Korean Shamans and the Spirits of Capitalism

I AM OFTEN TOLD that I am lucky to have worked with Korean shamans in the mid-1970s, for certainly by now such practices as I described in my dissertation and subsequent book must all have died out (Kendall 1985b). 1 I smile, for even when I began, I was told that I must seek my informants among hoary crones in the deep countryside. Then, as now, I found a vital practice in the immediate environs of Seoul, invigorated by young and dynamic practitioners (see Figure 1). This is not to deny that the shamans of my acquaintance, along with most Koreans who have lived through recent decades, perceive dizzying changes. I am interested in how shamans, clients, and spirits continue to make sense of the ground that moves beneath their feet.

The shamans I know often remark upon their clients’ preoccupations with wealth and advancement. Some shamans are inclined to boast of the financial rewards their clients have gained through ritual observances. Others are more cynical. One young shaman spoke with great heat and humor about profit-driven clients who will invest in repeated shamanic rituals, or kut, for good fortune, even within the space of a single year, and clients who will promptly sever their relationship with a shaman if the ceremony they have sponsored does not bear fruit in immediate financial gain. The shaman Kim Pongsun offers the acerbic view that the rituals for good fortune, chesu kut, are very popular because “if this house has so much money, then that house will sponsor a kut to get yet more money,” a Korean version of keeping up with the Joneses. She claims that in the past such rituals for good fortune were rare since “Who had money for that sort of thing? If someone was sick, then you would hold a healing ritual, or uhwan kut. Even if you went into debt for it, you had to do it. It was a matter of life and death.” Rituals held to send the ancestors to paradise, known as chinogi kut, were also more common 20 years ago. “Nowadays, do they concern themselves with the ancestors? People only care about themselves. No one bothers to send the ancestors off properly. They just add a

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Figure 1
small send-off at the end of a kut held for their own benefit.\(^2\)

The researcher is tempted to join the shamans in a disgruntled discourse upon the mercurial preoccupations of the contemporary Korean moment. I shall, however, resist making a simple comparison between the materialistic present and a more innocent time when all of us were younger, the ethnographic present of nearly 20 years past. Rather, I would use these different observations, theirs and mine, distant and more recent, as still shots recording serendipitous events in an unfolding historical process. To pursue the analogy, my first book was, in the manner of structuralist ethnography, an immobile formal portrait (Kendall 1985b). These more recent observations are slightly blurred snapshots, imperfect attempts within a frozen frame to record subjects in motion (as in Figure 2).

**Getting and Spending**

The flavor of the new Korea burst upon me one autumn day in 1989 with the arrival at a kut of the apprentice shaman, Kwan Myöngnyö, in a state of great laughter and excitement.\(^3\) Kwan’s sister, who runs a clothing shop in the South Gate Market, had been told at one of Kwan’s rituals that her supernatural Official (Taegang) wanted a drink of wine.

She had intended to pour the wine and set it down right there [in front of her shop] but she may as well have done it in broad daylight [the South Gate Market is always filled with people]. She had bought the tiniest little plastic cup, but even if she had tried to offer the wine in that, the people passing by would have thought that she was crazy. My sister couldn’t bring herself to pour the wine. So she said, “Official mine, let’s go to South Mountain.” [Kwan laughs.] Oh, that kid! She said, “It’s very congested here so let’s go to some breezy place where you can carouse in private.” And then she said, “Please get in the car so we can go.” She did all that, it was so funny to hear her tell it.

She says she drove up South Mountain, there are spirits up there after all. She drove up and then she got out of her car and looked around. It was absolutely perfect. So then she said, “Dear Official, aren’t you pleased? Why don’t you get out of the car and look around.” She didn’t leave anything out. [“She did well,” an older, more experienced shaman interjects.] She poured out a serving of rice wine \(tongdongju\) and said, “Please have a drink.” And then, she says, she kowtowed. In a little while, she poured out the wine in a line meaning “Drink your fill,” and came back down. The very next day, right then in the morning, she got the proceeds from an eight-million-won order [approximately U.S.$11,430]. [“That’s great,” the other shaman interjects.] … And the shop right next to hers, a big enterprise that had been in the business for ten years, she says that this year their business failed. In the South Gate Market there are some 500 shops and they say that only four of

![Figure 2](image-url)

A shaman’s consulting room is marked by a lotus-shaped lantern and white flag. On one side of her doorway, the diamond-shaped sign advertises “Famous Lingerie”; on the other, the round sign indicates a video rental shop. Photo by Laurel Kendall, 1994.

them are doing well, just four. What can it mean that only four of them are doing well this year?

A third shaman caps the discussion, “Yep, all you have to do is treat the Official well and then things will work out for you. That’s what it takes.”

Later that same day, Kwan again returned to the subject of her sister’s business, this time to affirm that when their father died, he had entered Kwan’s pantheon as a spirit, and thereafter the sister’s business flourished:

Within a year of our father’s death, my sister began to make money like wildfire. In the space of two years she’d taken in a billion won [by this inflated claim, over a million dollars]. Our father died in the eighth month, and from the tenth month she began to make money. Since my father’s death, all of my siblings are doing well. … [More generally she attributes her family’s prosperity to her own acceptance of the shaman’s profession, a decision her kin opposed because they claimed to be members of a noble \(yangban\) lineage.] In the past, I was poor and my brothers
and sisters didn’t have anything either. Now it’s so much better, they’re driving their own cars, they’ve all bought houses. Now that I’ve become a shaman they take me here and there to treat me and buy me presents.

This wins a cynical affirmation from her client’s mother: “You have to have money, and then they call you ‘noble,’” [toni issōya yangban irago]. “So what else is new? Money is nobility [toni yangban iranika muōkūrae],” a cynical shaman observes.

