



Simon Mills. *Healing Rhythms: The World of South Korea's East Coast Hereditary Shamans*

Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2007. 121 pages, b/w illustrations photographs, bibliography, index, CD recording. Cloth, US\$54.95; ISBN: 978-0-7546-5845-0.

THIS volume investigates the music, lives, beliefs, and ritual practices of hereditary East Coast shaman troupes in contemporary South Korea. In particular, the work focuses on the male ritual instrumentalists known as *yangjung*, and the main source for this work is two of these men. The author includes a brief introduction of the shamans of this area before delving into the musical practices and styles of the *yangjung*, which is far and away the greatest portion of this work. Finally, the CD included with the volume contains five songs corresponding with the chapters of the book and featuring music performed by the main informants for this volume accompanied by the author.

As the dust jacket of the volume informs us, this is the first English-language book-length study of the east coast hereditary shaman tradition. While the bulk of the volume is devoted to musical styles, Mills adds relevant cultural information about the shamanic rites and the lives of those who perform these. It becomes clear that the traditions of these shaman troupes are very much challenged and threatened by the fast-changing society of contemporary Korea. In fact it seems that the very troupe under discussion is facing extinction although Mills provides a post-script to the volume that finds promise in the recruitment of new female shamans (106). Notwithstanding this glimmer of hope, it is obvious that shaman troupes are facing major obstacles from changing societal needs and also the influx of destined shamans into areas formally served solely by hereditary shamans.

The book is divided into five chapters with the first providing a brief introduction to the hereditary shamans of this region, the second explaining the use of musical instruments and playing styles, the third introducing a song used to help transport the spirits of the dead to the next world, the fourth on the process of learning ritual music, and the fifth examining the transformation of the hereditary shaman troupes. For this reader, the most interesting sections of the volume were those that were directly related to the history of the shamans, the shape of their rituals, and their view of the next world as expressed in their songs of the afterlife. These parts also provide a very interesting glimpse into the personal views of the shaman troupe members; I particularly found the lack of conviction about the existence of gods and ghosts by one member (71–73) to be both amusing and revealing of perhaps the superficiality of the performances of rites. As Mills states, these performers seem to simply be “shamans by proxy” rather than ardent believers (73).

The chief focus of this work is the music of the shaman troupes and how their particular style differs from other shamanic music. Mills’ explanation of the musical

techniques by the players in using ritual drums (*changgo*), hand gongs (*kkwaeng-gwari*), and large gongs (*ching*) is thorough and helps to indoctrinate non-specialists in musicology to the particulars of these performers. While at times the discussion seemed best suited for specialists, I did find the means in which performers learned their craft to be quite interesting. It is notable that today's aspiring *yangjung* learn their craft in schools specializing in folk music styles or even at universities. Clearly the past tradition of learning within a troupe has basically passed.

While the volume has only a brief introduction to the institution of shamans in Korea, the research is solid and provides a good overview on the life of these performers. In particular, the author addresses issues of social stigmatization (10–13), marriage practices among shaman families (13–16), and the type of rituals performed by these ritual specialists. The viewpoints of the author's informants add to the explanations and help readers better understand how shamans and the *yangjung* view their own profession and place in society. This is a valuable addition to the existing scholarship on shamans and shamanic practices in contemporary Korea.

The volume is rather short and I believe some additions or expansions of ideas would have made this an even stronger work. This is most evident in the occasionally shallow discussion of the reasons for performing certain types of rituals. This is most prominent in the third chapter on the afterlife. While Mills provides some background to the importance of removing the spirits of the dead from this world, his overall discussion is rather brief (the chapter is only fifteen pages long and most of this is dedicated to excerpts from songs, an explanation of the various hells, and charts of the sexagenary calendrical cycle) and unsatisfying to this reader. The chapter would have been stronger if the rationale behind the rituals based in social functions, such as providing a space for public mourning and the venting of grievances, were discussed. I also believe the volume would have benefited from a glossary as the many Korean terms throughout the text could be daunting for non-specialists. However, these are minor flaws and do not greatly detract from the strengths of the work, especially in introducing a heretofore unexamined part of shamanic culture in Korea to an English-reading audience.

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