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The American Flag in Kim's Spirit Shrine

A notable feature of contemporary Hwanghae-do (now a region in North Korea) shamanism in Incheon, west of Seoul, is a body of material symbols of American power that are familiar to Koreans—such as the Stars and Stripes or the portrait of General Douglas MacArthur. Focusing on the small American flag that Kim Kŭm-hwa, a renowned Hwanghae-origin shaman, brought home from her tour of the United States in 1982 during which she performed *kut*, Korea's shamanic rite, at the Knoxville World Fair and the Smithsonian Museum, this article investigates how this object came to join Kim's spirit shrine as an auspicious artifact and what it says about her eminent yet turbulent career experience. It asks what sort of power the American flag displays and how this power is different from what we habitually understand as "American power."

Keywords: shamanism—Korea—spirit portrait—American power—politics of anti-superstition

Unfurling is an important act in a *kut*, Korea's shamanic ritual. Although the act takes several distinct forms within the rite, most notable would be the divination or fortune-telling session involving *obangki*, the ritual device consisting of five hand-held flags of different colors. In a typical *obangki* divination, the client blind-picks a flag from the bundle held by the shaman and repeats the act once or twice more. The flags are carefully folded together so that their colors are not identifiable to the client, who sees only five identical-looking bamboo sticks that are used as flag poles. Each chosen color signifies a specific cardinal direction and a set of divinatory meanings as related to the conditions of human wellbeing. It also represents certain types of spirits and the specific supernatural power associated with these spirits. For instance, the red flag, associated with the southern orientation, speaks of the power of mountain deities, whereas the yellow flag, which signifies the center, symbolizes the vitality of ancestral spirits. The shaman interprets the combined meanings of two or more flags blind-picked this way. The unfurled colors are supposed to help map the client family's health and business prospects by showing which spirits might respond to the family's specific wishes and how strongly they would do so. Hence it is not surprising that most people who solicit a *kut* usually take part in the five-flag divination with acute interest and concentration. One can even argue that these clients are willing to endure the long and costly ritual in anticipation of those moments in which they can test their luck with the bundle of the red, white, yellow, blue, and green spirit flags. *Obangki* is a compass for the spirit world, reaching out in all directions to all classes of the animate entities within it. Within the act of ritual divination, it is an important means of communication between humans and spirits. And that important communication starts with the unfurling of flags (on the idea of unfurling, see Swancutt 2023).

Within a group of shamans in Incheon, a historic port town west of Seoul, on whom we concentrate in this article, some occasionally introduce to the *obangki* ritual *taeguk'gi* in place of *obangki*'s white flag (and sometimes as an addition to the existing five flags). Featuring symbols of ancient oracles on the pearl-white background, *taeguk'gi* is South Korea's national flag today; before 1945, when the nation was partitioned into two separate polities, it was Korea's national flag. This group of ritual specialists follow a local tradition of shamanism, associated with a region now north of the 38th parallel that divides Korea. The first generation of this group were refugees from the region, called Hwanghae (Yellow Sea), during the 1950–53 war. One notable

feature of the Hwanghae shamanism tradition is known to be a particularly elaborate and vigorous ritual performance involving warrior spirit-helpers. Among those who practice this local cultural form in Incheon today, another distinct feature is that the spirit of an American general plays an active part in the warrior-spirit performance, together with other much more established spirit-personas who originate from old Korean history or from the milieu of ancient Sino-Korean relations. This spirit is that of General Douglas MacArthur, a hero of the Pacific War who, after the war, governed the then America-occupied Japan. During the ensuing crisis of war in East Asia that started in the Korean peninsula, MacArthur was the supreme commander of the United Nations forces to Korea and orchestrated the well-known amphibious military action in September 1950 against the North Korean positions. Being a pivotal episode of the three-year Korean War, the amphibious assault took place in the coastal sea of Incheon, where most of this group of shamans have been primarily based. In the *kut* performed by some of these shamans, it is considered to be an especially auspicious sign if a client picked the *taeguk'gi* flag of the *obangki* in the first round. When this happens, the spirit of the American general is delighted and, taking the flag from the client, gets into a vigorous, joyous dance (that is, through the medium of the ritual-performing shamaness).

We have seen the American general waving and dancing with the Korean flag on several occasions and also have previously written about how this foreigner spirit came to find home in Korea's arguably most authentic, ancient popular religious sphere in the first place (Kwon and Park 2018). We argued that this process of homemaking interacts closely with an opposite process of displacement from home experienced by the first-generation Hwanghae shamans during the Korean War. We concluded that the inception of the American general into their society of spirit-helpers is far from an expression of subservience to a foreign power (as suggested by some nationalist cultural historians of South Korea). In contrast, the spirit of General MacArthur, whose legacies in the Korean War and in South Korea's political history at large are prolifically materialized in the city of Incheon through museums and monuments, is an extension of the spirit of General Im Kyung-ŏp, an eminent seventeenth-century military official and long-established shamanic deity in the Hwanghae region. The keyword in understanding this historical process is displacement (see also Hoskins 2023)—in the double sense of the term involving not only the war-caused physical dislocation from the home-place (the loss of the long-familiar symbolic landscape and related imperative of rebuilding a spirited landscape in an alien place), but also confronting powerful modern political forces of coerced disenchantment that were bent on dislocating traditional religious forms such as shamanism from social space.

