

Iconology of a Korean Shamanic Icon

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Abstract

The researcher, endeavoring to discover the meaning of the iconography in a found, unattributed Korean folk icon, applied the phenomenological method and searched available English language references to identify the imagery and its purpose. The image was discovered to be a contemporary ritual icon made at the direction and exclusively for the use of a *manshin*, a Korean shaman, as a point of contact with tutelary spirits in ecstatic healing rituals.

Introduction

In 1991, the researcher discovered an interesting image in a Seoul flea market which had been unceremoniously dumped, unwrapped and undocumented, under heaps of unsorted objects. The researcher recognized it as somehow important, a kind of ‘folk art’, but not old. The surface was undamaged but the bottom of the canvas was dirty, as though it had been sitting on its lower edge rather than being hung on the wall. It remained rolled up in storage in the researcher’s New York studio for ten years.

In the meantime, the researcher located a few English language publications describing the iconography of paintings routinely used by Korean women shamans, popularly called *mudang* or, more formally, *manshin* (ten thousand spirits).[1] These icons are placed above and behind the altar of the shaman’s *tang*, ritual room, to serve as inspiration for both the shaman and her patrons. These spirit-mediums depend on visual imagery and music for their ritual, *kut*, to be effective.

By some estimates, 95% of Korean shamans are women and the few male shamans, *paksu mudang*, dress and practice as females. In ritual, the *manshin* goes into trance and is possessed by a variety of traditional tutelary spirits, all male. *Manshin* assert that during ecstatic[2] seance they become the tutelary spirit, brought down to earth from their residence in the heavenly ether.[3]

The paintings are constructed using a *kurim*, which is an underpattern of sharp black lines which frequently stays in place to be reused when a new painting is needed, thus insuring that the iconography remains traditional and correct.[4] The classical Confucian-based tradition of Korean painting, originating in the Yi dynasty (1392-1910), is done in grays with animal hair brushes using carbon ink on silk. The image under study here belongs to the tradition of folk painting which uses bright mineral colors made from pulverizing certain stones bonded with a glue fixative. These vibrant colors have become closely associated with Korean folk paintings, traditional costumes and temple decorations. Most prominent are the royal blues, malachite greens and Chinese reds. Sometimes ritual icons are painted by the shaman, sometimes by an artisan hired for the job, often for room and board only, as the painter expects no recognition for

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the effort. The icon always follows prescribed compositions and is anonymous, with no signature or seal, as the creator's identity and individuality is not important.

Shamanic icons are not intended for protracted use. Most do not survive the ritual post-mortem burning of the shaman's possessions. They are regarded as temporary, if not disposable, and renewable. When an painting becomes thin and tattered from being handled while traveling and being moved about in the ever changing arrangements on the altar in the manshin's *tang*, a new one is ordered up with no sentimental value placed on the old image.

Regardless of the skill or depth of investment by the artist, each icon is considered to be the temporary abode of the particular 'spirit' depicted in the 'ritual portrait' and is considered sacred once it is consecrated. Any application of scholarly, critical, or monetary value to the images is believed to diminish their spiritual power. This researcher assumes that the spirits depicted in the image presented here are no longer in residence as the image was discarded. Nevertheless, that being impossible to verify, the researcher will respectfully confine this effort to description and identification of the iconography as well as to place the historical practice of Korean shamanism in an appropriate context referencing the available literature on shamanic practice worldwide.

