the Bulletin of the Korean Federation of Associations for Victory over Communism and the Respect of Religious Faiths, more commonly known as the union of shamans (*Mudang hyöp-hoe.*), a grouping of Korean shamans and seers. This number too is accurate to no more than an order of magnitude. Its membership, according to the Bulletin, was unchanged over many years and then suddenly was not recorded at all because the shaman's union failed to pay its dues. The main purpose of this association, which was first registered

another, we will examine the case of Theresa (approximately thirty-three years of age), whom we met at the Institute of Korean Shamanism one evening in September 1990. She had come to the Institute to learn a shamanic dance and to discuss with other apprentice shamans some of the problems they were having.

"I became this way about a year ago. Before then, I was a Christian. For four years I regularly attended services at the Korean Protestant Church. The spirits (*sin*) are the same. When they're made to talk by Christians, the spirits are called demons (*magwi*); the *mudang* [Korean female shamans] call them *chapkwi* (wandering spirits).

"Jesus spoke to me. But he said only two words: 'Theresa, serve (*pongsa hara*)!' Under the direction of my pastor I fasted in a kind of cave for twenty-one days. After the first three days I was no longer hungry. I could see a small cross. After ten days I could see a large cross. And I could tell everyone's future; the pastors', the American Catholic priests' [...] My predictions were right! I could speak Japanese, English [...] but Jesus did not speak to me in Korean. Now the spirit does speak to me in Korean. I've not been able to call him 'grandfather' [as the other *mudang* do], I still say 'father' [like Christians] – it just won't come naturally. But the spirit (*sin*) does speak to me in Korean. The words come."

Theresa seemed to have no intellectual difficulty in making the transition from the Protestant Christian system, in which she had lived for four years, to a different one. Her problem was not theological: it was a problem of spiritual experience. Although one should be wary about making generalizations on the basis of a single case, it is worth noting that she formulated her problem with Christ in terms of language. Jesus hardly *spoke* with her at all. But the spirit (*sin*) did speak to her, and in her language; it gave her the power of divination, and she easily found a place for herself in the *mudang* world, in spite of some difficulties in making linguistic adjustments. The change that came over Theresa was not a result of a conversion to shamanistic values: it was the fruit of her personal experience. Might shamanism be some kind of word hidden in the heart of language?

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with the Ministry of Culture and Information in 1971, was to reinforce the anticommunist spirit and to defend its members against pressures applied by administrative authorities bent on repressing "superstitions." Currently it is also responsible for the training of new *mudang* and to present groups of *mudang* at regional and national folklore festivals.

### The Urban Setting

The large shamanic sanctuaries have disappeared: the Temple of the Masters of the Nation was moved from the Mountain of the South to Mount Inwang because the Japanese occupying force could not tolerate the idea of a Korean shrine being situated above a Shinto temple. The Nammyo sanctuary, located near the South Gate, has burned; a church dedicated to the memory of Catholic martyrs occupies the former site of a sanctuary located near the port of Map'o; the sanctuary of the Grandmother (*halmi tang*) was razed and a Protestant church took its place; the full list of the shamanic holy places that have disappeared would be very long.

The presence of Christian churches is made conspicuous by the proliferation of their symbols throughout the city's streets, in particular the iron towers topped by a red cross that punctuate Seoul's night sky. In general the Catholic churches are larger in size but fewer in number than the Protestant. These constructions, all of recent vintage, are more a reflection of an age of concrete than of any desire to make an aesthetic statement. This urban landscape is completely lacking in shamanic edifices. The union of shamans reports that there are approximately ten sites in Seoul where shamanic rituals are held. These sanctuaries tend to be constructed on hillsides at the edge of the city. Today most shamanic rites take place in the *mudang's* own sanctuary instead of in the homes of private individuals as they did in the past. But this practice has become nearly impossible in modern times; although the noise of Christian hymns emanating from neighborhood churches is accepted, the percussive shamanic rhythms are barely tolerated. Indeed it is not unusual to have a neighbor call the police to have them come and "stop the noise." Thus on its own terrain Korean shamanism has been, if not reduced to total silence, severely limited. This forced discretion contrasts sharply with the triumphant proselytizing of the members of certain Protestant sects who, with Bible in hand, shout their faith in the subway and on the city's main thoroughfares.