We dealt with the first, material aspect of displacement in our earlier work (Kwon and Park 2018), in part with reference to the career of Chung Hak-bong, an eminent actor in Incheon's Hwanghae shamanism group. In the present article, we will explore the second, political dimension of displacement. Useful in this discussion is the life experience of Kim Kūm-hwa, another towering figure in the displaced Hwanghae shamanism tradition in the post-Korean War South Korea. Madame Kim considered the *obangki* divination ritual an important part of her *kut*, just as Chung

and all other Hwanghae-tradition shamans did. In this article, however, rather than this ritual instrument our focus will be on another flag that she had long kept in her domestic shrine as one of her most cherished objects. This object was a small American flag, proudly displayed at the center of her spirit shrine in Seoul (figure 1). We will investigate how this object came to find a place in Kim's home shrine that is usually exclusively for the shaman's principal tutelary spirits and the gifts offered to them, asking what the American flag meant to her and what role it played within the shrine space and Kim's lived world more broadly. Following these investigations, we will return to the question of displacement and ask how Kim's American flag spoke to the powerful forces of modern politics that sought to displace shamanism from society.

Knoxville, 1982

Incheon has numerous historic relics. Many of them relate to the history of Korea opening its doors to Western and other foreign powers—notably, British, French, German, American, Russian, Japanese, and Chinese—at the end of the nineteenth century. The city is where several eminent American Protestant missionaries first landed in Korea in 1885, and it has several monuments and museums that celebrate the origin of Korea's Protestantism. The city keeps several other memorials that originate from more recent times. One of them is the statue of Douglas MacArthur, erected in 1957 in memory of this hero of the Incheon Landing by United Nations forces in September 1950, a pivotal episode in the Korean War. A short distance from the statue located on a hilltop public space called Freedom Park, visitors find another imposing monument, erected in 1982 to celebrate the centenary of Korea's opening of ties with the United States. We described in our earlier work how the emergence of MacArthur's statue into the postwar cityscape of Incheon developed



Figure 1. Kim's domestic spirit shrine. Photograph by Jun Hwan Park.

into a significant event in the constitution of Hwanghae shamanism's symbolic vista in its new home in this coastal city. The erection of the Centennial Tower for Korea-American Friendship, and the broader circumstances in which this memorial came into being, was also an event of considerable significance for Hwanghae shamanism. This is especially the case for Kim Küm-hwa, a prominent Hwanghae shaman who passed away in 2019. In her memoirs, Kim speaks of 1982 as a decisive turning point in her long career. In the summer of that year, she became one of the first Korean shamans to take *kut* to an international stage.

The occasion was the World Fair held in Knoxville, Tennessee, known more popularly among the townspeople as Jake's Fair, in reference to Jake Butcher, a banker and local notable who played a key role in bringing the international fair to the town. The fair was of great significance for the town's leaders, who hoped the event would provide a springboard for the recovery of the town and the broader Tennessee Valley from the energy crisis and economic recession of the 1970s. For South Korea, this event coincided with the centennial celebration of the ties between Korea and the United States, with a treaty on trade and commerce signed in Incheon (which was then called Jemulpo) on May 22, 1882. The centennial celebration involved a number of other events, including the erection of the centennial Friendship Tower in Incheon's city center, and an equivalent gesture in San Francisco, where emissaries of the Chosun Kingdom (1392–1897) had first landed in 1883, before heading on to the east coast. Participation in the Knoxville event was one of multiple events of considerable significance for South Korea; as for the town's notables, the event's significance was primarily economic, as they wanted to demonstrate their ability to be a major producer of a new energy source that was emerging then: nuclear energy. South Korea's participation in the 1982 World Fair was therefore a meeting of Korea's national interest in forging stronger ties with the United States than in the previous era with the commercial interests of a particular US community. Kim Küm-hwa's role in the six-month-long festivity was as a cultural diplomat, introducing the American public to an "authentic traditional culture and art from Korea" (*Daehan nyusŭ* 1982).

Madame Kim recalled her time in Knoxville very fondly—especially how, on one occasion, the six-hundred-strong audience responded to her performative art with more enthusiasm than she had ever encountered before. She was clearly aware of the significance of taking *kut* to a foreign country, and of the fact that this was part of an important cultural diplomatic initiative on the part of South Korea. So were her spirit-helpers, according to her, who responded to her invitation at the fair with exceptional vigor and enthusiasm. She was proud to be chosen for the occasion; however, the experience meant a great deal more to her. After Knoxville, she went to Washington, DC, where she had the opportunity to perform at the country's preeminent cultural institution, the Smithsonian Museum. She recalled her two-month trip to the United States as an exhausting yet rare liberating experience. In her memoir, Kim writes of her complex feelings about the experience, especially concerning how a tradition that is regarded in her home country as a backward custom and a superstition to be expunged from society is disseminated overseas as Korea's proud traditional art and attracted so much attention from foreigners. The trip was a time of freedom for her, she adds—liberation from the social stigma to which she had long been subject. In the

end, her voyage to Knoxville was a deeply contradictory experience for Madame Kim, in that she was specially selected to demonstrate an art form overseas as an authentic and worthy Korean culture, which was condemned back home as a tradition with no place in modernizing and industrializing Korea.