Brief History:

The origins of the research image can be traced to the second millennium BCE, when shamanic Tungusic peoples from Siberia, moving through Manchuria, entered the Korean peninsula bringing the early elements of the Korean language and totemism.[5] Korea's earliest ruler of record, the deified Tan'gun (c.2333 BCE),[6] was believed to have been a shaman using the power of his practice to influence public sentiment through this deeply held world view. On the Korean peninsula, figures of shamans in performance are found on bronze ritual ornaments as early as 500 BCE.[7]

Korean shamanism, *Shinkyō*, has it's earliest evidence in the matriarchal family structure of the Neolithic period. Practicing animism, demonology, ancestor and nature worship and the magical powers of the shaman, this early form of spirituality addressed itself to the all-powerful *Hanūlnim*, often called *Ch'ōnji Shinmyōng*. Worshipping natural objects such as rivers, rocks, old trees and mountains as well as the sun and the moon, the stars, especially the seven-star Big Dipper, *Ch'ūlsōng*, were especially revered. There is also Neolithic evidence indicating bear totemism and the presence of a 'Bear Cult'. Shamanic ritual came to be known as *yōnggo* and *tongmaeng*, ancestor worship.[8]

Andrew Nahm, 1993, places the arrival of Buddhism from China as early as the first century CE but the official date is said to be 372 CE. He places the introduction of Confucianism first with the kingdom of Koguryō in the fourth century, then to Paekche and lastly into the third kingdom of Shilla. The Buddhist monk Ilyōn (1206-1289), in his record of the origins of the Korean people, *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*, (the *Samguk Yusa*, n.d.) frames the historical period with the story of the primordial creation mythology wherein *Hwanung*, son of *Hwanin* (the God of Creation), descended upon a sacred mountain. Arriving with three sacred seals and three thousand flowers, he established there a sacred town and from that vantage point, commanded the Lords of Wind, Rain and Clouds, attended to the planting of grains, healed sickness, administered justice and otherwise regulated the lives of the people, civilizing human society by controlling the works of nature. A bear and a tiger prayed to *Hwanung* to make them human beings. Each was commanded to eat a stalk of mugwort and twenty cloves of garlic, traditional purifying agents, and then to stay in a cave, out of sunlight, for one hundred days. Both animals were at first diligent, and the bear became a fair damsel after twenty-one days. But the tiger ultimately failed because he could not stay in the cave that long. When the damsel wished to be married, *Hwanung* was obliged to

change form, become a human being, and marry the woman, who gave birth to *Tan'gum Wanggŏm*, ruler of the legendary Chosŏn for 1,500 years.

Ancient Chinese sources describe the Korean people as loving to sing and dance, honoring heaven, thanking the earth and communing with the deities and spirits through their art forms. Korean native songs, both secular and religious, called *hyangga* (native songs) or *saenaenora*, (new songs of the land) had been passed down orally until the year 888 when between 1000 and 1500 songs were recorded in the *Samdaemok* (songs of the three generations), with the ninth century “*Songs of Ch'ŏng*” being one of the best known examples. Songs and dances associated with Buddhism were integrated while Confucianism was also developing new music and dance associated with its own rituals. Indigenous shamanic rituals, *kut*, emphasizing chanting, dancing and exorcism were widely performed during these centuries of rich development in the Korean traditional arts.[9]

Over time, *Shinkyŏ* absorbed elements of both imports.[10] Neither posed a conflict with existing traditions until the Yi Dynasty (1392-1860 CE) adopted Neo-Confucianism as the state religion, with the subsequent destruction of ninety percent of the Koryŏ Period (formerly Koguryŏ) Buddhist structures. South from the capital of Hanjang (now Seoul), Buddhism continued in mountain pockets and *Shinkyŏ* was subjected to a similar pressure, resulting in the development of special groups focused on the secrets of longevity and mastery of the military arts with a supporting pantheon of ‘spirit generals’, described below.[11]

Women became culturally oppressed during the dominance of Confucianism, and Buddhism taught that a woman must be reborn a man for any hope of salvation. Also problematic was the later arrival of Christianity which, in a culture that has long believed that there are multiple realities, proclaims exclusive possession of the truth. As a result, the ritual arts of Shamanism survived and flourished chiefly among the Korean women as it addressed itself to their worldview, needs and concerns.[12]