### The Mobility of Sōngju

Traditional Korean shamanism is conceived and organized for a farm house,<sup>5</sup> a pavilion-like structure in contact with the ground.

5. Cf. A. Guillemoz, *Les algues, les anciens, les dieux: la vie et la religion d'un village de pêcheurs-agriculteurs coréens*, Paris, le Léopard d'or/1983; in particular the chapter on gods, beliefs and familial rituals, pp. 119–222.

What, then, happens in apartment buildings where families live one on top of another, the upstairs neighbor tramping on the head of the *Sōnju* (the household God) below? Pak Ino, a Seoul male shaman (*paksu*), who vigorously opposes such constructions for traditional houses, says of the apartments, "there was no other way to build them" (19 August 1991). This pragmatism is demonstrated in the way *Sōngju* is honored. After stating that household moves are quite frequent in Seoul,<sup>6</sup> Pak Ino gives the following advice to the apprentice shamans at the Institute of Shamanism, which he heads:

"You must be sure not to enshrine *Sōngju* in the house. Otherwise the residents won't be able to move out of it. If the descendants do not honor him correctly, there will be trouble for them. *Sōngju* must be received as a "mobile" *Sōngju*. When there is a move, both the former residents' *Sōngju* and the *Sōngju* brought by the new residents must be honored. Pour each of them a glass of something alcoholic. It takes three months before the *Sōngju* takes up residency in the new home. There is one *Sōngju* for each last name in the household."

What should renters do?

"If a renter wants to perform a small shamanic rite (*kosa*) in his new abode, he must offer up two potfulls of steamed rice (*siru*): one of them is for the *Sōngju* of the owner, one for the renter's own *Sōngju*, so that the two can coexist. If the owner performs a *kosa*, the renter must prepare a single pot of rice for his own *Sōngju* and ask for the other *Sōngju*'s accord. It is not important whether the owner is Christian. The individual person is Christian, not the house, not the *Sōngju*. Therefore the renter must steam a pot of rice (*siru*) for the owner's *Sōngju*" (19 August 1991).

Because of the mobility of Korean families, the living space of a household is no longer thought of as being inhabited by an immovable, intangible divinity. There are other examples of the shamanic pantheon adapting itself to contemporary realities: the Excellencies (*taegam*) now populate each floor of large apartment buildings, and in the basement live the "Excellency of the Boiler" and "The Engineering Excellency."

6. Citing statistics from the Ministry of Planning, *Le Courrier de la Corée*, 17 August, p. 21, says that 8,660,428 Koreans moved in 1986, which is 21.3% of the population; 0.1% less than the year before. The population shifts were generally either toward the big cities or from Seoul toward the periphery.

### The Pace of Urban Life

During a conference held at Korea House in Seoul on August 12, 1991, Yi Chisan, a male Seoul shaman of more than sixty years of age, commented that the *kut* (a great shamanic séance), which used to last an entire day, now lasts between five and six hours; and the seven hour séance lasts less than four. Some *mudang* perform two *kut* a day but, he added, it isn't the fault of the *mudang*: society demands it. Indeed a typical *mudang* cannot arrive at the *kut* before ten or eleven o'clock in the morning, that is, after her husband has left for work and the children for school. Since she must be home by six that evening, and it usually takes at least an hour to get there, the length of the *kut* must perforce be curtailed. However, what is truly amazing is the extraordinary ability of the shamans and their spirits to adapt to these new temporal conditions without it causing insoluble theological dilemmas. The spirits, rather than opposing the accelerated pace of city life, have gotten used to it, just like the residents.

Seoul's great *mudang*, who have a stable clientele and a large sanctuary, organize *kut* on a regular basis, usually between two and four times a year. (For example, on the fifteenth of the first moon, the fifth of the fifth moon, the seventh of the seventh moon, and the fifteenth of the tenth moon.) These are not collective ceremonies, held for all the clients at once; each family has its own ceremony, with one family following after another. This regular feeding of their clients' fervor tends to keep them "loyal," although the practice does hinder the formation of a "church" in which all members are fused within a single group. Each family has a singular and unique relation with the *mudang*.