I was surprised. The assertion that money is nobility, that the rich are considered noble, was not new to me. The old men of Enduring Pine Village used similar words to describe the local gentry of their remembered past. I would hear these sentiments again in the utterances of spirits during rituals performed by these and other shamans: “In our country, if you just have money, then they call you ‘noble.’” But never before had I heard a shaman make such an immediate connection between honoring the spirits and quantified material success.

I knew secondhand of such grand claims, knew that mainline Protestant theologians sometimes blame “shamanism” for predisposing Koreans to pentecostal religions in which prayer is a magical means to a materialist end.1 The underlying logic of Kwan Myōngyo’s story was familiar: treat the spirits well and they will do well by you, as when the gods and ancestors in Yongsu’s Mother’s shrine promised to give her the rent money, a pledge to help her earn her living as a shaman (Kendall 1985b:56). In the past, the claims made for successful rituals had been modest and vague: “and now they’re living well” or “things have gotten a bit better for them.” I mused that the young shaman’s bald assertions of wealth reflected the worldview of a newly prosperous urbanite. By the late 1980s, brash new patterns of consumption in Korean cities incited official alarm and even piqued the curiosity of the foreign press.5 I mused that perhaps Kwan Myōngyo’s understanding of the relationship between wealth and spirits, far from reflecting an innate “shamanic” worldview, funneled new sentiments and experiences into religious practice.

Then and Now

In 1977 and 1978, when I first lived in Enduring Pine Village on the periphery of Seoul, harbingers of what would soon be regarded as the “Korean economic miracle” were evident in the prevalence of new television sets and the absence of village daughters, gone to work in urban factories. More than half of the village households described themselves as primarily “nonagricultural,” their income derived from taxicabs, cottage industries, or hired labor in the nearby town (Kendall 1985b:45). The Republic of Korea was then in the middle of three decades of rapid industrialization that would transform an essentially agricultural society into a highly urbanized, newly industrialized country in the space of one generation (Koo 1990).2 The story of an interventionist Korean state favoring large corporations and stifling labor unrest among an educated and highly motivated new proletariat has been told and debated.8 The social consequences of this transformation have only just begun to be digested. The rural population is now half of what it was in 1960.8 In its place, one finds a large working class, a class of white-collar technocrats, professionals, and managers, and an increase in the ranks of the petite bourgeoisie (Koo 1987). Very few of the men and women who were teenagers in 1977 can still be found in Enduring Pine Village, and some of those who remain now commute to work in their new private cars. People talk constantly about how their lives have improved, then measure themselves against their neighbors and measure their achievements against their aspirations for their children.

By the late 1970s, when I began my first fieldwork, a majority of the Korean population already lived in cities. Even so, I assumed that the proper subjects for an anthropology of Korea were village people (“peasants” we called them then). Following anthropological custom, I took up residence in a village, albeit not an isolated village, and wrote about household-centered religious practices in the context of rural lives.

The household of my ethnographic imagination was a small family farm, a kin-based agrarian unit of production and consumption embedded in a larger market economy (Wolf 1966). Such people as the Rice Shop Auntie and Yangja’s Mother, whose husband drove a taxicab, appeared in my ethnography, brushing elbows in the shaman’s shrine with women who still lived in villages. The religious practices of farm wives had followed their daughters into the brave new world of first-generation urban entrepreneurs, but as dynamic practice, not frozen custom.

In the shaman shrines of Seoul and its immediate environs, I have encountered wage workers and farmers, and occasionally white-collar workers, but the core adherents are the members of a new urban class of shop owners, restaurateurs, and proprietors of small companies. Small entrepreneurs, an ill-defined group rarely mentioned in the scholarly literature, constitute a significant segment of the Korean population (Koo 1987:379–380). Slightly less than one-third of all nonfarm workers are self-employed or work for family businesses (Korea Statistical Yearbook 1990:75). While the government’s developmental strategies have consistently favored large monopolies at the expense of small businesses, most petty entrepreneurs would describe themselves as middle class and see themselves as capa-
ble of advancing through the system, an optimism manifest in the rituals they perform.\textsuperscript{10}

**Capricious Fortunes**

One summer evening in 1991 I accompanied the shaman Yongsu’s Mother when she went to a client’s house to perform a small ritual honoring the spirits of a newly purchased family car (\textit{ch’a kosa}). This was my first opportunity to observe such a ritual, although Yongsu’s Mother claimed that she and her colleagues routinely performed it as private car ownership proliferated among their clients. In this instance, the sponsors were the son and daughter-in-law of one of her longstanding clients. The man—let us call him Mr. Kim—had purchased his car without having Yongsu’s Mother check his horoscope (see Figure 3). Had he taken this precaution, he would have learned that this was not an auspicious year for him to bring a new vehicle into his household. A precautionary placation was in order.

I could appreciate the Kim family’s concern, having heard tales of the huge sums of compensation money exacted after traffic accidents, to say nothing of Korea’s having one of the world’s highest rates of traffic fatalities. The logic of the ritual was also familiar to me: grain or goods brought into or removed from the household without a bribe to the supernatural Officials piques their ire and brings misfortune. In the 1970s, new consumer goods such as televisions and stereos were cited in shamans’ divinations as “shiny things” that had unleashed misfortune when brought into the house without due precaution (Kendall 1985b: ch. 5).

In Yongsu’s Mother’s view, there were particular reasons why the spirits might be vexed with this family. As the son of a regular client, Mr. Kim had grown up under the spirits’ protection. After establishing a household of his own, he and his wife had dedicated a prayer cushion to the Buddhas in Yongsu’s Mother’s shrine. Nevertheless, his wife was swayed by a Christian neighbor, and the couple abandoned their obligations to the spirits (and Yongsu’s Mother) by attending the Christian church. The results were disastrous. Suffering all manner of financial reverses, the husband lost his own small factory and the couple was forced to sell their house. They returned to Yongsu’s Mother and sponsored a kut. This had all happened a year before the ill-advised purchase of the new car.