Icons

Personally owned shamanic icons share much of the iconography of the larger group scenes, “*San-shin taeng-hwa*”, found in the temples of most Buddhist sects in Korea, but the private icons tend to be smaller, with fewer images and much less investment both in terms of craftsmanship and the development of rich compositions and details. Both the temple paintings and the private icons are amalgamations of prehistoric shamanic themes mixed with Korean folk images and traditional Buddhist figures. They resolve into several familiar, repeated figural themes, all regarded as ‘portraits’ of Korea’s eternal spirits. As Christians can recognize St. Sebastian by the arrows and St. Cecilia by her harp, so too the ancient spirits have a recognizable iconography. Themes include: “Rain-Bringing Dragon”, “Three Spirits”, “Mountain Spirit”, “First Shaman”, “Spirits of the Seven Stars”, “Generals of the Five Directions”, “Three Ancient Generals”, the “Horse Riding Generals” and there is a modern addition to the repertoire of themes – the “Spirit of General MacArthur”![13]

Even though there is an accepted iconography for the traditional motifs, individual *manshin* may personalize their own lexicon in that certain of the ‘spirits’ will become more familiar and/or more responsive to her in ritual practice. Those with whom she feels a special bond become prominently depicted whereas those ‘spirits’ which do not readily frequent the shaman may not be seen in the icons displayed in her *tang*. The researcher recognizes that the research image is one of those personalized icons, in that it departs from traditional depictions in ways which will be described below.

Methodology

The researcher endeavors to observe and record everything given to the eye in this found image. Using the phenomenological method, the iconography will be first rigorously described. Phenomena resulting from the description will be researched in the English language literature. Finally, constellations of symbols, themes and other emergent facts of iconography will be identified in terms of the available but admittedly limited cross-cultural literature in the English language.

Literature

In the early 1980s, Dr. Alan Carter Covell and her son, Jon Carter Covell, offered early English language studies of the folk art, customs and shamanic traditions of Korea, followed closely by the 1985 study of rural Korean shamans by Dr. Laurie Kendall, an anthropologist currently with the American Museum of Natural History. Another important study on folk representations of the ancient and greatly beloved "Spirit of the Mountains", by David A. Mason, gives Western scholars access to the legends and mythology embedded in this ubiquitous figure of devotion. All four authors cite the early work of Mircea Eliade from 1964. In addition to these key authors, the researcher references a personal collection of dictionaries of symbols in order to learn the universal as well as the culture-specific significance of important symbols gleaned from the description.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

Format:

The icon is rectangular with a vertical orientation and the layout of the seven figures is symmetrical with three arranged vertically on each side of a larger, dominant, centered figure behind which is the largest of the three green halos. There is the suggestion of an unmodulated blue sky above and behind a pair of figures with green halos. Between the sky and the group of figures, there is a pattern of white swirls and circles suggesting clouds described with varying widths of ochre outlines. The three figures entirely visible in the front row appear to be standing on an apple green ground, flat, with no details.

The format places this image within the universal characteristics of the mandala[14] which characteristically tend toward symmetry and involves a relationship between the square (sometimes modified to a rectangle), the circle and triangulations with strongly established quadrations around a center.

Clouds

Clouds are the intermediaries between heaven and earth, arising from the universal dyad, the *yin* and the *yang*. In the Chinese tradition, clouds symbolize the transformation which sages must undergo to 'annihilate' themselves, to become like the limitless ether, seeking freedom from the senses and the surrender of the temporal soul.[15]

Three Green Halos

The halo, aureole, nimbus and mandorla, originating in ancient Oriental art, are solar images which refer spiritual power as opposed to the crown, which connotes earthly power. These symbols are constructed



Fig. 1 Painting, Untitled, Anonymous
No date, of recent origin
Water based paint on primed fibre backing
Previously stretched, Approx. 3' x 4' overall

of design devices suggesting radiance, especially around the head or sometimes the whole body: an aura. A round aura signals that the figure is dead and has been transformed from the earthly body into glory. Square auras are for the living. Persons, animals and fabulous creatures (such as the phoenix) wearing a halo are set apart from the less evolved by the diffusion and expansion of spiritual energy residing in the soul which emanates beyond natural physical limits. The halo began to be used in Christian symbolism only in the fourth century and is also not originally native to traditions of shamanic imagery, suggesting that, in Korea, the halo was appropriated by *Shinkyō* from imported Buddhist imagery.[16]