This type of relation between the *mudang* and her clientele is a traditional one, and is crystallized in the concept of the *tangol'*; this term means a frequenter or regular shamanic client and implies a stable, ongoing relationship with a *mudang*. Do the means of mass communication disrupt this relation? Let us now turn our attention to this question.

### The Widow and the Shaman

On the evening of September 10, 1983, Mrs. Yang had the female shaman Kim Kûmhwa over to her house to perform a shamanic séance for the repose of her husband's soul. The husband, a doctor, had died of abdominal cancer five years before (in 1979) at the age of 55.

Mrs. Yang justified her request for the séance on the basis of Korean tradition, on the numerous dreams she had in which her husband appeared, and by the fact that she saw a *kut* of descent (that is, shamanic initiation) on television, carried out by an American student under the direction of the *mudang* Kim Kûmhwa<sup>7</sup>; she had also read an article, in the magazine *Yõngnedi* [*Young Lady*], describing another *kut* of descent directed by Kim Kûmhwa. Finally, a former neighbor, a professor at the University of Seoul specializing in Korean folklore, gave Kim Kûmhwa's telephone number to Mrs. Yang and told her that the former was the best *mudang* in all of Korea, a sort of "cultural treasure."<sup>8</sup>

We cannot describe here all the steps and vicissitudes of this shamanic séance, in which the spirits (*sin*) and soul of the deceased were ritually incarnated in the persons of the various *mudang* who were present. Mrs. Yang (born in 1929, fifty-four years of age) and her daughter-in-law, wife of her eldest son, cried a lot. Mrs. Yang asserted that she knew nothing about the *kut*; however, during the lunch break, she acknowledged that the purpose of her participation in it was to relieve the deceased of his frustration (*han*) and to allow herself to return to the Protestant church that she had not attended since her marriage.

At 4:29 p.m. Kim Kûmhwa asked Mrs. Yang to hold a small tree branch and then she began trying to coax the soul of the husband to come to Mrs. Yang. Finally, after about ten minutes, Kim Kûmhwa declared that the deceased had not descended. Mrs. Yang was opposed to the idea of letting her daughter-in-law take over

7. On June 23, 1981, Mrs. Ch'ae Hûi carried out a *kut* of descent under the direction of Kim Kûmhwa. The Korean mass media made a big deal out of the supposed fact that Mrs. Ch'ae-Hûi was a professor at the University of California at Los Angeles; in truth she had just completed her graduate studies. This *kut* became a media event that supposedly proved "even American professors can not resist spirits." Even a book about it, filled with photographs, was published: "Ch'ae Hûi, a member of the department of ethnic dances at UCLA, learned the Indonesian trance dance and the American dance of Kiva. She felt the power of the *mudang* enter her and for a year afterwards suffered from the spirit sickness. During a trip to Korea to gather materials for her dissertation Ch'ae-Hûi was watching a documentary movie about a *kut*, carried out in the province of Hwanghae, when her body suddenly began to tremble and her upper back was seized with violent spasms [...]. She acknowledged having known since she had come down with the spirit sickness that it was her duty to become a *mudang*." Kim, Inhoe Ch'oe (Chongmin, *Hwanghae-do naerim kut* (*The kut of descent in the Province of Hwanghae*), Seoul, Yõrwhadang, 1983, p.84).

8. I would like to thank Professor Yi for having informed me that this *kut* was to be held.

for her. Eventually a grandmother, an intimate of the shaman, took it upon herself to incarnate the deceased.

Three days later, during the course of a nearly two-hour conversation with Mrs. Yang, she recounted to me what she had felt when the soul of her husband had spoken through the lips of the *mudang*:

"A lot of what was said were just banalities. And when Kim Kûmhwa asserted that my husband, when he got home at night, would tell me what he had done during the day, I thought to myself that it wasn't true. My husband never did that. He was a tight-lipped man. It was I who told him what I had done. His silence was traditional for an aristocrat (*yangban*). His love for me was sincere but it wasn't shown with words. Yet one of the things that was said did strike me as strange. My husband tended to be fat. He ate very little rice, mostly raw fish. He was quite concerned with his diabetes and high blood pressure. He had digestive problems. When the *mudang* spoke of his digestive problems, it seemed to me that the soul of my husband was speaking. It was strange."

