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Chongho Kim

Korean Shamanism The Cultural Paradox

Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing

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reviewed by [James Boyd](#)

1. Chongho Kim's position with regard to how shamanism is regarded in modern Korea is clearly established with the title of this book where Kim notes that there exists a cultural paradox. He explains this paradox in his introduction, noting that while the average Korean apparently scorns it, shamanism continues to survive. Kim believes that Western scholars have largely ignored the paradoxical position and nature of shamanism in modern Korea. Instead, he argues that they have tended to convey the impression that Korean shamans, the majority of whom are women, have a greater degree of influence in modern Korean society than is actually the case given the shamans marginalised position. In making his argument, Kim thus challenges the work of the American anthropologist Laurel Kendall, author of a number of works on the subject, including the highly regarded *Shaman, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Ritual Life* (1985) and *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman: Of Tales and the Telling of Tales* (1988).
2. Kim's book, which is a revised version of his 2001 doctoral thesis from the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, seeks to support his contention that Kendall has "romanticize[d] Korean shamanism, seeing it as a kind of 'women's religion' suppressed by patriarchy" (p. xiv). Instead, Kim questions why it is that Koreans continue to use shamanistic ritual even though prejudice against shamanism appears to be universal and the practice is widely stigmatised and despised as superstition. He relies extensively on observations gathered during his doctoral fieldwork, together with extensive interviews of the individuals that he observed, including shamans, their families, women who paid for shamanistic rituals, and the families of these women. Kim explains carefully what his purpose in conducting this fieldwork was, that is, to determine whether the shaman did actually hold a position of relative status in the village in which he conducted his fieldwork. He explains to his readers more details of the population and location of the small village outside of Seoul. Then, in the six chapters following the introduction, through his lengthy examination of the lives of a group of villagers, and their attitudes to shamanism, as well as his own participation in a number of shaman rituals, Kim seeks to show how Kendall's work has misrepresented the actual position of shamans in modern Korean society.
3. This section, that is his examination of the life and ritual of the shaman, as well as the people around the shaman, who call on them for rituals of healing form the better part of the book, is fascinating in what it captures. For example, in chapter two, 'Ritual without audience,' Kim walks through the actual process by which a client contacts the shaman and arranges for a ritual to be conducted, and then the actual ritual itself. In his discussion of the people and the rituals he observed, Kim tries to fathom why he was given the opportunity to delve into these people's lives. The examples that he gives of his encounters serve to make his work a rich and entertaining read. In chapter four, 'A Practice of Cultural Rebellion' for example, the reader is given an extensive description of one of the rituals that he observed, with particular attention to the interplay between the shaman and the participants.
4. However, Kim's work is not without flaws. While Kim's challenge to the work done by Kendall is well constructed, and through his use of quotations from the Korean women he interviewed, Kim does demonstrate that the prevailing attitude to shamans in modern Korean society is negative. Unfortunately, Kim also seems to dismiss Kendall's work partly on the grounds that it is easier for him, as a Korean-born, Western-trained anthropologist, to

understand and evaluate his own culture, than it is for Kendall and others, who while Western-trained, are non-Koreans. This is a highly questionable proposition. The implicit or explicit assertion that only those from within a group have the necessary insights to analyse that group seems to be a backward anthropological step, akin to the position in Japanese studies advanced by practitioners of *Nihonjinron* [theories of the Japanese].

5. Despite this reservation, I found Kim's book a very thought-provoking read, not only for the thorough way in which he amasses a large amount of evidence to indicate that the paradoxical position of the shaman in Korean society needs to be further evaluated, but also because he charts his own journey as a researcher, noting the trials and tribulations that face us all as we conduct research. For those with an interest in modern Korea or in shamanism, I would recommend this book. It has its faults, one being that in places, it is a little awkward in style, but it is worth reading for the many examples that Kim gives of shamanistic practices in modern Korea. It is clear that Kim is fascinated by his subject and has devoted a great amount of time and effort in seeking to understand the paradoxical nature of shamanism in contemporary Korean, especially the way in which it appears to be regarded in a different light by Koreans and non-Koreans. For this alone, his book deserves to be read.



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