Three

'Three' is one of the critical lucky numbers in shamanism, all of which are uneven and called *yang*, in Korean, whereas the even numbers are *um*, and female. Three is the number of innovation, and its square stands for universality. Tripled, the triad becomes the perfection of perfection, order in order and unity in unity. Among the frequent themes in Korean shamanism are "Three Stars"; "The Three Spirits" or "Three Buddhas" (*Sam-Shin* or *Sam-Bul*); and the "Three Generals of the Ancient Times".

Two Figures, Back Row, Left and Right

The heads of the two highest figures in the rear of the group are framed in large green halos edged in a thin line of yellow. They appear to be almost identical with three differences: their hands, which are clasped in a prayer pose, are slightly inclined left and right, toward the borders of the image; the yokes of their white robes are yellow on the right figure, and red on the left. Those colors are mirrored in the edges of the central red auras, flame-like, which are outlined in white and set forward on the red crowns (or auras?). Four red leaf-like details, two on the right and left of the auras, are outlined in yellow and have highlights of white dots which center and tip these vertically oriented shapes. A small detail of black, like a base, supports horizontal, overlapping, organic shapes on top of the crown behind the central flame. These crowns surmount broad, square faces and closely arranged, smooth black hair detailed with white outlines.

The faces are white, unshaded with facial details outlined lightly in brown. Eyes are simply drawn with one curvilinear line for the upper lid and below it about half of the iris can be seen. The gaze is unfocused. The simple arcs of thin eyebrows are green and there are blue lines indicating slight curls of moustache hair at the corners of the pursed, bow-shaped red mouths. Three, small, light blue, concentric arcs adorn the chin. The clasped hands have slightly more flesh tone than the faces and are framed by brown cuff-like details on the long-sleeved white robes which are edged in two light blue layers just under the yokes. Covering the shoulders, barely seen, there appear to be long cloaks, basically black with long stoles of red with small yellow trefoil decorations which are larger on the right but smaller and in greater numbers on the left figure. We see this pair from about the waist up, owing to the closeness of the five figures in front.

"The *Bodhisattva* of Moonlight and Sunlight"

The sun and the moon are most certainly the earliest images appropriated by humans to represent dyadic structures a universal principals of light and dark, spirit and matter, life and death, male and female. Tension between the polar compliments resists harmonic unification with each constantly displacing each other. This non-resolving character then comes to symbolize the fundamental regenerative power of the

cosmos[17] and finds such diverse expression as the *Hindu lingam* and *yonis*, the Chinese *yin* and *yang*, the *yab-yum* in Tibet, *ah-unh* in Japan as well as the *um* and *yang* in Korea.

In the creation myths of many cultures, especially early Shamanist China, Korea and Japan, primordial brother and sister deities, often twins, gave birth to everything in the earthly realm, the universal taboo against incest notwithstanding. In shamanist China, the male *Fu-shi* (also *Fu-xi*) and his sister *Nu-Gua* have upper torsos like humans but the lower bodies are pictured as two entwined snakes. In Japan, the twins *Izanagi* and *Izanami* are rarely pictured, but in the few images available they are rendered with the bodies of complete human beings. In Korea, the creation of the sun and the moon has two versions, underscoring Confucian family values, and both involve a brother and a sister who, while following instructions left by their mother, refuse to admit a tiger into the house. They are beset by the beast and finally appeal to god to save them. Finding them virtuous, god, in one version, made the brother into the ‘Sun Spirit’ and the sister into the ‘Moon Spirit’. In the another version, the sister protests that she is afraid of the dark and should not be the ‘Moon Spirit’ of the night. So, god reversed the decree and made her the ‘Sun Spirit’ and her brother, the ‘Moon Spirit’.[18] The children, now deified and sometimes rendered with halos, can be seen in classical Korean costume on the left and right of the “Heavenly Spirit” but can also be found in Chinese garments flanking images of Toksong, the “Lonely Saint” with the brother holding a pitcher and the sister a gold decorated box. When posed beside the venerable San-Shin, the “Mountain Spirit”, the pair proffer fruits and vegetables symbolic of his virility and longevity.[19]

