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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

Are Shaman Paintings Material Religion or Religious Art?

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Laurel Kendall, Jongsung Yang, and Yul Soo Yoon. *God Pictures in Korean Contexts: The Ownership and Meaning of Shaman Paintings*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 176 pp. \$54.00 (cloth); \$29.00 (paper).

Pioneering Research That Harmonizes Academic Analysis with Field Experience

God Pictures in Korean Contexts: The Ownership and Meaning of Shaman Paintings (hereafter, *God Pictures*) is a pioneering work, one that explores the proverbial “road not taken” by previous research on the subject. The authors situate “the lives of Korean shaman paintings [*musindo*] in a complex South Korean world; in shaman shrines, private collections, and museums” (1). Incorporating their vivid experiences in the field, authors Laurel Kendall, anthropologist and curator at the American Museum of Natural History; Jongsung Yang, collector and director of the Museum of Shamanism in Seoul; and Yul Soo Yoon, art historian and director of the Gahoe Museum in Seoul, investigate not merely the religious meanings and functions of shaman paintings, but how these meanings and functions are accepted, appropriated, and even created, depending on the interests of various participants—shamans, painters, collectors of shaman paintings, and so on—who are relevant to these visual forms of expressive culture. By taking this approach, the authors have expanded on prior academic work, which has been mainly limited to historical exploration of Korean shamanism and related fields, such as anthropology and religious studies. They meditate anew on the meaning of Korean shaman paintings from multiple perspectives, including material religion and religious art, which have not received much attention

thus far. Furthermore, it is notable that the authors conducted their research at shaman ritual sites with shaman paintings, as well as in museums, and included an analysis of various aspects of shamanism observed in the process of drawing, collecting, preserving, trading, and exhibiting shaman paintings, all rich sources for academic discussion. Since all three authors deal directly with Korean shaman painting—whether as curator, director, anthropologist, or art historian—this book is both vivid and academically sound.

God Pictures makes two important academic contributions. First, it adds to academic discussions on “material religion,” a relatively recent research area stemming from anthropology and religious studies. Earlier research on material religion (Morgan 2005; Park 2012) focused mainly on Christian and Buddhist objects, including crucifixes and icons, Buddhist statues, and rosaries. This book opens a new chapter for research in material religion by analyzing the unique characteristics of shaman paintings in the modern Korean context. In particular, it is noteworthy because it sheds light not only on the traditional and religious functions of the shamans who ordered the paintings and the painters who executed these orders, but also on the modern and commercial processes of trading and exhibiting the paintings in museums, in order to identify how various cultural agents appropriate these works. The authors’ multiple analytical approaches are clearly distinct from that of traditional art historians, who tend to focus on the religious iconography/iconology of shaman paintings, which facilitates comparing their meanings, forms, and other aspects.

The second remarkable achievement of this book is its explanation of how Korean shamanism was transformed through its link to modernity using shaman paintings as subject matter. Korean shamanism was disparaged in the course of modernization in Korea as an uncivilized superstition that should disappear, and, accordingly, there was huge pressure to expel it from society. However, Korean shamanism took this pressure as motivation to evolve, a shift that is evidenced in the modern transformation of shaman paintings and their surrounding socioreligious contexts.

The Ambiguity and Fluidity of Material Religion

God Pictures demonstrates a material turn in religious studies and anthropology

with regard to the study of Korean shamanism (4). The authors examine and explain “the social lives of shaman paintings” in Korean contexts (5), in contrast to prior works from the perspectives of art history and folk and religious studies that focused on the historical changes in shaman paintings’ style, ritual function, and classification of the gods.

This book shows a paradigm shift in the study of sacred paintings from religious iconography/iconology—the historical lives of religious images and symbols expressed in shaman paintings—to the social anthropology of religious icons, which focuses on the social lives of shaman paintings in their cultural contexts. The authors’ new approach focuses on “the social lives” (cf. Appadurai 1996) of shaman paintings as material religion and religious art, in contrast to iconographical analysis or iconological interpretation, such as the history of styles, types, general symbols, and cultural symptoms (Panofsky 1939).