When I met them, the husband was working for another company and the family lived in a modest but well-appointed apartment. Some of the family’s dialogue with the spirits would include a discussion of their prospects for building a new house. Later that night, when he drove me to the subway in his new car,

![Figure 3](image-url)

Mr. Kim’s car before its governing spirits had received their offerings. Photo by Laurel Kendall, 1991.

Mr. Kim would express profound relief at having completed the ritual. He told me that he respected Yongsu’s Mother’s skill as a shaman, volunteering the information that he had known her for 20 years and considered her his “foster mother” (\textit{suuyang ômma}).\textsuperscript{11}

Beyond the curiosity value of placating a Car Official (Ch’a Taegam) and Engine Official (Enjin Taegam), of a middle-class couple kowtowing in the street to the spirits that inhabited their shiny black vehicle, I was intrigued by Mr. Kim’s history of sudden and dire financial reverses. The precipitous failure of his small factory would seem well-matched to perceptions of terrible supernatural wrath even as a successful gamble—the shop in South Gate Market—implied tremendous blessing. This theme appeared again in the two rituals I observed in the spring of 1992. This was a period of record bankruptcies among small and medium-sized businesses as a consequence of a slump in the Korean stock market and the reluctance of banks to guarantee credit.\textsuperscript{12} These kut were for the clients of Sim Myônghù, an apprentice shaman active in the satellite town of Ansan. Both client profiles matched that of the shaman herself as migrants from further south, now in their thirties, attempting to establish themselves through small-scale enterprises.

The Pak family seemed fairly successful. They and their small daughter were nicely dressed and drove to the public shrine in the family car. The expressed purpose of the their shamanic ritual was to tend the ancestors of Mr. Pak’s family, but their overriding concern, as explained to me by the wife and as addressed by nearly every spirit manifested by the shamans, was the family’s desire for a business of their own. Mr. Pak works for a major corporation and his wife runs a small clothing shop. Should Mr. Pak quit his job and combine
forces with his wife to run an expanded family business? The spirits, through the agency of three shamans, urged caution, suggesting a delay of two or three years but promising a couple eventual success.¹³ (In my experience, the spirits tend to be fiscally conservative.)

Mrs. Yi’s circumstances were far more serious. Her husband was a contractor, but when his business failed, he had given up, stayed at home, and worked himself deeper into debt. Attempting to sustain the family, Mrs. Yi worked as a daytime housekeeper, but now she was thin and pale and ached all over. Most immediately, the cut was for her health, but her household’s financial situation was an overriding concern. The shaman Yongsu’s Mother made an explicit connection between body and circumstance, noting that when people have such acute financial troubles they understandably worry and brood until it makes them ill.¹⁴ Mrs. Yi seemed shy and forlorn going off in a van to a distant mountain in the company of three flamboyant shamans and, on this particular occasion, with two Americans toting a video camera as well. The shamans coached her through the ritual, while the spirits, speaking through the shamans, affirmed her pain, stroking her gently as they expressed pity. When it was done, she would comment that the ancestors’ sympathetic understanding of her plight had given her comfort. Like the Pak family, Mrs. Yi was given hope for the future. Like the Pak family and probably many others as well, she was told, “You don’t get rich in a single morning. You have to make a great effort and also honor the spirits.”

The stories told here suggest that their subjects are motivated by something more than the simple greed imputed to clients by cynical shamans. Like Kwan Myöngyo’s sister, who took her supernatural Official to South Mountain, the Kim, Pak, and Yi families, are (or were) engaged in high-risk enterprises at the margins of the Korean economic miracle. The consequences of good and bad fortune have a crushing immediacy for them. Because access to capital is restricted in Korea, small businesses have difficulty securing bank credit (Janelli 1993:64). Consequently, they have been drawn into the informal curb market for high interest and more precarious loans.¹⁵ In the first five months of 1982, 3,646 companies—mostly small and medium-sized businesses—went bankrupt (Korea Newsreview 1992a).

By the late 1980s, I realized that a great many of the kut that Yongsu’s Mother and her colleagues performed concerned business. Many were held not merely for “good fortune,” “wealth,” or “so the business will go well,” the bland summations that are offered in passing to curious anthropologists, but in response to disastrous financial reversals and failed enterprises. The volatility of the market, the seeming arbitrariness of success or failure, is consistent with perceptions of how the spirits behave: do well by them and they grant you good fortune; offend them and they harass you (Kendall 1977, 1985b: ch. 6).

Consider, for example, Mrs. Pok’s story. She is the child of a shaman and has honored the spirits throughout her adult life. Her husband had worked for a major electronics firm but was forced into early retirement in his forties.¹⁶ Now it was Mrs. Pok who went into business. In 1994 she opened a florist shop in a neighborhood where there were several other similar shops.¹⁷ She had been in business for only a short while when someone placed an order with her for 1,400,000 won (U.S.$1,750). The shopkeepers in the neighborhood said that this was an unprecedented windfall for a new business. She began to dream of securing a major account from her husband’s former company. Mrs. Pok, her shaman mother, and just possibly her neighbors attributed her early good fortune to the benevolence of the spirits that the shaman mother had zealously invoked and propitiated on Mrs. Pok’s behalf.