In Korea, imagery based on the archetypal theme of the ‘Sun and Moon’ is typically layered with elements of indigenous folklore, Confucian influence and Buddhist iconography. The theme of the ‘sun and the moon’ can be represented as simple orbs, as in the famous nineteenth century, eight panel screen which stood (and still stands) behind the throne of Yi Dynasty kings (1392-). In this image we see that the sun, representing *yang*, is on the king’s proper right and the weaker *um* force is on his left.[20]

Given the usual (but not invariable) left/right placement of the orbs as well as the children representing the ‘sun and moon’, the two *bodhisattva*, seen in the image under study here, wearing raiment mixing both Chinese and Korean elements, easily carry the ‘sun and moon’ symbolism suggested only by a change in the colors of their crowns and clothing. Other images of *bodhisattva* may display red and white orbs in their headdresses or held in their hands.[21] Red represents the fertile earth and the harvest. It stands for the sun in agricultural peoples and is the most fortuitous of colors. It has a connotation of goodness, whereas in the West, it is ambivalent, sometimes being associated with blood and tragedy.

Central Figure

In the center of the composition is another figure with the same green halo, but this one is slightly larger. This whole figure is a bit larger than any other. The posture is frontal with the weight evenly in both feet and the hands crossed over each other on top of the handle of a gold, Korean sword with characteristic flanges midway on each side of the blade, pointed vertically down to the ground. The hands crossed over the halberd mark the exact center of the painting. The face of this most prominent figure is also white, square but a bit longer than the first two figures. The eyes are rendered with a single arc for the upper lid and two-thirds of an iris but the focus is directly at the viewer, benign. Green concentric arcs on the chin are more heavily drawn than in the first case and the suggestion of moustache is done in green with two teardrop-shaped strokes on each side of the red mouth, which is similar to the two figures first described. The hair is green and is also styled similarly to the first two figures.

Hierarchical Order of Rank on the Picture Plane

Ritual icons made for shamanic practice in Korea are essentially mandalas and follow those universal rules of construction on the picture plane. They tend toward symmetry and most frequently are quadrated into North, South, East and West around a strong central image. As with other Asian traditions, Korean convention recognizes five directions, the center being the fifth, straight up. Ranking the most important imagery is a matter of placement on the picture plane and of size relationships. The bigger and higher they are, the more important. The position at center or higher in the composition indicates highest status, so images that are larger and at the center have higher rank order than images that may be higher on the picture plane (as in the two *bodhisattva* above) but are smaller in size which indicates that their rank is lower than the larger (but lower) central figure. In general, placement lower on the picture plane and smaller in size indicates the lowest status and often divisions between the spiritual and earthly realms as well.

The raiment of the centered figure is the most ornate of the seven. Wide black boots with white-tipped toes and articulated with yellow lines are identical on the three frontal figures. The central image wears full white pants stuffed into the boots topped by an overskirt with at least three layers and held in place by a wide green and red fabric belt, tied in front with a white cord. The overskirts are richly designed. The longest one, underneath the other two, ends just above the black boots with a flat border of horizontal stripes, top to bottom, of white, blue and red. But the last border looks pleated with dark green at the top fading into light green and ending with a narrow strip of white. The light yellow body of this skirt appears to be made of woven strips of fabric. The top overskirt is short, coming just to the mid-hip line. It is of red fabric with small yellow trefoil patterns and a border of black edged in white. The piece between the top and bottom overskirts is a pointed panel, possibly with vertical folds and hanging in the center from under the top overskirt. It is red, with slight stripes of yellow, edged in the same black and white border, all of which serves as a visual 'frame' for the sword. Above the belt is the placket of a red shirt with details outlined in yellow and the sleeves of the red shirt can be seen to be edged with a black border with a small white edge to the cuffs. From under the cuffs, one can see another undergarment of long bands in yellow, ocher, white and green ending with a white ruffle at the wrists.

