

## Old Gods, New Times: A Shaman Ritual in South Korea

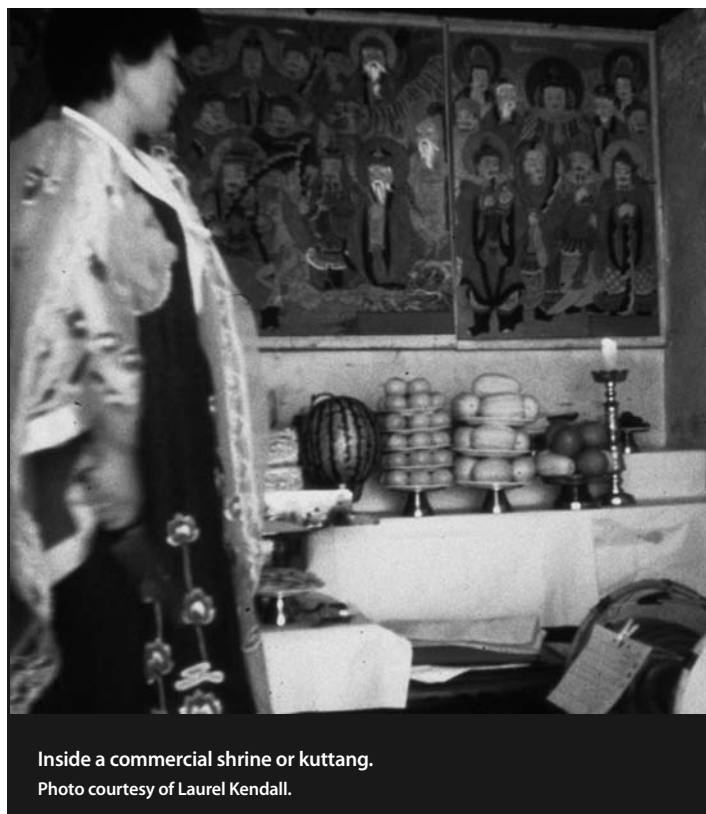
By Laurel Kendall

*Editor's Note: We thank the University of Hawai'i Press for providing permission to publish this essay, adapted from Laurel Kendall's book, Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF: South Korean Popular Religion in Motion (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).*

*Shamans are religious specialists who are perceived as having the capacity to deal directly with spirits on behalf of the community, either by sending their own soul on a journey to other realms or by calling them into the here and now and manifesting them in their own bodies. Shamans bear witness to their encounters with spirits through their own bodies, either in a journey undertaken in a trance state or by manifesting the spirits' presence through their own voice, gestures, dances, and mimes. Because shamans were first described in Siberia among hunters and herders, their work is sometimes described as an "ancient" or "primitive" religion, but shamans have had long and expansive histories in the sophisticated kingdoms and then nation states of East and Southeast Asia. As the following account illustrates, a living shamanic practice must effectively engage the contemporary world around it.*

In the 1970s, as a young anthropologist and novice fieldworker, I spent nearly two years in the company of South Korean shamans, called *mudang* or *mansin*, observing their rituals and divination sessions and accompanying them to *kut*, their most elaborate ritual. In *kut*, the shaman puts on the costumes of the gods, dances to rapid drum beats, and when the music stops, speaks and mimes in the god's persona, sometimes angry and demanding, sometimes comic, usually offering promises of good fortune before departing to another flourishing of drum beats and dancing. And then another shaman dresses to manifest another deity until all of the appropriate gods and ancestors of a client family have made their appearance, and all manner of inauspicious influences have been cast away.

Most of the *kut* I saw in the 1970s were in country houses crammed with neighbors and kin who commiserated with the ancestors and bantered with the gods. When I returned to this world some fifteen years later I found that the shamans I knew were still active, if anything even more active, but the circumstances of their work had changed. No longer did we wander down a country lane or bundle onto a lurching country bus, going to perform a nightlong ritual in a village house. Indeed, old country houses with their open wooden porches and fenced courtyards were rapidly disappearing, replaced by well-insulated bungalows with modern plumbing and steam heat. The countryside itself was shrinking as cities and towns expanded into former fields.



Inside a commercial shrine or *kuttang*.  
Photo courtesy of Laurel Kendall.