From superstition to culture

Chung Hak-bong, another prominent figure in Hwanghae shamanism who lives in Incheon, reported similar contradictions. In her media interview, Chung contrasted her past experience of social stigma and discrimination as a performer of shamanism to “the changed world today” in which, in her words, “kut activities are even exported to foreign countries” (Hwang 2013, 26–27). The folklore specialist who interviewed her adds (*ibid.*, 27):

As *musok* [the culture of shamanism] began to be recognized as culture and art since the 1980s, [Chung’s] *man’gudaetak kut* [a brand of Hwanghae-do *kut*, meaning “the *kut* that protects ten thousand humans from ten thousand misfortunes”] came to be known and performed inside and outside the country. When the *man’gudaetak kut* was nominated [by the South Korean government] as Hwanghae-do’s number one intangible heritage in 2006, Chung Hak-bong became the guardian of this heritage.

Many other reports take note of the transition of Korean shamanism from the category of “superstition” to that of “traditional culture and art.” For instance, Laurel Kendall makes a trenchant criticism of the concept of superstition (*misin* in Korean) as applied to shamanism and its many closely associated local traditions and customary domestic practices (2009, 1–33). Kendall’s criticism points to several directions. First are South Korea’s political campaigns in the 1970s to cleanse what it considered to be the remains of backwardness from social space. In the countryside, the heavy-handed, mass-mobilized political campaign was called the New Village Movement. Her criticism also points to the combatant polemics against superstition or idolatry emanating from some of the then increasingly powerful evangelical sectors, the growth of which was closely intertwined with the country’s rapid economic growth during this era. The militant polemic against idolatry (as regards shamanism and other forms of popular religiosity, and by the church as well as by the state) also closely interacted with the era’s powerful political character of militancy—against communist North Korea, which was regarded as an idol-worshipping society, referring to the personality cult of Kim Il-sung, the country’s founding leader. Interestingly, Kendall throws a critical gaze also at some of the moralizing traditionalist discourse that prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s—such as the argument that assigns shamanism to women while placing this allegedly feminized popular religious sphere in contrast to the neo-Confucian tradition that some traditionalists hailed as Korea’s true moral tradition.

Of the era’s cultural politics against superstition, the explicitly political dimension calls for some further attention. “There is no more shocking event in the history of Korea’s folklore studies (in the post-Korean War era) than the New Village Movement (*saemaül undong*) of the 1970s,” writes Kun-woo Nam, a veteran South Korean scholar in this field (2018, 153). Following the so-called New Life Movement of the late 1960s,

the New Village Movement had a complex background in the rapidly changing domestic and international situations of the time. The initiative was principally a rural economic reform program in the context of sweeping industrialization, which involved a massive migration of the labor force from rural to urban areas. It also had elements of an agricultural revolution, which in this context refers to the introduction of biochemically engineered, high-yielding rice crops as well as the infrastructural intervention in rural spaces in terms of road-building, modernization of the hygienic order, and new housing construction—elements that are widely observed in the construction of economic modernity elsewhere in Asia. The way this drive of rural reform became a concern for scholars of folklore such as Nam, however, relates to the fact that the drive purported to radically transform the mentality and spirituality of rural Korea, not merely its material conditions.

It is reported that amid the New Village Movement of 1971–81, more than two-thirds of the hitherto existing communal popular religious sites and built objects were systematically obliterated from rural Korea. This wanton destruction of the cultural heritage was orchestrated by the state hierarchy. However, it also involved zealous local administrative bodies that competed with one another to show their efficacy in this policy domain, as well as mobilized village youth and other grassroots organizations that the state instituted locally as part of the national campaign. A news report from 1973 depicts a situation typical of the time. Entitled “300-Year-Old Rotten Customs Are Blown Away by the Warm Wind of Saemaül Undong,” the article tells of the heroism of a lone local social activist in a seaside village. The man singlehandedly succeeded in bringing the enlightening spirit of the New Village Movement to the villagers, who had “long lived in terror of superstition, believing that should they anger Yong’wang (Dragon King, master of the maritime world in traditional thought), lightning would strike them from the heaven” (*Kyunghyang sinmun* 1973). In an admirable leap of faith, the article claims, this conservative village, which annually held about twenty community rites on behalf of various guardian spirits, decided to part with its dark past by discontinuing these rites. The village assembly also decided that, in the future, the communal fund that the village had kept for hosting its annual fishing fertility rite should be invested in New Village activities instead. The report notes that when the residents met to discuss these matters, their assembly had an air of solemnity. No one raised objections, and the decision to end the tradition of the fishing rite was endorsed unanimously. It is not difficult to imagine why this was so, taking into consideration the fact that, by 1973, the New Village campaigns were not merely a rural development scheme but had also become a powerful instrument of societal control under the rule of a political dictatorship.