Mrs. Yang asked me whether it was typical to be asked to hold a branch to receive the deceased's soul. When I told her it was, she continued:

"The constant beat of the drum and banging of the gong were mesmerizing. A person weaker than me would not have been able to hold out against it. I did everything I could to remain in control of myself. [The implication is that she was struggling not to allow the deceased's soul to enter her, nor to give in to Kim Kûmhwa's entreaties.] When it was all over I felt at peace, calm. The next night my daughter-in-law dreamed that a Confucian ritual offering was being made [to the deceased]."

Then Mrs. Yang went on: "I was surprised that a *mudang* would start speaking [in Korean] like a Chinese general. I had thought that all the gods were Korean. The *mudang* spoke for a long time, like a television actor playing the role of a Chinaman. When I got home that night I began thinking about the séance and something struck me. As a child I had lived for ten years in China, in T'ientsin, near Beijing. I had a Chinese nursemaid who was very kind and whom I liked a lot. Her name was Ruma. I couldn't help wondering if the presence of the generals weren't tied to her. Kim Kûmhwa doesn't know I lived in China; neither does Professor Yi's wife, who probably spoke to her about me. What made it more troubling was that fact that three or four nights before the *kut* I dreamed about Ruma; and I had never dreamed about her before

in all my life. It's a strange coincidence. There's an element of truth in the *kut*."

A few brief remarks on this séance. First, it is worth noting the important role played by the mass media in generating the desire to have a *kut*, "according to Korean tradition," in a woman of high society, a doctor by training and a devoted Protestant. Secondly, among the words spoken by the *mudang*, there were many that were quite pertinent to the situation, but Mrs. Yang rejected them because of her assumption that Professor Yi's wife had informed Kim Kûmhwa about these matters. Having inquired into this matter with the principals, I think it unlikely that such an exchange took place. It seems more likely that the conversation between Kim Kûmhwa and Mrs. Yang, held several days before the *kut*, would have supplied her with enough information even if Mrs. Yang claims to have divulged nothing of relevance. On the other hand, the words concerning the attention paid by the deceased to his diet (which indeed can be heard on the recording of the *kut*) are considered to be important. Yet these lines take up only two of the one hundred sixty-seven lines attributed to the deceased in the transcript. The authenticity of the words therefore depends on the subjectivity of their recipient. "It" works, but no one knows beforehand what will and what will not work. Besides, does not the tenacity with which Mrs. Yang resisted "receiving" her husband's soul prove *a contrario* the presence of the deceased?

As to the matter of whether the appearance of the Chinese generals at the séance (they were there for twenty minutes) was particularly unusual: I was told it was not. In fact it is traditional, and the *mudang* who carried out this part of the *kut* told me that "Chinese generals always play well." What we have here is an ordinary element of the ritual taking on an extraordinary significance due to the client's subjectivity; she alone sees its significance and it becomes, for her, proof of the authenticity of the *kut*.

Whatever the shaman's powers of intuition, perception and vision, no one knows exactly what happens during a séance. In 1985 Chang Hyogyong, a young (17 years of age) female shaman, said: "I don't know if the words I speak are true, but the clients keep coming back. Therefore they must be true." In the early 1980s the mass-media began exposing a side of Korean shamanism that had hitherto been kept hidden out of shame, even though its place within shamanism – all due allowances being made – was rather small. This phenomenon of "mediatization" of one or two *mudang*,

who as a consequence become “stars,” has been brought into rather sharp focus by Choi Chungmoo (1991).<sup>9</sup> Along these lines I would now like to turn to a “scandal” that stirred up the shamanic world and the press of the capital during the summer of 1990.