But then, only a few months later, business was off. For three weeks, barely a customer a day visited her shop. Now the neighboring florists confirmed her dismay, telling her that this was not normal. This sudden falling off of business was ominous, suggestive of divine displeasure. Mrs. Pok began to suffer pains in her legs, a further confirmation that a kut was in order. The spirits who appeared at her ceremony affirmed that yes, a ritual lapse had left her vulnerable to misfortune. They also suggested that her shopkeeping neighbors had taken ritual measures to shore up their own good fortune at her expense.¹⁸ She was told to perform ritual countermeasures, avoid any food bestowed by her neighbors, and cast salt in the wake of any rival shopkeeper who might drop by for a visit.

If kut such as these articulate the worldview of petty capitalist entrepreneurs who inhabit a new and precarious economic terrain, how representative are these people among the shamans’ clients? I gained my initial impression from rituals performed by shamans with whom I have enjoyed long and close ties and who are used to my working among them. I am aware that certain shamans are renowned for particular specialties: astute divinations, curing, or successful initiations. I wanted to be certain that this new emphasis on business success and failure was not simply an artifact of specialization among the network of shamans I knew or, in their terms, of the particular spirits that “play well” with them.

The Small Random Sample

In the summer of 1994 I made random observations of 18 kut and minor offerings (ch‘isong). Two of these
I attended in the company of Yongsu's Mother. For the rest, I bumbled into commercial shaman shrines in the mountains surrounding Seoul and, with the aid of a smooth-talking research assistant, gained permission to observe and ask questions.  

Although commercial shrines were known in Korea from dynastic times (Korean Mudang and Pansu 1903:204), they have flourished in recent years in response to the constraints of apartment living and anti-noise ordinances designed specifically to suppress the shamans' activities (Hwang 1988:18; Sun 1991:163). Here, room by room, different regional styles are performed simultaneously, their distinctive rhythms and stories spilling into the common courtyard in a montage of action and sound, a postmodern ritual happening (see Figure 4). But the summer is a slow season, and the record-breaking heat of the summer of 1994 was particularly daunting. On those sweltering July days when even popular shrines were silent, we could usually find some shaman at work with her clients on the hillside behind one particular shrine in an area sacred to the mountain god (sansin'gak).

Shamans and clients were necessarily suspicious of a foreign observer with a notebook and a camera, sometimes confusing the role of scholar with that of the journalist who would splash the intimate details of their kut onto the pages of the popular press. A few had suffered unpleasant exposure in the past. Some of the clients were performing covert rituals and were anxious lest their husbands discover what they had been up to. Because many Seoul shamans are now aware and proud of international scholarly interest in their work, my academic credentials were helpful, up to a point. But I was more effective in establishing rapport when I described my own involvement in the shaman world as a client who had sponsored rituals, had prayed on sacred mountains, and was familiar with the ritual vocabulary.

In each instance, I combined a brief interview with hours spent observing the interactions between clients, gods, and ancestors. The advice and recriminations put forth by the spirits revealed the client's motivation for sponsoring a kut and allowed me to retrieve a more full-blooded story than could be garnered, out of con-
text, by simply asking “Why are you doing this?” Questions posed of clients before the start of a ritual usually prompted cursory summations: “I’m doing this for my business,” “My husband is ill,” “Things aren’t going so well.” Such pro forma remarks, precisely because they are pro forma, lend themselves to tabulation, and had I chosen to rush from ritual to ritual and shrine to shrine, firing questions on the way, I might have garnered a satisfactory universe of quantifiable data. I would not, however, have gained a textured sense of what these rituals were all about and would never have retrieved Mrs. Pok’s story, as recounted above. Before her kut, she had told me that she was holding the ritual because of the pain in her legs. After we had watched for a while, she went on at great length about her suspicions regarding her neighbors. “People are greedy,” she said. “They might even take ritual measures” (as she, herself, was taking ritual measures).

My initial hunch was correct. Fully 15 of the 18 sponsors of kut were engaged in some form of small business, although they ranged across a spectrum of wealth and opportunity from the proprietors of small factories, a mushroom-importing business, restaurants, and shops, to a freelance furniture mover, the proprietress of a hole-in-the-wall bar, and an electrician. Divinations revealed that in addition to these enterprises, several of the female sponsors were also involved in various real estate ventures.23

Although dissident intellectuals within the Korean Popular Culture Movement (Minjung Munhwahoe Undong) romanticize shaman practices as expressing the concerns of the most victimized segments of Korean society (K. Kim 1994)—and some kut do (see Kendall 1977; S. N. Kim 1989a, 1989b)—only three of the sponsors in my sample would in any sense fit the profile of marginalized proletarians: a retired laborer who now worked in his brother’s factory and had incurred a huge debt through a fraud perpetrated by his own son-in-law, a domestic worker married to a laborer whose daughter had gone mad, and a floating bar hostess who aspired to a bar of her own. Conspicuously absent from my sample were the households of salaried corporate workers and civil servants, those who inhabit the more secure and respectable rungs of the Korean middle class. I did hear in shrines, and in conversations with shamans, how the wives of these men would sponsor kut to secure their husbands’ promotions, and that high monopolists would themselves sponsor kut.24 But on my random visits to the shrines, I did not encounter them.

I suspect that members of the upper middle class hold their rituals in more discreet settings and that these events are more likely to enter the field notes of scholars who work closely with “superstar shamans” (Chungmoo Choi’s [1991] term). It is also logical that households whose futures rest upon the relative stability and predictability of corporate life or civil service would be far less inclined to sponsor rituals than would those imbued with the “adventurous, aggressive, risk-taking, high-roller element” that has had as much or more to do with capitalism than has Calvin’s or Max Weber’s Protestant ethic (Taussig 1995:394). Despite great variation in the circumstances of the petty capitalist entrepreneurs who are the majority of my sample, they have in common a need for gambler’s luck. The internal dramas of their kut turn on risk, uncertainty, and the potential for sudden and severe loss.25

In all but five of the rituals in my sample, business success was a salient concern, while prognostications of wealth or good business were routinely promised by the spirits in every single ritual.26 Several kut were held in response to loss or the threat of loss—two failing restaurants, a fraudulent claim on an order of mushrooms, responsibility for a debt fraudulently incurred by another, and Mrs. Pok’s flower shop. Business concerns sometimes came bundled with other issues, like the pain in Mrs. Pok’s legs or Mrs. Yi’s aches and pains, or when financial anxieties caused husbands to drink to excess, undermine their health, and abuse their wives.