This wave of destruction did not spare urban space, although here it is sometimes difficult to tease out the destructive force of the state’s coercive spiritual enlightenment campaigns from the effects of urbanization and urban development. For instance, the veteran folklorist Yang Jong-sung writes of Sasin-dang (the Shrine for Envoys) in Seoul (Yang 2018). Having been one of the four prominent sites of popular pilgrimage and shamanic religiosity in old Seoul, the shrine came to be thoroughly uprooted from the lives of townspeople starting in the early 1970s. In bustling central Seoul, it is not difficult today to find old residents eager to tell

the history of their neighborhood. One story was about the felling of *jangsŭng*, the traditional guardian figures of a community, by a group of local church activists. Another story concerned our interlocuter's grandmother who, having long had a close relationship with a neighborhood fortune-teller, was forced to travel to a far peripheral corner of the city to meet and consult with her. The fortune-teller left the neighborhood in 1970, after running into trouble with some residents who disapproved of her practice and eventually reported her to the police. Kim Kŭm-hwa reported a similar experience. The *kut* was held mostly in the client's home in the past, unlike today, where it can be hosted only in a designated place far away from residential areas. On one occasion, in Seoul's increasingly hostile environment to her trade in the early 1970s, Kim had to halt her *byung-kut* (curative rite) and make a quick dash from her client's home, through the back windows, when the police raided the place after being informed of the event by her client's neighbor. Against this background, one can sometimes hear during a *kut* event today statements such as "Saemaül Ghost, I command you to step aside!" declared as part of the calls against misfortune-causing spirit entities.

Kim Kŭm-hwa recalled the era of the Saemaül campaign as the most testing time of her long career, as it involved social exclusion and related feelings of indignation on her part against unjust treatment. She makes it clear that Saemaül was unlike other similar campaigns she had undergone earlier in her career, for it was based on a bottom-up mass mobilization, not merely the abusive power of the state, which closed in on her from all corners of her everyday life. Her memories involved troubles with state authorities but also with some church groups—such as the incident of a small ritual she held on a hill (not to attract attention by the police) being surrounded by a group of protesters from a local church, reciting aloud the part of Matthew on Satan-chasing. There were other challenging times, however. Notable was her confrontation with another state authority—the revolutionary power in northern Korea during the 1950–53 war. Encounters with this power and the difficulties it caused were shared broadly by nearly all the first-generation Hwanghae-origin shamans in Incheon, also being one of the main reasons for their leaving their homes in northern Korea. Many other townspeople of Incheon, originally from western areas of northern Korea, where Christianity had a strong foothold during the first half of the twentieth century, had a related experience. North Korea waged an aggressive assault against religion and religious communities during the war and the postwar reconstruction era, especially against those communities that challenged its political mandate. In the early postcolonial era, the North Korean revolution initially did have elements of pragmatism, seeking to bring these communities to a united front for state-building. The Soviet power that supported this process also applied a much more conciliatory approach to Christian communities in Korea than it did in the East European or Baltic regions. According to an observer, this was due to the fact that the Soviets realized that the Protestants, despite their relatively small numbers, had a forceful voice in the northern society and tremendous organizational capacity in the space of decolonization (Armstrong 2004). After the Korean War, however, the North Korean revolution began to define religious questions increasingly in a dogmatically Soviet way—ignoring the immense difference between a prerevolutionary Russia, where the

Orthodox Church exerted enormous political influence, and situations in postcolonial Korea, which traditionally is a predominantly secular and religiously pluralist society having no such state-church collusion. The civil war in 1950–53 radicalized the fault line between the revolutionary state and what it regarded as counterrevolutionary religions, in part because of the intervention in the war by a “Protestant” country, the United States, that frustrated North Korea’s ambition for national unification. Added to the northern state’s association of Korean Protestantism with America’s imperial power (and hence, as the enemy of the Korean revolution) was the historical fact that Protestantism was introduced to Korea, at the turn of the twentieth century, primarily by American missionaries.

Kim Kŭm-hwa’s memoirs highlight two historical periods as times of great hardship. One was during the Korean War, especially during the early days of the war, when her home region of Hwanghae, like other places of North Korea, was briefly occupied by the South Korean and United Nations forces. By October 1950, North Korea’s People’s Army was in disarray and in hurried retreat to the north of the 38th Parallel and then on to the country’s border with China. This followed its swift and triumphant takeover of nearly the whole of South Korea, from July to September 1950. This change of tide was facilitated by the successful amphibious landing of US and South Korean forces in Incheon harbor in September 1950. Evidence suggests that during this brief and turbulent time, which led to a reversal of the tide following China’s intervention in the Korea conflict at the end of October 1950, the retreating northern military and political forces conducted a clean-up action against people whose loyalty to the revolutionary regime and war efforts they doubted. These allegedly subversive elements included people who held religious beliefs or practiced “superstitions.” By that time, Kim Kŭm-hwa was an established *mansin* in her village area on the western coast, having been chosen by the village to conduct the important *dong-je*, a community-wide ritual on behalf of the village’s guardian spirits. Facing the prospect of being publicly labeled as a believer in superstition, and trying to escape persecution, Kim volunteered to join the local revolutionary Women’s League. In another episode, Kim underwent an intense ordeal of interrogation (including sessions of self-criticism) in the hands of the local party cell, after a modest healing rite she held in a neighbor’s house had been caught by the party’s security network and its webs of neighborhood self-surveillance. Fortunately for her, a long-time client intervened and rescued her from captivity. The woman’s son was in a position of considerable authority in the local Workers’ Party, and she and her family had benefitted from Kim’s curative ritual before.