### The Shaman and the Actress

It all began with an “important”<sup>10</sup> dream that Kim Kûmhwa had – a dream whose true meaning was only revealed to her after receiving a phone call from the renowned Korean actress Kim Chimi.<sup>11</sup> The latter, who was then considering making a film about a woman who becomes a *mudang*, wanted to meet with Kim Kûmhwa to learn how a *kut* of descent (initiation) for a *mudang* was done. An hour before they were scheduled to meet,<sup>12</sup> however, the shaman came to the actress and urged her to stop equivocating: it was time to receive the *kut* of descent and become a true *mudang*.<sup>13</sup> The actress’s desire to learn the skills of the *mudang* had touched off the *mudang*’s corresponding desire to turn the actress into a spiritual daughter.<sup>14</sup>

It appears that the actress had in the past suffered from “the sickness of the *mudang*.” Five years before, while making the film *The Buddhist Monials*, a gold ring had fallen onto the ground from her left hand and smashed to bits; immediately afterwards she was stricken with terrible pains in her left side. Work on the film was eventually halted when Buddhist prelates from all over the country converged on the capital to lead protests calling for the film’s suppression because of its slanderous attack on their morality. The

9. Choi Chungmoo, “Nami, Ch’ae, and Oksun, superstar shamans in Korea”; Ruth-Inge Heinze, *Shamans of the Twentieth Century*, New York, Irvington Publishers, Inc. pp. 51–61.

10. This is according to Kim Kûmhwa herself (sixty years old, an officially designated “living cultural treasure”), in interviews granted in August 1990 to several female-oriented monthly magazines: *Yôsông chungang*, p. 308, *Umôn sensû* (Woman Sense), p. 309.

11. Kim Chimi is considered one of Korea’s greatest actresses. She has appeared in more than eight hundred films (*Sisa chônól* [*Sisa Journal*], January 17, 1991, p. 42) and currently appears in between thirty and forty in a good year.

12. The meeting took place on June 20, 1990, according to *Umôn sensû* [*Woman Sense*], p. 309; *K’win* [*Queen*], August 1990, p. 169; *Chubu saenghwal*, August 1990, p. 218; in the middle of May (to be precise, May 20), 1990, according to *Yôsông chungang*, August 1990, p. 307.

13. *Yôsông chungang*, August 1990, p. 307.

14. *Yôsông chungang*, August 1990. More precisely, the article speaks of a “second spiritual daughter after Professor Ch’ae Hûi.” On the subject of the latter cf. supra.

actress was left tonsured (the film called for it), without a movie, and with terrible pains in her left side. She went to America for treatment. There her side pains were eventually diagnosed as being related to headaches on one side of her head. She herself attributed them to aging and returned to Korea to pursue her career, in spite of her pain. Only one of the newspapers surveyed makes reference to her private life or to the death of her son (drowned in a giant drum of soy oil) at age twenty-five, whose frustration (*han*)<sup>15</sup> she hoped to undo (*p'ullida*) during the *kut* of descent. On July 29, 1990, I attended another *kut* of descent in which Kim Kûmhwa was asked to participate. Addressing the assembled *mudang* she justified Kim Chimi's *kut* of descent on the grounds that the actress had had three husbands, that she was alone and had suffered much, which meant that her sufferings were due to the call of spirits. Kim Kûmhwa announced that the *kut* of descent would take place on August 13<sup>16</sup> and invited me to attend. However, when I called Kim Kûmhwa around the tenth, she informed me that the *kut* had been put off indefinitely.

On September 2, 1990, the daily *Chosôn ilbo* (p. 9) devoted an entire article to the actress, entitled: "Project to film, near the DMZ, a *kut* for the reunification of Korea" with the subtitle, "Categorical denial of the descent of spirits." The article revealed that the actress was studying with Kim Kûmhwa solely in connection with the movie.

In January 1991, the front page of the weekly *Sisa chônôl* featured a photograph of Kim Chimi in the dress and hat of the *taegam* (The Excellency). Inside there were articles devoted to the *mudang* of the East, to Kim Kûmhwa, and statements about "the religious value of the harmonious synthesis among people, spirits, and nature achieved in shamanism"<sup>17</sup> and "this religion of the masses, guided by the unity the people." Also, there was an interview with Kim Chimi herself.

She says: "I did not receive the *kut* of descent. Still I'm very interested in shamanism and in the beliefs of the *mudang*. I consult them on matters of divination. Isn't shamanism rooted in our way of

15. *K'win*[Queen], August 1990, p. 167 (sub-title of the article) and p. 170 (in the text).