Materialist Spirits

The spirits that shamans manifest solidly inhabit the world of family enterprise.27 Their songs and divinations package auspicious prognostications in the imagery of client enterprises. For Mrs. Pok, “Bunches of flowers are going in [to fill a large order]; whether sitting or standing you will hear the sound of the door [opening constantly for clients]. . . . Those who come in will not leave empty-handed. The luck of the XX Flower Shop will open wide.” For the electrician, “Though my client goes east, west, south, and north . . . I will help so that there will be no power failure.” For a family that runs a travel agency, the spirit Official of the vehicle (Ch’a Taegam) will “seize the front tire and seize the back tire and move the vehicle to an auspicious place.”

The apprentice shaman Sim Myo’ngi’hui claimed the active presence of a particular spirit, Grandfather Sage (Tosa Haraboji), whom her colleagues described as “an ancestral grandfather who studied a great deal—honor him and you will get lots of money.” I was not familiar with this spirit. He had not been a significant presence in the rituals I observed in the 1970s, although the shamans assured me that he had a venerable pedigree. He seems to be enjoying a great surge of popularity, for in addition to the Yi and Pak family kut, a Grandfather Sage was also found among the Protestant American ancestors of my husband’s family. Grandfather Sage appears in kut wearing the long, broad-sleeved robe and
crownlike hat of a man of letters, the very costume worn by a mannequin in scholarly pose in the American Museum of Natural History's Korea exhibit. But when Sim Myônghŭi manifests Grandfather Sage, she gives him the full-bellied waddle of a rich man, rather than the decorous gait of a literatus. This conflated imagery is well-suited to Grandfather Sage's message. Like Kwan Myôngnyŏ's father, who entered her shrine as a Spirit Warrior and subsequently helped his children gain wealth, the Grandfather Sage is among those potent ancestors who, if recognized and honored, benefit the family, but who, if neglected, bring hardship and strife. Grandfather Sage's ancestral wisdom and virtue, his cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977:188-189), are overliterally transformed into economic capital. (Grandfather Sage is definitely not what those commentators had in mind who maintain that a "Confucian" heritage predisposes Koreans for capitalism.)

Good clothes, comfortable housing, and private cars give the shamans' clients visible evidence of new identities constructed upon material success. The shamans themselves flourish jewelry and clothing as signs of a successful practice, advertisements of the efficacy of their spirits. The simple robes of synthetic gauze they wore during rituals back in the 1970s are now often made of heavy satin and fairly blossom with embroidery and spangles (see Figures 5 and 6). Even the spirits' tastes are changing, as bottles of whisky, imported fruit, and American brand-name candy appear among the offerings in the shrines (see Figure 7). For shaman and client alike, the assertion that money makes nobility is a counterhegemonic validation of their own experience, at once a wry comment upon and a celebration of contemporary materialism. Korean elites claim just the opposite, that social standing is not merely a function of money, but of education, breeding, and family background, attributes that are commonly invoked in discus-
sions of Korean values and have a practical validity in elite and middle-class matchmaking (Kendall 1996a). Families like the Kims, the Paks, and the Yis claim to value these same qualities, and yet they also know that such significant social capital will not be theirs within the present generation.

The Korean elite—a constellation of capitalist, military, and political interests—has flowered in the late 20th century from roots struck in the colonial period. This group is an awkward replacement for the landed Confucian nobility who were politically dispossessed under Japanese rule, then saw the land reform that followed liberation complete the erosion of their economic dominance in the countryside. Eckert describes how early Korean capitalists of the colonial period found it necessary to construct an image of the businessman as a moral paragon to circumvent the old neo-Confucian contempt for commerce (Eckert 1991:225). The absence of a self-justifying ideology for the new capitalist class is resolved, in part, by traditionalist assertions of familism and education, a claiming of the moral high ground to which the newly minted middle class might also aspire. At the same time, old school ties and family connections are mustered as an instrumental means of advancing elite interests while preserving a monopoly of privileged access to information and power (O. Cho 1987; D. Kim 1990). But the new elite has not successfully appropriated the respect once accorded scholar-officials and learned gentry, nor are they likely to in the wake of the corruption scandals that exploded at the end of 1995. Portrayals of the lifestyles of monopolist families in the popular press and in television soap operas convey a double-edged image of wealth and power, at once celebratory and critical. A similar ambivalence may be found in shaman rituals where families like the Yis and the Paks recognize the worth of family background, education, and breeding but also know that they cannot call these things their own. Instead, Sim Myŏnghŭi manifests for them a noble ancestor in a waddling comic portrayal whose very existence is evidenced in their own financial gain.

The portrayal of greedy spirits in kut becomes a fun-house mirror of client (and also shaman) aspirations as the spirits proclaim, “Your greed is even greater than my own” (see Figure 8). The supernatural Official who figures so prominently in rituals for good fortune, promising wealth in exchange for cash but always with the threat of ruin, becomes a ready parody of invest-

![Figure 6](image_url)

Shaman performing this same segment inside an urban house in consideration of the neighbors. Note her elaborate wig and headdress. Photo by Laurel Kendall, 1994.
wön money order to cover his tab, and when the proprietor claimed to have no change, he staggered off into the night leaving the ridiculously large sum in her hands. Sober the next day, he returned to ask if he hadn’t mistakenly given her a million-wön money order. She callously told him that it was too late, the deed was done. When the supernatural Official played at her ritual, he/Yongsu’s Mother stretched out his/her hand and demanded, “Give me a million-wön money order.”