Political repression against shamanism did not only come from North Korea’s revolutionary state authorities, however. Kim’s testimony makes it clear that the brief occupation of her northern homeland by the southern police and paramilitary forces during the Korean War, at the end of 1950, was an equally terrifying time, and the intimidation she underwent during this time was in some ways more threatening than any she had experienced earlier in the hands of the northern revolutionary vanguard and youth groups. In her memoirs, she recalls a life-threatening moment during the occupation, in the presence of a South Korean state security officer (whom she calls a CID officer), to whom communism and shamanism were indistinguishable

and belonged in the same pit of abominable superstitions. CID stands for the “criminal investigation department,” ununiformed personnel in the British police forces. In the American system, it refers to the United States Army Criminal Investigation Command. In South Korea, during the Korean War, the same acronym was used for the special branch of the military specializing in anticommunist surveillance and counterinsurgency combat activities. The organization carried out sweeping arrests and summary killings against alleged communist suspects during the very early days of the Korean War in areas of South Korea that were at risk of being overrun by the rapidly advancing northern communist army. It is known that about two hundred thousand civilians, who were citizens of South Korea, fell victim to this generalized state terror against society, whose rationale was to prevent these individuals from aiding and collaborating with the enemy. The assault against civilians continued throughout the war, later changing in character to a punitive action, directed against those who were suspected of having collaborated with the northern communist forces during their occupation of the South (Kwon 2020a, 21–42).

Therefore, shamanism was under pressure from the state-driven anti-superstition politics on both sides of the Cold War border. In his report on “The US Military Government’s Religion Policy,” a historian of religion explores the strong institutional favoritism shown toward Christian leaders and groups by the US Military Government in Korea (1945–48), and again under South Korea’s first postcolonial government headed by Rhee Syngman, who the military government helped bring to power (Kang 1993). This favoritism was manifested in a number of ways, including the introduction of a disproportionate number of Christian leaders to key state administrative positions, legislation of the so-called recognized public religions (thus excluding other social religious sectors), and the empowerment of northern-refugee Protestant leaders and youth groups as part of the militancy against communism. It also involved the introduction of the institution of (Christian-only) chaplaincy into the nascent Republic of Korea army, a measure whose significance in the history of Korean Protestantism was later manifested in the aftermath of the Korean war when the number of church attendees began to explode in South Korea. When the country’s parliament first opened on May 31, 1948, Rhee asked a parliamentarian and Methodist priest to open the historic event with a prayer. The prayer lasted for about ten minutes, at the end of which all the parliamentarians stood up and collectively joined it. This extraordinary happening was irrespective of the fact that at that time only about 2 percent of the southern Korean population identified themselves as Protestants. The imposition of this affirmative policy, which privileged the church in such a predominantly secular and religiously diverse society as Korea, evolved in the southern half in parallel with the emergence of a broadly Soviet-style, anti-church, and anti-religion politics in the northern half. The North’s postwar anti-religion politics eventually crashed on all religions, as they were all considered antisocial and superstitious beliefs; the South’s Christianity-privileging politics might be considered pro-religious freedom, but only in a highly selective way, thereby creating its own derivative moral hierarchy of what constitutes the true worldview versus what makes a superstition. In 1947, the Seoul Metropolitan Police (of the US Military Government) declared a “war against superstition” with an astonishingly belligerent message:

Nowadays superstitious deeds such as mudang's *kut*-plays and *pudakgõri* [a derogatory reference to shamanic rituals] are prospering, thereby exerting grave evil influences in the domain of social re-education. This situation cannot be ignored. Acknowledging that it is difficult to obliterate long-inherited customs at a single stroke, the Metropolitan Police has chosen fifteen sites in different parts of the city and issued a stern directive that, from now on, all prayer activities must be held only within these designated places. If, despite our directive, we discover any noisy *pudakgõri* and *kut*-plays are held in private homes or mudang's own houses within the city boundary, these will be punished severely, and we shall thoroughly purge them. (*Seoul Sinmun* 1947)

This demonstrates that popular religions were under considerable political pressure on both sides of partitioned postcolonial Korea. The ensuing Korean War was a life-changing experience for Kim Kũm-hwa and other Hwanghae-do shamans, not only with the changing waves of violence it involved but also because it meant the loss of the communal basis on which her vocational and existential being as a practitioner of indigenous religious form depended. In her memoirs Madame Kim describes the latter as the most painful and irrevocable consequence of her war-induced dislocation from home. As noted earlier, the advent of MacArthur as a shamanic spirit in the postwar years was, in a crucial way, part of the story of dislocation and the following process of making a home in the new environment. For the purpose of this article, it needs to be remembered that the experience of dislocation in a political sense was far from over with the end of the Korean War in the mid-1950s. On the contrary, an even more radical and more generalized crisis of deracination was to be forced onto Kim and her colleagues in the following decades, especially in the 1970s.