By the 1990s, the shamans I knew were performing most of their *kut* in commercial shaman shrines, called *kuttang*. These shrines, in the mountains surrounding Seoul, removed the noise of *kut*, but also removed the spectacle from common view. Private cars or vans ferried shamans, clients, costumes, and food offerings to the distant *kuttang* where the gods and ancestors were feted only until late afternoon when everyone went home on industrial time. I missed the exuberant countrywomen who had crowded into small rooms and punctuated the event with tears, laughter, spontaneous dance and song. But when I examined what the shamans were doing, I began also to see how they were adapting their work to the changed circumstances of modern life, even as their gods were addressing the anxieties of new urban clients. This is the story of one such *kut* from the spring of 1992.

### GOING TO A KUTTANG

On this May morning in 1992, filmmaker Diana Lee and I have made a dawn journey along the north/south axis of the Seoul subway system to Ansan to join the senior shaman Yongsu's Mother (as Korean matrons are addressed) and her promising apprentice, Babe. Okkyöng's Mother, who was a bumbling apprentice at the time of my first fieldwork, but has now become a deep-voiced and confident shaman, joins us at Babe's house. We wait for a telephone call from the client who, the shamans rightly assume, cannot leave for the *kut* until her husband is out of the house. Why is she holding a *kut*? Is someone ill? Yes, it's a *kut* for affliction. The wife

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is ill. They should have had a kut three years ago. The husband was in construction, building houses and selling them, but he lost everything and now he just stays home. The wife goes out to clean and cook for other people while the couple wallows in debt.

The call comes through, and we collect Mrs. Yi from a pink apartment complex, not a luxurious facility, there is no landscaping, but a fresh new construction. Mrs. Yi, a tall, thin woman in her early thirties, wears jeans, a striped knit top, and a cardigan. She is carefully groomed with permed hair, bright and carefully applied make-up, gold earrings, and a thin gold chain necklace. This is probably how she leaves the house to go to work, disguised to resemble any young housewife going shopping or meeting friends. Long red artificial fingernails complete the image, belying hands that do other women's housework. She comes out to the van hauling a large carton of fruit for the offerings. After exchanging greetings with Babe and nodding to the rest of us, she sits silently all the way to the shrine. Like a paper flower that unfolds in a glass of water, she will open up slowly over the course of her kut.

We arrive at a mountain kuttang, a one-story structure with several rooms facing an open courtyard like an old-fashioned Korean inn. We unload cartons of offering food and the shamans' costumes and equipment, and place them in the shine room with its pictures of brightly-painted deities on the walls. I try to engage the bashful Mrs. Yi in conversation. Like many residents of Ansan City, she came from further south and has lived in Ansan for only ten years. She is thirty-four-years old and has two children. Because she seems uneasy, both with talking to a foreigner and with holding a kut, I offer some platitude about my interest in kut as a part of Korean culture. "Interesting?" she says, with a mirthless little laugh, "I think of it as 'expensive.' I'm only doing this because I am desperate." She tells me that she aches all over and that her husband's business is not going well (according to Babe, it has failed). To hold a kut, she has borrowed nearly four thousand dollars. Has she ever held a kut before? No. Did her mother do this? No. Her mother-in-law? She goes to church. How did Mrs. Yi come to sponsor a kut? She was at her wits' end. "Someone," probably a neighbor, introduced her to Babe.

The preparations complete, the mansin put on traditional Korean dress, the billowing skirts and crescent-sleeved jackets they wear to serve the spirits. Once the kut begins, they will pause only for lunch and for short breaks between the three major segments that they divide between them. Mrs. Yi glances periodically at her watch, anxious to get home before her husband returns. Babe is still arranging offerings and the shrine staff is still delivering steamed rice cake when Yongsu's Mother sings to drive away pollution and invite the gods.



Shaman in appropriate costume invoking gods from a high mountain, including the Seven Stars.  
Photo courtesy of Laurel Kendall.

## BABE: SIGHTING A DIVINE ANCESTRESS

Immediately after lunch, Babe dresses to invoke the Mountain God, joking that it will be hard to work on such a full stomach. The mansin laugh, but Mrs. Yi's face is blank. The Mountain God (Babe) describes anxiety over wealth going out of the family. The god speaks of a grandmother who prayed on mountains in the past and an ancestor who was a high official. These sightings indicate a family with powerful gods, a family that should honor them with frequent kut. All of the gods who appear in this sequence describe wealth going out of the family. With gestures toward the offering tables, they repeat, over and over, that if the family had done a kut earlier, all would have been well, a logic already familiar to me from many other kut both past and present.