“Auntie, how ever did you know?”

“This isn’t any auntie, this is the Official.”

“I don’t have it anymore. I spent it all on the business.”

The transactions between supernatural Official and bar proprietor, proprietor and patron, shaman and client blur like the whirling riders on a carousel, spun round to the predictable rhythm of the contraption.

**Conclusion**

The gamble of the marketplace assumes the possibility of luck, nurtured in the Korean shaman shrines in

![Figure 7](image-url)

**Figure 7**

Consumer goods and other offerings for a shaman’s own spirits in her personal shrine. Photo by Laurel Kendall.

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abiding relationships with the spirits. The shamans who perform into being the Spirit Warrior of Commerce or the Supernatural Official of the Florist Shop offer connections with a spirit world that matches their clients’ own. Relationships with the spirits are conducted in the idiom of a bargain and rituals function as investments conducted with a touch of self-satire, a bubble of wry humor. Despite the wicked impulse to pun in my title, it should be obvious by now that I do not see shamanic practices as fueling a particularly Korean “spirit” of high-risk capitalism. Max Weber, who held that advanced capitalism moved to the drumbeat of “rationalization” and had no place for spirits and magic, who explicitly distinguished his “spirit of capitalism” from “the impulse to acquisition, pursuit of gain, of money” (Weber 1958:14, 17), would undoubtedly turn over in his grave at the things described here. These stories from the Korean shaman world are more in sympathy with R. H. Tawney’s remarks in his foreword to the English translation of Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, suggesting that while much can be learned by tracing the influence of religious ideas on economic development, “it is no less instructive to grasp the effect of the economic arrangements accepted by an age on the opinion which it holds of the province of religion” (Tawney 1958:11).

We have learned from the work of Jean Comaroff (1985), David Lan (1985), June Nash (1979), Ahwa Ong (1987), Lesley Sharp (1993), Michael Taussig (1980), and others that religion is neither a dead nor a fixed category, but an instrument of popular consciousness. If, however, we consider only the religions of the oppressed, the consciousness of disadvantaged and marginalized peoples, we risk replicating older dichotomies: the oppressed practice an inarticulate and natural-seeming popular religion (Bourdieu’s doxa), while the dominant class espouses rationality or at least rational-seeming orthodoxies (Bourdieu 1977:169; Thomas 1971:666). Jean Comaroff (1994) has recently cautioned against stereotypic dualisms that make the cosmic chaos of modernity the flip side of traditional order and that spatialize this contrast as “the West and the rest.” I am concerned lest an otherwise fruitful interest in the religious consciousness of the oppressed lead us to ignore the rest. As we have seen, the religious practices of Korean petite bourgeoisie, no less than those of the peasants, miners, and proletarians described in other places, are a means of apprehending, of attempting to exert some control over the seemingly arbitrary motions of the political economy.

While this study owes much to Michael Taussig’s insight that capitalism breeds its own wily magic, the clients one meets in the shaman shrines of Seoul are worlds apart from the Colombian cane-cutters of his account, the recently proletarianized peasants who do not yet accept a moral order in which capitalist commodities define human relationships (Taussig 1980). Mrs. Pok, Kwan Myöngyo’s sister, and the Kims, Paks, and Yis have journeyed not between two distinct modes of thought but, at most, from market-oriented family farms to more expansive family-centered urban enterprises. They are a petite bourgeoisie in the classic Marxist sense; they control their own elementary means of production, be it a small shop, an electrician’s tool kit, a furniture-mover’s truck, or a stock of imported mushrooms. Albeit they do not in any sense control the market forces that govern their enterprises. They accept the terms of the marketplace, but like many in similar circumstances, they regard the market as animate, arbitrary, and risk-ridden. In Taussig’s reading of Marx, they are, with the rest of the capitalized world, within the domain of the commodity fetish (Taussig 1980:31).

The lost world of their youth was not a place of precapitalist innocence. Korean farmers have long been engaged in grain production for the market and have measured their gains against rent and taxes. The metaphoric linkage of house and household in the beliefs and practices I observed in the 1970s, a system that acknowledged the danger of wealth carried in and out of the house walls, was an appropriate reflection of the small family farm within an increasingly commercialized economy. A few decades ago, sudden and often inexplicable illness posed the most dire threat to the integrity and continuity of the rural family. Today, entrepreneurs’ households are vulnerable to human fallibility, to bad debts, thieves, employees, and fraud, and to the fluctuations of the overheated market. A system of religious practices oriented toward the health, harmony, and prosperity of the small family farm has been adapted to a world in which these concerns still apply but where the fate of the family, for good and ill, is seen as dangling on volatile external forces in a moment of intense opportunity and danger. The shaman’s perception that in the past, shamanic rituals were usually held in response to life-threatening illness whereas now most are held in the hope of riches makes perfect sense in light of the medical options and economic possibilities of the 1990s. This is a matter of calibration, not a radical transformation.