1982

It is against this background of political and social stigmatization reaching its apex in the 1970s that the transition to the 1980s appears to have had particular significance for Kim Kũm-hwa and other like guardians of what the Seoul Metropolitan Police decree refers to as "long-inherited customs." In his recent review of South Korea's public and academic discourses on shamanism from the late 1960s to the 1980s, Yoshinobu Shinzato (2018), a historian of religion, notes the rise of the concept of cultural heritage as a key aspect of the era's changing policies toward traditional religious forms. He highlights efforts made by the country's prominent folklorists and the growing interest in traditional art and culture among students and intellectuals in the 1970s, who advanced this interest as part of political activism against the era's political dictatorship. Shinzato also makes some critical observations on collusions between some folklore studies groups and the Park regime's cultural politics. His observations concentrate on the fact that the centuries-old popular religious culture was under threat under the authoritarian state's heavy-handed developmentalism, whereas folklore studies concentrated on recording and compiling these cultural relics before they disappeared (assuming this was inevitable).

The New Village Movement was a powerful mass politics, combining a top-down administrative system that penetrated deep into local lives with a bottom-up mass

mobilization. Considering its vertical command structure, it is not surprising that the movement abruptly ran out of steam when the central figure of the authoritarian political system, President Park, who had been in power for nearly two decades after seizing it with the military coup in May 1961, disappeared from the political stage in December 1979 when he was assassinated by his security chief. Even though the preponderance of the power of military elite continued in the subsequent decade, Park's death in 1979 nevertheless opened up an important space in the sphere of South Korean cultural politics. The military leaders of South Korea's so-called Fifth Republic (1981–88) inherited many elements from the Park era but also sought to free themselves from the burdens of his legacies. They also seized power through a coup, but in doing so they sparked off a strong wave of civil resistance, notably in the city of Kwangju, to which the coup leaders responded violently and brutally, using the army and paratrooper units under their command. Two years after the massacre of civilians in Kwangju in May 1980, another defining incident took place, this time in Pusan. Called the Arson of the US Information Center and staged by a handful of college students led by a theology student in Pusan's renowned Presbyterian university, this incident in March 1982 followed an earlier arson attempt at the US Information Center in Kwangju in December 1980. The two incidents together are considered by many observers of modern Korea to signal the beginning of a decisive change in the public perception of American power in South Korea—notably, the growing public awareness that the successive military-led authoritarian regimes in South Korea were not merely Korea's problem (i.e., a political underdevelopment) but were made possible by the complicity of the United States. There was a broad awakening in South Korean society as to the contradictions intrinsic to the presence of American power in the Korean peninsula—between the United States' leadership in the liberal international world and its illiberal foreign policies in relation to its allied states in Asia and elsewhere. In consequence, the 1980s became the time when South Koreans began to question the meaning of American power in their modern history and, accordingly, to soul-search the place of their polity and society within the broader world and beyond the American hegemon.

The military leaders of the Fifth Republic were acutely aware of these changing vistas in South Korea's political society as well as the fact that their power-grabbing was stained in blood. It is under these circumstances that they came to take great interest in the centennial anniversary of the opening of diplomatic ties between Korea and the United States in 1982. There was also an attempt to turn away from the Park era in the cultural sphere: the era that Youngju Ryu calls the Winter Republic, characterized by a depressive (and repressive) political atmosphere, yet vibrant (and resistant) activism in literature and art (Ryu 2015). As a result, the post-Park regime pursued a relatively more liberal policy in cultural production and consumption, encouraging entertainment and sport (the latter eventually led to the hosting of the Asian Games in 1985 and then to that of the Summer Olympics in 1988). At the same time, it sought to counter the growing interest among students and intellectuals in elements of Korea's traditional popular culture by presenting the state as the guardian and promoter of this cultural heritage. The tradition of shamanism especially was fast becoming an important battleground in this milieu. The growing

resistance movement to the military rule took shamanism as a key part of its cultural (or countercultural) activity, increasingly seeing it as an authentic spirituality of the repressed and resisting masses. As the veteran South Korean anthropologist Kim Kwang-ok observed, shamanism (or the idea of shamanism) was rapidly becoming central to the culture of resistance during this era (Kim 1992). The state's culture-policy pundits took careful note of this development and countered with their own politics of authenticity—notably, by bestowing titles of intangible heritage to various regional forms of shamanic rites and their notable practitioners, as well as by introducing these rites into the realm of public art and entertainment performance. All these were happening, however, while the government was cracking down on dissenting politicians as well as a broad swath of student and civic protesters. The Fifth Republic also forcibly reinvigorated the politics of Red Scare—by inventing a series of allegedly seditious groupings including some family-run communist spy ring cases, which were disseminated widely in the news media and through the then newly available color television.