16. This date is given in the first lines of the articles in the four magazines surveyed: *Yôsông chungang*, August 1990, p. 307; *Umôn sensû*, August 1990, p. 308; *K'win*, August 1990, p. 168; *Chubu saenghwal*, August 1990, p. 218.

17. This was written by Cho Hûngyun, Professor of Religious Anthropology at the University of Hanyang. The other articles were written by journalists assigned to the cultural section of the weeklies.

life? For example, don't we say, 'I have no luck, or inspiration' (*sin nanda*)? Unlike other people . . . , I find shamanism interesting and uplifting. Yet it seems to me false to say that I suffered from the sickness of the *mudang*. However, I do hope to receive the *kut* of descent. All religions are superstitions (*misin*). I want to receive it in order to learn what it is. I don't know if I have the ability. I'm still trying to learn so that I can make a movie about it. It can't be done carelessly. So perhaps I'll have to put it off until later. There's been much too much talk about all this [...] The ordinary *mudang* live in horrible conditions [...] They are scorned by their own society and are psychologically isolated[...] They've been of invaluable help to me in the movie we're trying to make. I want to avoid any misunderstandings about them."<sup>18</sup>

Several comments need to be made about the material just presented. First, I would like to applaud the work of Kim Kûmhwa, a star among stars. Every religious group in Korea (and throughout the world) has its media personalities, no matter how much the phenomenon may be deplored by some. Why shouldn't it be part of Korean shamanism? The simplicity, kindness and modesty of Kim Kûmhwa are also to be lauded. Indeed it is in no small measure thanks to her efforts that the ostracism of Korean shamanism, which has weighed so heavily – and for so long – on it, has been lessened.

Yet a certain number of questions raised by the course of events surrounding the Kim Chimi "affair" remain. There was an impression that someone was tricked. A *kut* of descent was announced but did not take place. Kim Kûmhwa, who had announced that the actress would receive the *kut* of descent on August 13, was mistaken, but no one would say so: It was enough simply to deny the so-called rumor! The attitude of the actress has not changed: she wanted to learn, and still wants to learn, the *kut*. When the shaman wanted to make her a *mudang*, she accepted. Kim Kûmhwa's power of vision was found to be fallible. She had made the same error in regard to her other spiritual daughter, Ch'ae Hûi; she did not become a *mudang* and has no Korean clientele. Rather she lives on the west coast of the United States and works with people who are interested in trance-causing dances.

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The female shaman lost. In traditional society a *mudang* who makes an error does not lose the sanction of the community. Rather one

18. *Sisa chônôl*, January 17, 1991.

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goes to another *mudang* until a word of deliverance is uttered, freeing the mistaken *mudang*. In a media-dominated world there is neither recourse nor control. Events are managed until they turn back upon themselves. The female shaman made the same error with the so-called professor from an American university as she did with the actress. She was caught in the trap of “mediatization” that she herself had accepted. Would shamanism become a form of dance? of theater? of “cinema”?

Yet perhaps the most important fact was that the actress said, “Unlike other people, unlike Christians, Buddhists and Confucians, I find shamanism interesting and uplifting.” As far as I know, this is the first public declaration of faith in shamanism ever made in Korea. The shaman lost but shamanism won. At what cost? It is far from certain that the “mediatization” of shamanic séances adds to our understanding of them; on the contrary, it contributes to their reification; it is the same process of folklorization that was highlighted by Keith Howard in his analysis of the Korean institution of “living cultural treasures.”<sup>19</sup> But does not the efficacy of shamanism depend on an authentic word that moves and transforms the listener?

*Translated from the French by Thomas Epstein.*

19. Cf. Keith Howard, *Bands, Songs, and Shamanistic Rituals: Folk Music in Korean Society*, 2nd edition, Seoul, Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch 1990, pp. 241–262; “*Namdo t'il norea* Ritual and the Korean Intangible Cultural Asset System,” *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 1989, 3, 2, pp. 203–216, and “Tashiraegi. En Corée, pas de retour après la mort si ce n’est dans un Trésor culturel intangible,” *Cahiers de musiques traditionnelles*, Genève, 1990, pp. 119–139.