In a similar fashion, the popular religion of China’s recommercialized Canton delta and of thoroughly industrialized Taiwan offers exaggerated promises of wealth and commercial success through an extant ritual language of blessings and good fortune, a language developed by family farmers engaged in a market economy. The study of popular religion in the booming economies of eastern Asia does not yield a facile contrast between capitalist and pre capitalist modes of production and consciousness. Instead, one finds yet an-
other instance of how “lived realities defy easy dualisms, ... worlds everywhere are complex fusions of what we like to call modernity and magicality, rationality and ritual, history and the here and now” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1986:5).38

A client who drives her supernatural Official to South Mountain for a drink of wine and the spirit who requests the company president’s million-won money order may provoke a smile. These developments are not without humor to shaman and client as they reflect upon what their world has become. In humor, they remind us to take popular religion seriously as one means by which some “modern” and “middle-class” people both play and reflect upon a game whose odds are most likely stacked against them.

Notes

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1. In Seoul and its environs, shamans are called mudang, mansin, and, more recently, posal.

2. The inflated costs of kut, now figured in millions of won (or thousands of U.S. dollars) have undoubtedly also discouraged the performance of double-length rituals.

3. In my previous work, I have used pseudonyms that approximate terms of address (Yongsu’s Mother) or professional nicknames (Chatterbox Mansin) to protect the confidentiality of my informants. When Diana Lee and I began to film shamans, we asked our subjects how they wished to be credited for their work and raised the possibility of using pseudonyms. They desired recognition and requested that they be credited with their legal names (such as Kwan Myôngnyo), although these names are almost never used in social contexts. Where I use quotations and incidents derived from videotapes of these shamans, I follow the later style for consistency and so as not to link a confidential alias with a visual image.


5. In writing about the Korean shaman world I use the term god for spirits in a shaman’s or a household’s pantheon who have powers above and beyond those of ordinary ancestors, although they may once have been ancestors. I use spirits as a broad general term for all of the entities evoked and tended by shamans, including both gods and ancestors. (The shamans seem to use sins to refer to gods but sometimes in a more general sense as well.) Some scholars of religion are uncomfortable with the god designation since the shaman’s spirits do not evidence an ontologically transcendent position—indeed they enter into bargains with the living (Roberte Hamayon, personal communication, March 1993). Terminology is a fundamental obstacle in the study of comparative religions. Tambiah suggests 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 Judaeo-Christian concepts and concerns” (Tambiah 1990:20–21). I write of a non-theistic religious tradition and am wary of applying hierarchical standards derived from an utterly different context. It will be recognized that terms such as god, spirit, and shaman are, at best, approximations of local concepts.


7. Sociologist Hagen Koo writes that “In the late 1950s, four out of five working people were farmers but in less than thirty years only one in five remained on the farm. . . . The magnitude of change South Korea has experienced in the past three decades was greater than that experienced by European countries over a century” (Koo 1990:672). Perhaps Koo overstates the case, insofar as the rural population of the 1950s was swollen with war refugees and with return migrants from Manchuria, northern Korea, and Japan after the liberation in 1945 (Cummings 1981: ch. 2), but there can be no doubt that a major transformation took place.


11. His mother had probably dedicated him to the Seven Stars in Yongsu’s Mother’s shrine, ensuring their protection and also establishing a fictive kinship of “mother” and “son” (Kendall 1985b:80–81).


13. As in all other kut, other family issues were also addressed. On this occasion, the spirits expressed concern for the husband’s lack of diligence, for the (absent) mother-in-law’s health, for the wife’s prospects of reversing a tubal ligation, and for the daughter’s minor medical problems.

14. As a parallel explanation she attributed the immediate source of the woman’s pain to a bungled ritual. Mrs. Yi had ill-advisedly paid a large sum of money to an incompetent shaman who, midway into her initial chant, had shouted “The spirits are stirred up, get out of here!” This, of course, had merely made the spirits angry since they had been led to anticipate a full ceremony. Predictably, the telling of this story led Yongsu’s Mother into a tirade against the numerous incompetent, irresponsible, and immoral shamans practicing today.

15. In 1979 the government extended protection to small enterprises in certain areas of manufacture and in 1985 sim-
plified procedures for licensing businesses. In 1992 protection extended to small businesses in certain areas of manufacture was lifted (Eun Mee Kim, personal communication, June 24, 1992, and Korea Newsreview 1992d).

16. Roger Janelli and Dawhnee Yim, writing of the salaried elite within a major South Korean conglomerate in the late 1980s, describe a relatively stable pattern of employment, with most resignations occurring among more recent hires. Resignations were possible after an unfavorable transfer or when given pointed indications that one’s performance was unsatisfactory (Janelli 1993:152–155). Writing more generally, and in the troubled economy of the early 1990s, Denise Lett gained the impression that many white-collar workers were either terminated at midcareer or given the incentive to resign through lack of promotion (Lett 1994:109, 150–151). My field assistant readily recognized the early retirement of Mrs. Pok’s husband as part of a current trend.

17. Although she denied any prior business experience, we may assume that Mrs. Pok, like many Korean housewives, had at the very least invested money in informal credit associations.

18. The term yebang means “prevention” or “prophylaxis.” I had encountered it previously in ritual contexts as an exorcistic measure to prevent future misfortune, but here it was described in a manner suggestive of sorcery.

19. On a few occasions, we were refused access and I chose not to press the matter.

20. The public shrines offer a number of services in addition to renting rooms. They provide vessels for the offering food, cook the offering rice and steam the rice cake that the shamans or the clients provide, cater meals on request, and vend cigarettes, drinks, and tonics. Some shrines also maintain grottos for a streamlined version of the mountain pilgrimage (described in Kendall 1985b:128–131). I made a point of visiting both “up-market” and “down-market” shrines, those that seemed to draw renowned shamans and wealthy clients, and those that seemed to draw marginal people for abbreviated rituals, some performed by what were to me my subjective gauge, incompetent shamans. They did not manifest a full pantheon of deities and provided only the most stereotypic ancestral wailing and reproaches. Yongsu’s Mother considers ancestral manifestations the easiest segment of a kut and is highly judgmental of shaman competence. See note 14 above.