When, as the Mountain God's Special Messenger, Babe tries to balance the pig's head on a trident, a sign that the kut offering is accepted, she cannot get the trident to balance. Okkyong's Mother, with a sharp hand gesture, sets Mrs. Yi to bowing in front of the offering tray where Babe struggles with the trident. When it finally stands, Babe relates a vision of the ancestral grandmother who honored the Seven Stars, a confirmation of the divination she has already given.

Babe manages a complicated dance, trailing the long sleeves of the white robe, then addresses Mrs. Yi, who is rubbing her hands in a gesture of intense supplication, "I am the Seven Stars who has helped this

family from long ago. In the past, the women of the family honored me. As for you, no good will has come to you (from the neglected Seven Stars)." Gesturing to her forehead, she adds, "Your head aches all the time." Mrs. Yi tries to flick away the tears that pool in the corners of her eyes. Another deity, the Birth Grandmother, tosses chestnuts and dates from the upturned surface of Babe's cymbals into Mrs. Yi's lap telling her, "If you can just surmount the current crisis, all will be well. I will help you." The pock-marked Princess (Hogu), her red skirt thrown over her head, makes a brief appearance and extracts a fee for make-up to cover her scars, the fee that enables her to remove the red skirt. Babe manages to convey all of this to Mrs. Yi with gestures, pointing to her cheeks to indicate the marks. Next, attired in a traditional military robe and hat, Babe dances with a bundle of colored flags and manifests a Spirit Warrior:

*You left your native place. You have a difficult fate. There was a Spirit Warrior in this house from long ago (a god helpful to commerce). I have waited for a long time. If your luck changes quickly, it will be in the 8th or 9th month; if it comes more slowly, then next year things will improve. I will help you get a house of your own.*

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When the Spirit Warrior offers her the flags for divination, Mrs. Yi errs (as I have done) attempting to extract a flag by its stick rather than merely indicating her choice. Because she does not know how to respond to the gods, and has no female kin or neighbors to help her, the mansin address the gods on her behalf, "It was because she didn't know any better (that she delayed her kut)." "Please help her, make (the misfortune) go away." "She will give you more next time." Mrs. Yi has not caught on to the stylized exchanges and stands silent, rubbing her hands in supplication, an anxious expression on her face as she strains to understand what the shaman is saying. It is not just that she must listen over the percussion, the drum and cymbals of her own kut and the different rhythms pounding out of the kut in the next chamber. The language of kut has its own idioms and uses many archaic terms. Even if Mrs. Yi's mother had patronized shamans and Mrs. Yi had seen them in her youth, these kut would have been in a different regional style and dialect. The mansin recognize that when a woman like Mrs. Yi has a kut for the first time, she usually cannot understand the mansin's speech.

Babe/the Spirit Warrior flourishes a white divination flag as Mrs. Yi's choice, a flag identified with celestial spirits like the Buddhist Sage and the Seven Stars. This further confirms the gods' insistence, "They honored the Seven Stars in this house in the past . . . You saw a woman in white in a dream. That's who it was." In the shaman world, an ancestor who worshipped the Seven Stars becomes conflated with the deity after her death and helps her descendants if they honor her. The Seven Stars offers more commiseration, "There are things you want to say, but you hold them in for years on end."

As a greedy Official/Babe comments on the quality of the pig's head, sticking her fingers up nostrils that should have held rolled 10,000-wŏn bills. Grabbing the tip of one ear, the god dangles the pig's head in a gesture of contempt. In an ice blue robe and black scholar's cap, Babe becomes Grandfather Sage (T'osa Harabōji), strutting with her back swayed to suggest a full paunch, "There was a Grandfather Sage in this house, with a long beard (she strokes an imaginary beard). And he smoked a long pipe (she holds out an imaginary pipe). You should give him a pipe and then husband and wife will make a lot of money between them." The delivery is buoyant and Mrs. Yi smiles now, even laughs a little, covering her mouth with the back of her hand as Korean women are supposed to do.

In her next manifestation, Babe picks up the two bundles of children's clothing, for a boy and a girl, and curls an arm around each one as if they were puppets animated by her own waddling, child-like gait and the occasional petulant stamp of her foot. Babe's Child Gods make a lively



The shaman in a colorful costume and blue vest is the "Spirit Warrior."