Religious culture comprises several important dimensions. Some sacred texts, like the Bible and the Quran, represent the religious world views of believers, and some religious practices, like prayers and rituals, contribute to religious world views by creating meaningful experiences for religious practitioners. In the history of religions, mantras or prayers have given humans access to experiences that have helped them reach mystical union with the ultimate reality, while sacred religious music can cause its creators, players, or audiences to feel the grace of gods or to immerse themselves in meditation or contemplation. These elements of religious culture create religious experiences through hearing; icons, religious statues, and paintings are the important sacred media of “material religion,” which directly convey a feeling of the divine through the sense of sight (cf. Morgan 2005).

The authors of *God Pictures* emphasize the ambiguous and fluid identities of shaman paintings. These fascinating cultural objects are sacred religious paintings that evoke profound veneration for shaman gods and, at the same time, profane commodities that are bought and sold in commercial transactions. Shaman paintings are not only “material religion” but also “religious art” (19–23); they oscillate between the two.

The Social Lives of Shaman Paintings

In chapter 2 of *God Pictures*, the authors pose the following questions: Are Korean shaman paintings material religion or religious art? Are religious icons, including shaman paintings, always sacred? Can sacred objects be commodified as coveted objects? This book provides a coherent explanation of how the ownership and meanings of shaman paintings vary according to context and to the agents involved. Applying British social anthropologist Alfred Gell's (1998) notion of "object agency" to shaman paintings, the authors explain the ambiguity and fluidity of shaman paintings as follows: "Both shamans and collectors abduct agency to paintings but in very different ways: in the shaman's view, the god exerts agency through the paintings as a site of human and divine interaction. For the collectors, the painting itself is an agentive object" (74).

As stated above, shamans regard shaman paintings as sacred "material religion," in keeping with a traditional religious perspective, but modern collectors and dealers treat them as profane art commodities. Painters have regarded shaman paintings "as a sacred as well as a technical art" (107). Shaman paintings are ambiguous and fluid objects that change according to the context and process of a given shaman's production order, the artist's painting, the work's preservation in the shrine room and magical uses in shaman rituals, and the selling and buying of the painting. The authors of *God Pictures* explain the "social lives" of shaman paintings—their contextual ambiguity and fluidity—by exploring the following questions:

When is a painting a Korean shaman painting? What makes a painting more than just a painting but a magical or sacred thing? What does it mean to carry the trace of a god? Once animated and venerated, can it ever be just a painting again? What makes it art? Do artfulness and magic ever intersect? Does it matter, in terms of market value, that the painting was once a sacred thing? (3)

Shaman paintings become sacred objects according to the following process: a shaman places an order for a painting, abiding by the will and demand of the gods; then, the painter performs ablutions and completes the painting with prayers and dedication. The initiation rituals (*narim kut*) of shamans are the dramatic events whereby shaman paintings become sacred. The triangulation of shaman, god, and paintings made through this process activates the animation of shaman paintings as material religion, and gods entering shaman paintings take part in the animation of

shaman paintings “when the initiate sees the faces of the gods in her initiation ritual [*narim kut*]” (78–79).

In contrast, the “deanimation” (78) and “purification” (78) involved in calling shaman paintings profane art is also derived from the gods’ approval and achieved by dealers and collectors. The authors suggest that there are fights among the gods or shaman paintings to occupy the shrine where the paintings will be hung. For example, the real story of Korean shaman Yongsu’s mother and older aunt Chatterbox *mansin* (Korean charismatic shaman) in 1983 and 1985 is very interesting. In their dialogue, the two sister shamans comment that “their gods would not be able to cohabit peacefully” (70) and “had been fighting with each other” (73). Chatterbox’s new gods were not compatible with the shaman and her own gods in the same shrine. Thus, Yongsu’s mother rolled up the paintings of her sister’s gods under her altar. She would not serve her sister’s gods, because they would not help her (73).