21. One of the shrines that I visited had air-conditioned its small chambers, but the others relied upon cross-drafts and electric fans.

22. These rituals (ch’isong), although not as elaborate as full-dress kut, included manifestations of the gods and ancestors in tragicomic portrayals and the giving of divinations (kongsu). Four ch’isong have been included in my sample of 18 rituals.

23. In some cases, the businesses were run by the women who themselves sponsored the kut. In others, the business was a family enterprise—two of the restaurants and the mushroom-importing business—or more exclusively the husband’s domain—the two small factories, the electrician, and the mover.


25. These kut resonate with the observations of other scholars working in industrialized societies who find that rituals crop up with great intensity and elaboration in those times and places where uncertainty and chance play the greatest role (Bocock 1974; Gilliss 1985:260–261). Resonant, too, is the observation of the 17th-century folklorist, Sir Thomas Browne: “’Tis not ridiculous devotion to say a prayer before a game at tables” (quoted in Thomas 1971:115).

26. Three of these kut were intended to satisfy the troubled souls of the dead (chinogi kut), including one “ghost wedding” so that a dead bachelor would stop hampering the marital prospects of his nieces and nephews. One ritual was held on behalf of an insane daughter, and one small ritual was held to counter the inauspicious potential of a bad horoscope year (although the sponsor also seemed to be having difficulties with her stepchildren).

27. Korean shamans do not claim a one-on-one possession so much as an experience of visions and inspiration sufficient to sense the spirits’ will and perform it into being (Kendall 1996b).

When manifesting spirits that inhabit the world of family enterprise, a shaman might proclaim: “I am the Spirit Warrior of Business, the Spirit Warrior of Commerce, the Electrician’s Spirit Warrior (Changsa Sinjang, Yongp Sinjang, Chonpksul Sinjang).” “I am the Official of Commerce, the Official of the Automobile, the Commerce Official of the XX Flower Shop (Sangp Taegam, Chagayong Taegam, XX Hwawon Sangp Taegam).” For the proprietors of a faltering rib restaurant (kalbijip): “I am the Official of the Kitchen, the Official of the Kitchen Knife [particularly important in a rib house], the Official of the Restaurant Counter (Chubang Taegam, Chubang K’al Taegam, K’antu’o Taegam).”

In one kut, a male shaman (paksu madang), speaking for the spirit Officials, claimed that the Officials of Business and Commerce appear only when the female shamans perform, that his Officials play on a high mountain, that they are more elevated than those that service business pursuits. His remark not only echoes the old Confucian bias against commerce but also affirms the stereotype of Korean women as being temperamentally suited to business schemes and haggling.

28. For example, the scholar’s gait is parodied in the Yangu Pyol Sandae Nori masked play.

29. Kamun (family background) and hakpol (educational background) are, with age, the most frequently mentioned concerns of matchmakers who attempt to join like with like. The expressed purpose of having relatives of both sides attend an arranged first meeting (masson) is to observe the two marriage candidates’ deportment and table manners, as an indication of their breeding, and to gain some sense of family deportment (Kendall 1990a: ch. 4).


31. Matrimonial links among monopolist families, and between monopolist and well-placed political families, have so intrigued the popular imagination that they have been described in women’s magazines (Pae 1984; Yi 1983), elaborated in a book-length monograph (reviewed in Korea Newsreview 1992b), and even prompted the Wall Street Journal to publish an elaborate kinship diagram (Darlin 1992). In the recent
scandal regarding the finances of former president No, a great deal was made of his family’s marriage alliance with a monopolist family.

32. The notion of greedy gods seems intrinsic to the humor of the kut I have observed, both past and present, an expression of the power of the spirits that borrows upon an imagery of corrupt officials dating from dynastic times (Kendall 1985b: ch. 1, 1985a; cf. Rutt and Kim 1974:293–333, et passim). Some authorities insist that the spirits’ repeated demands for cash are a very recent and embarrassing addition to shaman practice (H. Cho 1985), but in very recent kut, this playful bantering seems to have been much reduced, in the interest of time, because shrine kut no longer draw the crowd of neighbors and kin who entered into these exchanges, and because many young clients are so inexperienced that they must be constantly coached. I noted that in the two rituals I observed in 1992 and in the one I sponsored that same spring, only a small number of bills from the initial fee were returned to the client for distribution during the kut. Sequences once marked by extensive banter were abbreviated to one or two exchanges.

33. Money orders are now commonly used in Korea in the absence of large-denomination currency.

34. Robert Weller (1994) makes a similar point in discussing the inapplicability of Tausigg’s formulation to cult activity in Taiwan.

35. Some would even claim that the commercialization of customary relationships in land and labor was already underway in some parts of Korea by the 18th century, while others would chart significant developments from the closing decades of the last century. (The debate is summarized in Eckert 1991: ch. 1.) The story of Korean agriculture under colonial rule (1910–45) is a tale of expanding markets, intense population pressure, increasing tenancy, and out-migration (Williams 1982). More recent decades saw intensive capitalization and mechanization as the rural population shrank (Sorensen 1988).

36. The oscillating emphasis on health or wealth is, in all kut, a matter of degree; prayers for wealth (chesu) have long been intertwined with wishes for health, harmony, and blessings, as noted in the healing (uhwan) kut for Grandfather Chôn described in my first ethnography (Kendall 1985b: ch.1) and in some of the cases described in this essay.


38. Tambiah (1990) has illuminated how the commonsensical distinctions between “magic” and “rationality” that have been deployed in the study of non-Western religions are themselves anchored in the specificities of Judeo-Christian thinking and the particular history of the Enlightenment.

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