Photo courtesy of Laurel Kendall.

manifestation. In a lispng falsetto, they announce that they have come down from Mount Sōrak. "Oh my! This is exciting!" They pour water into an aluminum bowl, call it "liquor," and drink it down. "This tastes goood!" Babe balances the bowl on her head, making a comic face. The other shamans giggle. The Child Gods give a quick divination to Mrs. Yi and turn to the rest of us, my own divination delivered syllable by syllable in mockery of a Westerner trying to speak Korean.

Babe has proven her competence, manifesting numerous gods for well over an hour, showing a knack for comedy. Yongsu's Mother has watched her like a proud parent, laughing at all of her jokes and antics. Mrs. Yi, initially poker-faced, has slowly warmed to the commiserations and antics of mansin and gods as she learns her part in the ritual.

### OKKYŎNG'S MOTHER: COMMISERATING ANCESTORS

During a brief break, Mrs. Yi bends into the conversation and asks the mansin to clarify one of the points made in the divinations. Okkyōng's Mother, who will manifest the ancestors, takes this opportunity to ask her about the grandmothers and grandfathers in her family and the manner of their deaths, then puts on a yellow robe and manifests Great Spirit Grandmother who leads the ancestors to kut.

[In a weepy voice.] *There are afflictions in this family, multiple afflictions. You can never go back home [both parents are dead]. Things did not work out for you. You are sore all over. Is there any place on your body that isn't in pain?*

Okkyōng's Mother manifests the ancestors, beginning with distant generations, conjuring a grandmother who speaks of "descendants' mistakes," again alluding to the broken tradition of honoring the Seven Stars, offering commiseration. Mrs. Yi's own father, who hung himself, appears weeping, "Why did Father die? There wasn't any property. There wasn't any money. It tears you up inside. It's so pathetic." Her dead mother follows, continuing the lament for the hardships that led to the father's suicide. After Okkyōng's Mother tears the strips of cloth that signify each ancestor's release from hell, she rubs Mrs. Yi's hair and shoulders, half embracing her. Mrs. Yi sobs without restraint, as she is meant to do. An uncle complains that he died as a bachelor. A sister-in-law who died as a child demands candy and cash then promises to look after her nephew. Okkyōng's Mother rubs Mrs. Yi's back, a locus of pain. Departing ancestors express gratitude for their offerings and tell her not to worry, that her situation will improve. Once the ancestors' segment is complete, Okkyōng's Mother describes how, when she manifested Mrs. Yi's father, she could not stop coughing, her own throat constricted because he died by hanging.

## YONGSU'S MOTHER:

### A ROMP WITH ROWDY GODS

Yongsu's Mother dresses to perform the military gods; the gods who are particularly lively when she manifests them. As the General, "Do you think you can get rich without me? You worry so much that you can't sleep. There are times when you pick quarrels with your husband. I will help you to open up your luck." The Special Messenger says much the same thing, as does the Spirit Warrior, but Yongsu's Mother plays these gods, particularly the Spirit Warrior who is associated with her own dead husband, with a parody of masculine imperiousness, swaggering, harrumphing and snapping at the client, scrunching her face into a leering mask that shows some teeth, causing Mrs. Yi to giggle, as she is meant to do.

Again the halberd is balanced and again the trident is balanced with the speared pig's head on top. The mansin directs Mrs. Yi to place 10,000-w $\ddot{o}$ n bills in its ears and mouth. Again, the Spirit Warrior has Mrs. Yi choose a divination flag; again a god flourishes a white flag. The Spirit Warrior tells Mrs. Yi, "You thought that you couldn't honor the gods because you didn't have the money, but after that, nothing worked out, isn't that so?" The same phrases that caused Mrs. Yi to look solemn in the earlier segment now, with Yongsu's Mother's comic intonations and masculine clowning, make Mrs. Yi smile and even laugh.

Mrs. Yi draws a second flag, an auspicious red one, and the Spirit Warrior prances grandly with the flags draped over his/her shoulders, engaging in the bargaining, bantering games enjoyed by the Spirit Warrior and the Official. When Mrs. Yi gives the Spirit Warrior 10,000 w $\ddot{o}$ n, the god calls it a "widower;" when he receives a second bill he dubs it "as nice as a widower going into a widow's room." This as an old joke but it has the desired effect on Mrs. Yi who laughs without restraint. And she has finally caught on to the bantering play. She meets the Spirit Warrior's demands by saying "Next time, I'll give you more."