There appears to be three layers of cloak over the shoulders. On top, there is a short blue cape edged in red over a white mantle tied under the chin of the figure. The length cannot be seen, but the underlayer of cloak appears to be covered with a scale-like or feather-like design made of overlapping, inverted arcs of yellow with white dots in the center of each arc. This cloak is edged similarly to the edging on the long underskirt but the pleated border is a light blue fading into white.

The most striking difference in the appearance of the central figure is the helmet. A blue cap is edged in red at the brow with elevated, symmetrical white scroll designs framing a red plume fluttering to the viewer's left and highlighted by a yellow, three-pointed 'flame' drawn in black outline. In front of each ear are yellow half-circles with thin red lines describing concentric circles within and a segmented border. Behind the yellow arcs are multi-colored wings, open, with the outer row of long feathers in red and white and the three rows of short feathers rendered in blue, yellow and green with white outlines.

Shin-Jang: "Winged Deity"

Appropriated as "Korea's First Shaman", this icon always displays a pacific countenance compared to the fierce warriors usually accompanying it, and it is featured in almost every Buddhist temple in Korea; usually on an East wall while purely Buddhist deities are seen on North walls. Some Buddhists call this

figure “*Tongjin Posal*”, a *bodhisattva* who guards the Lotus Sutra. Covell (1986) speculates that the image is much more ancient with roots originating in the prehistoric folklore of a shamanic tribe of nomads called the “Puyŏ Horseriders” from the “Kingdom of Wu”, in what was then a large plain in Southwest China, just North and West of the present North Korean border. This legend links *Shin-Jang* with the first shaman-emperor of Korea, Tangun (c.1233 B.C.).[22]

Other Buddhist scholars say this figure guards the *Hwaŏm Sutra* and should be surrounded by the required forty-nine figures. Compositional details vary depicting the ‘first shaman’ but the image is called ‘*Shin-chung-dang*’, or “Spirit of the Altar Center” and attests to the coexistence of Shamanism and Buddhism over a period of fifteen centuries.[23]

The growing literature on shamanic lore most frequently references the Altaic tradition as a classic model representing most of the characteristics common to the call, initiation and practice of shamanism worldwide. Even so, there are significant variations in some cultures. The one most commonly reported skill claimed by shamans is flight, especially spirit flight. So feathers and wings are commonly found details in shamanic, symbolism, raiment and the accoutrement of practice worldwide. The wings invariably coming out of the sides of the headdress of the Korean “Winged Deity” seem to refer to legends in Siberian shamanism recounting that the first shaman was born from an Eagle and a woman, the eagle having been sent by the “Heavenly Spirit” to teach mankind how to shamanize. According to the legends, *Shin-Jang* could command all the spirits of heaven, earth and the underworld except for the “Heavenly Spirit” who supervised all the others.[24]

An unclear or multi-reference identification seems not to bother practitioners, and in Buddhist temples the “Winged Deity” has become associated with helping the souls of the dead. In that role, the icon is accompanied by an array of forty-nine fearsome figures, one each for the forty-nine days the deceased must wait in *Bardo*, a kind of purgatory, to be eligible for rebirth in a new form. The frightening affect of the attendants is to remind the prayerful of the horrors attendant on misbehavior. One of the major rites of shamanic ritual is the ‘Trip to Hell’ by a *manshin* to rescue a dead soul and lead it to a more auspicious position in the afterlife. Covell (1986) identifies the *manshin* KIM Kum-hwa, a refugee from North Korea, as the most universally recognized shaman now living in terms of proficiency in the “Trip to Hell” *kut*. He relates that, in 1983, the British Broadcasting System was doing a documentary on her life and began to film her in this rite but they became so