The authors explain this situation by utilizing the French anthropologist Bruno Latour’s (1993) understanding of purification. The reduction of shaman paintings purified from being material religion to secular art is not decided unilaterally by dealers or collectors, but is initiated by approval from the gods and the *hajik-kut* (ritual retirement) of a shaman. As a result, a Korean *mansin* said, “If they [the gods] do not want to go anywhere, we give them to a museum” (123). Spiritual beings such as souls, gods, spirit energies, and spiritual power (*yöng*, *sin*, *singi*, and *sillyök* in Korean, respectively) make shaman paintings sacred, defined as animation. Meanwhile, dealers and collectors treat these paintings as mere profane art in the course of commodities transactions, which are called deanimation and purification. Throughout the authors’ explanation of the social lives of religious paintings, we come to understand that gods, shamans, painters, dealers, and collectors accept and use shaman paintings in different ways according to their respective interests and contexts. We also see that shaman paintings, which usually work as sacred religious paintings, may transform into secular products. The groundbreaking contribution of *God Pictures* is that it enables us to expand our view of shaman paintings from focusing solely on shamans to including the voices and roles of collectors and dealers, and even of the gods themselves.

The Hybridity of the Unique Korean-ness of Shaman Paintings and Their Modern Transformation

The authors of *God Pictures* approach *musok* (Korean shamanism) and *musindo* (Korean shaman paintings) in a way that makes readers pay special attention to the relationship between Korean shamanism and modernity. They explain the modern transformation of Korean shamanism from the perspectives of alternative modernity and compressed modernity. In particular, the authors pay attention both to the nationalist view of Korean scholars and collectors, which holds that shaman paintings reflect a “unique Korean-ness,” and to modern transformations observed in the changing styles and production processes of shaman paintings. These approaches result in a paradigm shift from understanding Korean shamanism as a primitive religious tradition to viewing it as a modern hybrid culture.

Taken as a whole, the book offers more varied perspectives and further develops arguments presented in Kendall’s earlier works (1985, 2009). In her previous work, Kendall explained that shamans, or female clerics, and housewives, or female believers, were coordinating constantly in terms of practicing rituals from the dual structure of family rituals mainly led by men and household rituals conducted by women. She stressed the identity and mutual supplementation of ritual roles that the women held. They escaped from the structure of male-centered Confucian culture and female-centered shaman culture based on the dichotomy of cultural center and periphery, mainstream and non-mainstream, and dominance and subordination. Kendall (1985) emphasized the active and aggressive roles of women by highlighting the similarity of ritual roles between shamans and housewives in traditional male-centered Confucian society; to this end, she tried to deliver the voices of the gods that were revealed through the voice of the shaman from an empathetic perspective.

Kendall also argued that most rituals in urban areas in the 1970s were not carried out at home, but at the shrine of a *mansin* or at a commercial shrine (1985). During the deployment process of modern capitalism, small-scale family businesses began to work in the area of exorcism, work formerly done by small-scale family farmers. In other words, shamans and regular participants in shamanism have been reorganized as subjects and clients of ritual services, reflecting modern capitalism; thus, the spiritual structure based on shaman culture and the social structure have

evolved together.

In *God Pictures*, Kendall and her coauthors recover the multiple voices of various agents reflected in shaman paintings by escaping from the dichotomy of mutual confrontation in Korean culture or religion, and they also explain how religious shaman paintings have turned into secular products. In the process, they convey that the religious meaning and commercial value of shaman paintings reflect “compressed modernity” (59) and explain that the tradition of shamanism is transforming anew by integrating Western factors and modern changes.