The era's new cultural policy is well illustrated by the festivity of National Wind in May 1981, held in the central Seoul area of Yöüido. The timing was deliberate—to mark the anniversary of the Kwangju tragedy, mobilizations for protest were underway in campuses. The week-long festivity was hailed as the largest public feast in Korea's history thus far, “a great youth festival.” The event is reported to have attracted around ten million attendees, some of whom were later discovered to be conscript soldiers disguised as students. In content, the national feast combined a “modern pop festival,” including youth song contests, with the performance of traditional themes. These included the re-enactment of the *sonoli-kut* (Play-the-ox *kut*) from Yangju county, Kyung-gi Province. *Sonoli-kut* was a popular communal festivity in pre-1945 Korea, having an element of agricultural fertility rite and being structurally similar to a *kut* proper. Although village shamans did participate in the communal procession (and when they did, the feast did have a real ritual, religious character), *sonoli-kut* was also a carnivalesque event (in the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin's sense) or an art of *communitas* (à la Victor Turner), in which mockeries of the anachronism of existing social structure can generate a feast of laughter and a sense of liminality. The introduction of this local ritual form to the national feast of 1981 followed the nomination of Yangju *sonoli-kut* in 1980 as an intangible national heritage. The heritagization initiative was extended to other regional traditions in the following years. Hwanghae's fishing rite (*baeyönsin-kut*) and community *kut* (*daedong-kut*) entered the honored list of intangible cultural heritages in 1985, with Kim Küm-hwa being nominated as the guardian of this local cultural tradition.

It was amid this momentum of shamanism (or *musok* as it is referred to in contemporary Korea) changing from “deplorable superstition” to “notable cultural heritage” that Kim Küm-hwa made her trip to Knoxville in 1982 as part of the Korean cultural-diplomatic envoy to the United States to celebrate the centenary of the two countries' friendship. After that, she continued to be a prolific actor in South Korea's diplomatic and cultural exchange events, until she passed away in February 2019. These events included a performance in 1995 on the third anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic ties between China and South Korea. After the tragedy

in New York and Washington, DC in September 2001, Kim was invited back to the United States—this time to perform a spirit-consolation rite for the victims of 9/11. Although her visit to Knoxville was part of a greater sociopolitical change that had already been set in motion, Kim did not see it in this way and instead considered the experience to be a defining moment. In Knoxville, she said that she had witnessed a world where she could be free from social stigma and be proud to be a performer and guardian of traditional culture (figure 2).

Conclusion

In her memoirs, Kim movingly tells of her encounter with a few visitors to her Knoxville performance as the most memorable episode of her 1982 trip (Kim 2014). These visitors were members of America’s First Nations, who, according to Kim, showed particularly acute interest in what she was doing in the fair. This encounter made her sad as well, as it forced her to realize that earthly spirituality was looked down upon not merely in her homeland but also in the land she was visiting. Moving on from this recollection, Kim later reflects on the entirety of her life trajectory from a village in Hwanghae to a position of considerable fame, as a beholder of an intangible national heritage and, as often mentioned in the media, even as a “national shaman” (*nara mansin*). In this reflection, she no longer shows any bitterness about the political culture of anti-superstition, or any particular enthusiasm about her heritage entitlement and the related politics of cultural conservation and recognition. One gets the impression from her mildly spoken narrative that, in her experience, the transition from one domain of cultural politics to the other is more of a continuation of alienation than necessarily a betterment or decisive progression. Her fondest memories, rather, remain with the time in her birthplace, now in North Korea. The vitality of these memories was not because of her being young then, or due to the



Figure 2. Kim Kŭm-hwa, 1931–2019. Photograph by Jun Hwan Park.

fact that this was the place where she was born and raised. Rather, it is because then and there, she was a shaman with a place to belong to and act in, not one who is perpetually in search of a place where she could meaningfully dwell. She calls this place her Home World—a home for many familiar spirits and a world of many places that are these spirits' homes.

On a closing note, we reflect on what her 1982 trip to America meant to Kim and why it was such a liberating experience to the extent that she had decided to keep the souvenir of this trip at the center of her spirit shrine since. In order to do so, it might be instructive to introduce an episode that took place shortly before her trip to Knoxville and the Smithsonian Museum.

In October 1981, the eminent French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss came to South Korea for a three-week visit. Apart from lectures and other social occasions, this giant of modern anthropology was interested in seeing Korea's iconic traditional cultural sites. These included local Confucian academies of the Chosun era, which Monsieur Lévi-Strauss said left a great impression on him, especially because, being located in the countryside, they were quite different from the academic institutions in his native France that are primarily concentrated in the country's urban centers. Interested also in popular religious sites, Lévi-Strauss watched a *kut* performance at the national shrine house in the north of Seoul's city center, Kuksadang on Inwang-san. The occasion happened to be a family's rite for their ancestors, and, after witnessing the rite, the anthropologist remarked on certain differences that he felt existed between shamanism in Korea and the better-known equivalent tradition in indigenous Siberia and among the Inuit in the far-north of the American continent. He said that indigenous Siberian shamans were known to be able to travel to the land of the dead, being mediators between the living and the dead (as well as between nature and society). In contrast to this, Lévi-Strauss observed that the focus of Korean shamanism seemed, instead, squarely set on relations among the living. He probably meant relations with the dead who are treated as if they were alive. Following this experience, he went on to take part in another *kut*, this time performed by Kim Kūm-hwa at her client's home in Seoul's old residential quarter. Soon after his visit to Korea, a portrait of a Korean shamaness found its way to one of Paris's most prominent cultural institutions, UNESCO House in the Place de Fontenoy. This painting is proudly displayed in the corridor that connects the international organization's main conference halls as an artifact representing the indigenous culture of Korea. The shamaness in the painting is none but Madame Kim Kūm-hwa.