...flabbergasted when the manshin’s ecstatic ritual carried her so close in identification with the dead soul that she seemed to die, without pulse or breath. They ceased filming to carry her to a doctor, but fortunately she “returned from Hell”.[25]

Details of the design of this icon vary a great deal within a certain range. The facial structure may be very round, oblong or square. The black (or green!) eyebrows are invariably arched, neat and trimmed and the beard may vary from minimal and wispy to completely absent. A common detail found on his garments is the fish-scale or overlapping feather pattern, found as a decorative element on Chinese bronzes since 800 BCE.[26] Another distinctive detail is the relaxed posture of the hands crossed over each other and resting on the handle of a Korean style sword, blade pointed to the ground. The blade is wide with any number of pairs of sharp flanges projecting from each side.

In the research image, the figure of *Shin-Jang* occupies the powerful central position and wears a yellow overskirt, yellow being the traditional color of the ‘center’ in the symbolism of the Korean mandala.

“Spirit Generals of the Five Directions”

Since time immemorial, Eastern cosmology has spoken of the five directions, rather than four as in the West. Asians think of the center as an anchor for the cardinal points. The number five has a magical connotation in Asia. In China, it is the center symbolizing harmony and balance as well as the sacred marriage between the principles of Heaven and the Earth Mother. It represents the universe with two axes, horizontal and vertical passing through the same center. Originally, the ideogram for *wu*, five, was only the cross comprising the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) plus the center and at a later time, two parallel lines were added representing Heaven and Earth, between which the *yin* and the *yang* produce the five active elements of earth, fire, water, wood and metal. Ancient writers declared that universal laws were five in number: five colors; five flavors; five musical tones; five metals; five internal organs; five planets; five spatial regions of the earth; five poisons and five senses.[27] Through the art and architecture of the Far East, the system of the five directions has existed from antiquity into modern times.

The significance of the number five has taken on a cosmology of its own, deeper than any religion, so it is not surprising that shamanism developed five ‘spirit generals’, *O-bang-shin-jang*, as guardians for the *um* and *yang* principles of the five directions. The generals can be identified by the color of their garments and the weapons they carry. Any number or all of them may be called by a *manshin* during a *kut*.

Traditional symbolism moves around the mandala format clockwise. *Hyŏn-Che* (Chinese: *Chan Hsu*), the general of the North, is associated with the tortoise snake and the color black or a very deep purple. The winterly seasons of the North have the heaviest presence of the female, *um*, principle. East is guarded by *Chŏng-Che* (C: *Fu Hsi*[28]) who can be identified by blue robes, the season of spring and the emblem of the blue dragon. Red is the color of summer, the South and the phoenix is the animal representing the general *Chu-Che* (C: *Shen Nung*). West is symbolized by white, the white tiger and the season of autumn, attributes of the guardian *Paek-Che* (C: *Shao Hsi*). The Center is represented by the color yellow, with respect for the mythical founder of China, the Yellow Emperor *Huang-ti*, known in Korea as *Hwang-che*. Covell (1986) believes that nearly all *manshin* will display one icon with all five generals in her *tang* and if the style is Chinese, the symbolism is rigorously maintained. But if the iconography is Korean, much more leeway or personalization may be employed in the design of an individualized ritual icon.[29]

“Three Generals of Ancient Times”

In addition to the theme of the “Generals of the Five Directions”, shamanist iconography also represents “Three Generals of Ancient Times”. [30] Although the seven figures in the icon under study do seem to separate into three spiritual beings and four earthly beings, one of the earthly beings, middle left, is in yellow court robes and unarmed. This makes it also possible to divide the group into three ‘spiritual beings’ and three ‘generals’ (possibly selected members of the “Generals of the Five Directions”), the “Three Ancient Generals” or generals personally related to the *manshin* through her practice but representing other of the several solitary figures from the Korean pantheon of military spirits.