As the Official, Yongsu's Mother extends her lips into a pig-like snout and contemptuously surveys the offerings, eyeing Mrs. Yi with a comic leer. Covering her open mouth with both palms, Mrs. Yi dissolves into belly laughs. The Official grabs Mrs. Yi's leg and drags her across the room. Word has gone around the shrine that a particularly lively Official is present. The shrine staff and people from the other kut crowd the doorway as Yongsu's Mother extracts 10,000 w $\ddot{o}$ n bills until Mrs. Yi says that she has spent all of her money. Okky $\ddot{o}$ ng's Mother prods her to give her last 1,000 w $\ddot{o}$ n. The Official dances with the big steamer of rice cake and hands it to Mrs. Yi, calling her "pretty." The other mansin coach Mrs. Yi to pour out a bowl of rice wine for the Official who snidely asks, "What's the matter with you? Do you only know how to drink beer?" Hoisting a tray bearing the pig's head over his/her own head, the Official prances and sings, "Our Official is so fine! I'll keep your husband busy (by



Offerings to the Child Gods in a shaman's shrine.  
Photo courtesy of Laurel Kendall.

bringing him work)." The god/Yongsu's Mother adds as an aside that the Official is having such a good time that he/she could keep partying all night. I sense today as I have on other occasions that Yongsu's Mother does not want to stop her buoyant manifestation of the Official, despite her desire to get home early today. Finally, Yongsu's Mother passes the pig's head to Mrs. Yi's waiting arms, followed by the Official's blue vest and military hat, a bestowal of blessings.

### CONCLUDING ACTS

Babe very quickly invokes other deities, the House Lord and the Mountebank, affirming that next year things will be much better. The shamans disassemble the offering food and pack their equipment. Babe gives Mrs. Yi final instructions. She must take some of the white rice cake home and place it in the inner room for the grandmother who honored the Seven Stars:

*Bow three times saying "You are the grandmother who helped us from long ago." Tell her you are giving her an offering . . . and say to the twelve Officials, "Twelve Officials, make us rich." Then take a sip of wine from each cup and toss some of the wine outside.*

Mrs. Yi takes notes. Babe gives her other leftover offering food to take home and suggests how she might use it, filling plastic bags with fish, meat, and rice cake. Mrs. Yi looks

overwhelmed, perhaps wondering how to deal with this sudden excess and whether it will arouse her husband's suspicions.

Yongsu's Mother takes care of the gods outside the house and the final send-off of wandering ghosts and noxious influences. She seats Mrs. Yi on the edge of the narrow veranda and exorcises her, pelting her with scraps of food, taking the bundle of clothing offered to the ancestors and wafting it around Mrs. Yi before tossing it away, tearing strips of cloth to release the hold of the dead, brandishing her knife until she is satisfied that Mrs. Yi is clean. As a blind ghost, Yongsu's Mother rolls back her eyes, takes a frog-like leap, and squats on the ground, tapping with her hand until she finds the basin of water that she must sprinkle on her eyes in order to open them again. For the ghost of a woman who has died in childbirth, she takes a bowl of post-partum soup and bites a huge wad of kelp so that it dangles from her teeth like a long ghostly green tongue.

Within minutes, the mansin are in everyday wear, the van packed, and we are on our way home. I ask Mrs. Yi if she feels relieved. She tells me that she does not know what she feels. During the kut, she says, she felt heavy-hearted about all of the things that had gone wrong in her life, but the ancestors understood her feelings and had given her encouragement.

### CONCLUSION: MAKING A MYTHIC WORLD

The next day, I asked Yongsu's Mother about the kut. Was it because the family should have held a kut in the past? Is this why the wife became ill and the husband's business failed?

*Yes, more or less. They should have had a kut. The husband's business failed. He hasn't worked for three years. They're just living on*

debt. Living that way makes a person anxious, they use their nerves, and then, of course they get sick. It's that way with everyone, isn't it? You don't have money and then you fret about it until it makes you ill.

Mrs. Yi's immediate domestic crisis was enmeshed in the gyrations of the South Korean economy in the early 1990s, bad years for precarious small businesses. In the mansin's terms, Mrs. Yi's afflictions were, simultaneously, a product of anxiety and frustration and a consequence of her having neglected household gods and ancestors with appropriate rituals and offerings. In the kut, Mrs. Yi experienced the compassion of family ancestors and was encouraged to regard an ancestral grandmother as a long-neglected but potentially helpful household god. Through gods' play and the tears of ancestors, the kut offered a reason to hope, but conjuring hope for Mrs. Yi was no easy task.