The first aspect of this modern transformation is that shaman paintings, once made through religious rituals by elite painters following orders placed by shamans, are now being manufactured by means of mechanical reproduction and sold in quantity as commodities. Accordingly, the past status of shaman paintings as material religion, realized by the religious ritual and passion of a sophisticated master, has been degraded to that of mere painted products:

Where most shamans buy from the shops, and most shops buy the mass-produced work of workshop artists or Korean-Chinese painters, the act of acquiring a painting has become a commercial transaction in the age of mechanical reproduction. (43)

A new form of shaman painting in the age of mechanical reproduction is the *chonghap t'aenghwa* or *modum t'aenghwa* (collective painting) (41), a grouping of the shaman's gods painted together on a single broadsheet. In comparison with the past, when only one important divinity or a small number of divinities were drawn in one painting, in today's pictures numerous contemporary divinities coexist. This shows the changes in style and production in paintings representative of “compressed modernity” (59). For example, collective paintings that include all of the gods in a shaman's personal pantheon grouped around the Buddha (117, figure 5.11) are a late twentieth-century innovation. These paintings are now widely used to accommodate cramped urban spaces. Traditional shaman culture has adapted to a modern style by appropriating those modern factors suitable for shaman traditions.

On the other hand, the collection and exhibition of shaman paintings by scholars and collectors reveal different modern contexts. Based on the opinion presented by the Korean folklorist Chang Chu-gun (1994), the authors state that, “in

the early twentieth century, commissioning a painting was more a religious act than a commercial transaction” (95). However, the commercial value of shaman paintings in modern Korea is recognized based on nationalist interests in folkloric culture promoted by modern Korean scholars and collectors, who wanted to confirm them as a “unique” and “Korean” cultural tradition. As such, the paintings have become collectors’ items representing the “unique Korean-style of folk religion.” These nationalist interests are different from those of Western collectors, and we can understand them as a form of alternative modernity.

In *God Pictures*, we learn that the radical transformation of the New Community Movement (K: Saemaoul Undong), a development project to modernize South Korea, in the early 1970s denounced shamanic rituals, regulating them as superstitious practices (57–58). In the process of “compressed modernity,” shamanism absorbed, perhaps paradoxically, such modernity due to its fluidity. Modern shaman paintings represent aspects of this fluidity. For example, in chapter 2, figure 2.9 on the theme of “many teachings, one way” shows fluidity in the pantheon by including Jesus Christ, Shakyamuni, and Confucius (33), and figure 2.10 on the theme of “The Special Messenger (*Pyöplsang*)” represents fluidity in its iconography (34). While the former shows the religious receptivity of shamanism, which tolerates saints and their religious values appropriated from foreign religions, the latter accurately reflects the influence of military dictatorships during the 1960s and 1970s.

As such, the authors prove that shaman paintings are not fixed, but are examples of material religion that have been transformed historically and continue to be transformed constantly, according to the religious culture and political and economic situation of the day. They also show that shaman paintings absorb the influences of compressed modernity to expand the fluidity of shaman culture by realizing the transformation of the painting style and production method. In summary, shaman paintings in modern Korea can be dubbed a hybrid cultural phenomenon that embodies both a unique Korean-ness and modernity.

Some Critical Remarks

Can we, however, define the hybridity of shaman culture solely as a symbol of the alternative modernity of shaman culture, as claimed by the authors? Is it

impossible to explain in other ways? From a historical perspective, I believe that explaining it from the viewpoint of folk religion or popular religion would be more appropriate. I agree with the authors' explanation that modern Korean collectors' desire to seek out unique Korean-ness lies at the root of their modern search for an indigenous Korean folk religion. Still, modernity cannot explain everything. For example, shaman items sell together with Buddhist or folkloric items in the same shop, as pointed out by the authors. This can be understood within the modern context of capitalistic commoditization and mass production, distribution, and consumption, as in the case of Christian or Catholic products being sold in relevant religious specialty shops in Korea.