The world of freedom Kim encountered in her 1982 trip to America is perhaps best illustrated by this portrait of a Korean shamaness and the constitutive order of the international organization within which it is placed. Of all the international organizations in today's world, UNESCO is probably closest to the discipline of modern sociocultural anthropology in terms of ethos and idealism. The two share a set of ideas and norms that is often glossed as cultural pluralism and the vision for human unity based on the celebration of cultural diversity. Since UNESCO's founding in 1946, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the organization has advocated for the power of education in helping to actualize this vision of unity through plurality. This vision constitutes, according to the organization's charters, vital groundwork

for the prospective realization of lasting peace—a concept that was initiated by the Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century, notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, and then brought back into the public discourse of interwar Europe, particularly after 1945.

UNESCO's headquarters in Paris, UNESCO House, is not merely a place for intergovernmental meetings for educational, scientific, and cultural policy-making. Completed in 1958, it also purports to be a "universal museum" where diverse art objects and cultural artifacts from all corners of the world are kept and displayed. This is in line with UNESCO's pursuit of "tolerance" (of differences) and celebration of "diversity" (in unity) since its inception after the destruction of World War II. One can marvel at an artifact from the northwest coast of Canada in one of the House's main conference halls. Elsewhere in the building are many other objects, including a statue of Buddha from Nepal ("the birthplace of Lord Buddha, Lumbini"), a fine kimono from Japan, and a painting from Korea. Each of these objects is supposed to best represent the cultural and artistic heritage of the place from which it originates. The artifacts are displayed within the House, together with some of the great modernist works of art—for instance, those of Miro, Picasso, and Le Corbusier. The House itself is of a striking modernist shape of a brutalist orientation, standing out sharply from the surrounding neighborhood, which consists primarily of imposing nineteenth-century buildings. The idea is to preserve the treasures of the world's diverse artistic traditions within an aesthetically modernist space without privileging any particular traditional form. This is in accordance with the organization's purpose of promoting modern scientific knowledge and education while celebrating cultural diversity—an ethos that the founders of the organization believed would be vital to the making of a peaceful and tolerant world in the post-1945 environment (Kwon 2020b).

Her encounter with Lévi-Strauss was an important event for Kim Küm-hwa, who kept her photograph taken with this anthropologist prominently displayed in her home. The meeting took place as part of a momentous shift in the moral status of shamanism in South Korea's public understanding of its cultural heritage and identity at the start of the 1980s. We saw this shift through Madame Kim's voyage to Knoxville and elsewhere in the United States as a cultural emissary, to celebrate the centenary of Korean-American friendship. Domestically, the change meant that shamanism was no longer primarily an emblematic legacy of a backward past and a principal focus of the state-driven anti-superstition campaign, becoming instead also a distinct cultural tradition worthy of conversation—a change that Kim recalls as liberating and life-transforming in her memoirs. However, for Kim, the trip to the United States signaled more than relative freedom from persecution and stigmatization at home. For her, the voyage, especially the invitation to one of United States' most eminent cultural institutions, the Smithsonian Museum, was also a powerful encounter with the morality and aesthetics of cultural plurality and with the related recognition of her work as a guardian of Korea's traditional cultural integrity. The magnitude of this experience is made evident in the small American flag that Kim brought home from her 1982 trip—first as a souvenir and then used as an emblem of power—that she kept at the center of her domestic shrine ever since.

We then can conclude that the power of her shrine artifact, the American flag, is not the same as America's power as the latter is commonly understood in contemporary historical and political discourses. Instead, this power is closer to the moral ideal of cultural heritage and plurality as this appears in UNESCO's charters and in the constitutive spirit of modern anthropology, especially that of the discipline's post-1945 development. Much can surely be said as to whether the flag is the right one for eliciting the political ideal of a culturally plural world and if the political entity represented by the American flag can make a rightful and uncontroversial claim for advancing this ideal during the so-called American Century of the second half of the twentieth century. The important point is, rather, that Kim witnessed that such an ideal, no matter how imperfect it might be, existed in the wide world during her first overseas trip and that she subsequently decided to keep a material symbol of that ideal at hand and amid her other spirit objects of dazzling colors. Moreover, she knew also that such an ideal was far from a property of a distant foreign land only. As noted in her recollection of life in her natal village of Hwanghae, a culturally plural world was where she began her career in the first place—a world in which shamanism could coexist with other more powerful cultural-religious traditions (such as Confucianism and Buddhism) and where a young novice shaman like herself could contribute to the wellbeing of the community as meaningfully as any learned village elders or leaders. Seen this way, as was the case with the spirit of MacArthur, we may conclude that what the American flag in Kim's spirit shrine displays is quite *un-American*—as it is principally the memory of Hwanghae shamanism in its original home of Hwanghae.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Parts of this article were presented in seminars and panels held at the University of Chicago, Sogang University, Seoul National University, as well as at the 2019 Anthropology of East Asia meeting in Bangkok. Our earlier research on the subject was supported by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. More recently, our research activity has been made possible by generous support from the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2016-LAB-2250005). We thank them all. We also thank Julie Chu, Donald Baker, Antonnetta Bruno, Hyang Jin Jung, Seong-nae Kim, Clara Han, Bhrigupati Singh, and Katherine Swancutt for sharing with us their interest in the power of magical symbols in modern politics.

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