Mrs. Yi lacked the accompanying mother, sister, sister-in-law, husband, or neighbor one sometimes sees at shrine kut, much less the knowledgeable village women who might have coached and supported her in decades past. It was the shamans themselves who gradually acculturated Mrs. Yi to the world of kut. She had no prior experience and initially, she had seemed confused and awkward, present only because she was desperate enough to accept a shaman's advice. The mansin had to construct a mythic world for her, foundation up, and they did this with a mingling of inspiration, skill, and improvisation. They found her an ancestral grandmother as a potentially helpful deity ("You saw a woman in white in a dream. That's who it was"), a link between household gods and family fortune whose presence they underscored throughout the kut and perpetuated in the household ritual Babe enjoined Mrs. Yi to perform at home. The ancestors articulated the tragedy of her father's suicide. The Official's antics gave presence to demanding gods who would also be honored at home.

By degrees, the mansin brought Mrs. Yi to the point of weeping, laughing, and talking back to the gods. In this work, the apprentice Babe displayed competence and a developing comic flare, an ability to provoke moist eyes and giggles, but it was the two more experienced shamans, Yongsu's Mother and Okkyōng's Mother, who caused Mrs. Yi to weep and laugh with abandon. Yongsu's Mother's comic manifestation of the Official elicited not only belly laughs from her erstwhile bashful client, but drew spectators to the doorway. Perhaps the reader might appreciate, as I learned to do, the skill and resourcefulness with which mansin like Yongsu's Mother and Okkyōng's Mother and their gods continue to work their enchantment for anxious city women like Mrs. Yi in places like the anonymous kuttang. ■

## FURTHER READING

Baker, Donald. *Korean Spirituality* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).  
Kendall, Laurel. *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean-Ritual Life* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985); see also, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF: South Korean Popular Religion in Motion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

LAUREL KENDALL is curator of Asian Ethnographic Collections at the American Museum of Natural History and Chair of the Museum's Anthropology Division. She is the author of many books and articles having to do with Korea, Việt Nam, gender, modernity, and popular religion. Her most recent book, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF*, from which this article was abstracted, was published by the University of Hawai'i Press in 2009.

## Shamans in Today's Korea

By Donald L. Baker

There are no reliable figures for how many active shamans there are in Korea today, nor for how many Koreans patronize shamans. Estimates for the number of shamans run from 40,000 to 100,000 or more. If the higher range figure were accurate, then there would be more shamans in Korea than Buddhist monks or Christian pastors.

Despite the rapid urbanization and industrialization South Korea has experienced over the last half-century, and despite the increasing visibility of both Christian churches and Buddhist temples on Korean streets, the folk religion of Korea not only survives, it thrives. The animism that once dominated village ritual life continues to draw Koreans to the Mountain God shrines found behind the main halls of most Buddhist temples, and the belief that we are surrounded by invisible personalities who have the power to influence our lives continues to motivate Koreans to seek out shamans.

Traditionally, there have been three types of shamans in Korea. Hereditary shamans are ritual specialists who inherit the ability to perform certain rituals believed to influence the behavior of spirits. They perform those rituals without entering a trance or claiming to be possessed by any spirits. A second type of shaman is a shamanic diviner, who merely relays information from the spirits without elaborate rituals, and normally does not become possessed. Today neither the hereditary shaman nor the shamanic diviner attracts as many well-paying clients as do the charismatic shamans.

Charismatic shamans, sometimes called *mansin* ("ten thousand spirits," for the multitude of spirits they can channel), put on a much better show, since they invite various spirits to take over their bodies and speak through them to those who seek their help. Through such shamans, Koreans are able to plead with spirits to stop afflicting them with physical, financial, or personal problems, or are able to talk once again with recently deceased loved ones. The dramatic rise in Korean living standards over the last few decades has not eliminated the desire of many Koreans to engage in such interactions with spirits. Rising incomes have instead meant more Koreans are now able to afford such expensive rituals.

DONALD L. BAKER teaches in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia. In 2008, he was awarded the Tasan prize for his research on Tasan Chōng Yagyong, a writer and philosopher in Korea in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His most recent book is *Korean Spirituality* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).