Selling shaman paintings and other religious items as commodities is a modern phenomenon, but shamanic and Buddhist objects were made together in the premodern era, so this phenomenon cannot be fully explained as a product of modernity. A more appropriate explanation can be given when the issue is considered from the viewpoint of popularized or folk religions in contrast to official religions (Vrijhof and Waardenburg 1979; Choi 2002). Shamanism is a folk religion without scriptures and a popular religion without institutional authority. Starting in the Joseon era, Buddhist monks and shamans were treated as an untouchable class, lower than commoners. Accordingly, shaman paintings were degraded to a shoddy level, since they were not drawn by court painters with a strict, high level of artistic acumen. In this process, goldfish monks (金魚僧), who used to draw Buddhist paintings, began to draw shaman paintings when they were suppressed during the Confucian Joseon, thus opening a new chapter for folklore paintings by empathizing with and alleviating people's pain. As a result, shaman paintings were religious paintings and folklore paintings at the same time. Surely, modern commercialization dramatically accelerated such trends.

The other issue concerns how to understand the fluidity in shaman paintings. Many Korean religious historians assume that shamanism is an indigenous religious tradition that formed the basic spirit or deep unconsciousness of Korea prior to the introduction of foreign religions. They explain that a multilayered religious culture was formed in the modern context of religious plurality based on this assumption with the inflow of foreign religions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, and

Christianity (Park 2012). However, shamanism needs to be understood as a hybrid culture of syncretic inclusivism derived from the *mansin's* spirituality and the alternative modernity associated with unique Korean shaman culture, not as a primitive religious tradition.

Collective shaman paintings are the result of a sort of modern transformation, but hybridity and fluidity in shaman paintings can be understood in terms of the unique cultural features of Korean shamanism as folk/popular religion. I believe that we need to pay attention to the mixed phenomenon, which is ambiguous, multilayered, and even contradictory, regarding the identity of the divinity revered in shamanism. The case of Sambul Chesök or Samsin Chesök is a good example of the interesting recognition of fluidity and artistic representation of mixed folklore religions (figures 2.13, 2.14, 3.7, 4.8, 6.1; plate 3). The word *Sambul* means three Buddhas, but in many cases, it was understood and used to mean three gods (*Samsin*). Samsin or Sambul normally appear in the form of Buddhist monks with conical hats on the shaman's fan, but Sambul in Buddhism and Samsin revered in Korean national/folklore religions are totally different divinities, though the two are mixed up occasionally. To clarify such multilayered and mixed characteristics, research aimed at understanding the overlapping features between Buddhist paintings and shaman paintings regarding wealth, longevity, and birth, as well as their differences in eras, creators, forms, and geography, is necessary.

Lastly, the features of shamans, the ritual subjects of shaman paintings, need to be reviewed. The authors regard the use of shaman paintings by some hereditary *mudang* (Korean shamans) "as a modern development following standardizing tendencies in the practices of Korean shamans" (134). Hereditary *mudang* (*sesŭp mu*) of southern Korea are not spiritually inspired shamans but, rather, religious artists who are trained to sing, dance, and perform shaman rituals. They do not need to be chosen and possessed by the gods. Therefore, they do not have shrine rooms (*sinbang*), in which shaman paintings hang above the altar as sacred spaces for gods who are resident in the paintings (19, 134). On the contrary, *mansin* following the tradition of northern and central Korea, especially Seoul and the northwestern provinces of Hwanghae and P'yongan, are charismatic shamans (*kangsin mu*) who are chosen and possessed by the gods. They receive the power of inspired speech from

the deities they serve, and the deities are present in the shaman paintings (19, 134).

However, distinctions between hereditary *mudang* and charismatic *mansin* and the regional distribution of shaman paintings are not necessarily identical. For instance, the shaman painting located in the Naewattang shrine on Jeju Island off of southern Korea was drawn in the Joseon era, but it is a representative case of a painting of a hereditary shaman (Ha 2011; Kim 2013). Though such an example is not common, this case raises the question of whether a hereditary shaman does not need shaman paintings. If more cases are found from the traditional era, the use of shaman paintings by hereditary shamans will be shown to be not a modern transformation, but an error. Though it is true that shaman paintings appeared distinctively among charismatic shamans, further research will be necessary if these are their exclusive property.

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