Four Individualized Figures

The faces of the three haloed figures are white, passive and idealized whereas the faces of the other four figures are slightly pink, more individualized and with more variety of expression. The clothing, facial features, expressions and postures are all different, suggesting that these are human beings rather than spiritual beings. However, this group of four seems to resolve around three like figures in military garb and one unlike (middle left).

Multiple References

The question is, are the three ‘like’ figures (middle right, front left and right) selected members of the “Generals of the Five Directions” or a group representing the “Three Generals of Ancient Times”? Or is the intention to remain undefined, retaining reference to all these possibilities. Further suggestion of layered associations is found in a reproduction of the “Three Generals of Ancient Times” where we see that one of the generals wears a winged helmet, referencing *Shin-Jang*, “The Winged Deity”, discussed above.[31]

Middle Right Figure

The figure in the middle on the viewer’s right wears a red cloak with large flower designs in yellow with the same black and white trim around the sleeves as described above. He is also wearing a white mantle tied under his chin and a red shirt. One can also see the top of an overskirt with a red waistband. His helmet is rounded on top with a red band at the forehead, and large red plume suggesting feathers is attached behind the crown. He holds the black handle of a staff, lance or trident. Thin black swatches of hair appear to be sticking out from under the red rim of the helmet or they may be long eyebrows, or both. Curvilinear black lines around the eyes describe a furrowed frown and the eyes, wide with white showing above the pupils, appear to be staring intensely at something forward and on the left of the scene. Could he be looking at the red orb held in the proper left hand of the figure front and left? More curved lines describe a face with rough contours, a wide bent nose and the red mouth is wide with a tight bow to the lips.

The segment of black handle held by this figure might be a lance or a trident, but we cannot see enough of it to know. The iconography of weapons carried by any of the ‘generals’ is not consistent, anyway. He wears red, the color of the general guarding the South but so does the figure, front left. *Chaktu Sillag*, “The Knife-Riding General”, also wears red and carries a long handled weapon. But in the research image, the feet are not seen, and so the identifying shamanic performance of walking on the upturned blades of knives cannot be confirmed.

Front Right Figure

The very light pink facial tone on this figure has fewer lines describing furrows but the wide thick nose is similar to the figure behind and to the front left of the composition. The manner of line representing the mouth is stylistically the same as those figures as well, but appears a bit more relaxed than the other two. A wide thin moustache of black hairs stretches across the upper lips and a small section defines the space just under the lower lip. A short, thin line of hairs describes a beard stretching from side to side, meeting the long earlobes. His facial expression is only slightly less intense than the figures behind and to the left. The eyes again are wide, showing whites above the pupils but these are a bit softer, being defined with a more simple arc, even though showing a quality of interest that might be directed at the red orb. Fewer lines describe a face with thick contours and there are patches of beard in front of the earlobes as well as under the lower lip. The black eyebrows are long, especially on the outer edges and there is a thin black beard and a moustache that features long lengths of hair on each side at the cheekbone. The red mouth is drawn identically to the figure behind and the facial hair pattern is similar, but longer, if a bit less full.

This figure holds a sword in his proper left hand of more simple design compared to the central figure. The blade, unsheathed, defines a strong diagonal in the composition, moving from the central bottom, just

adjacent to the point of the vertical, central sword and inclining to the upper right. This figure appears to hold a red scabbard with his proper right hand in an opposite diagonal position across his chest with the end of the scabbard under his cloak and upper left arm. The cloak is green with a scalloped red border and thin white trim edging the sleeves and front opening. The lining of the sleeves shows a decorative pattern of red and white gradations encircling the inside of each sleeve. The shirt is pink without detail but the cuffs visible at the wrists are red with a white undershirt sleeve also visible. The overskirts are caught in a loosely tied red waistband and white sash tied in front. The outer overskirt appears to curve around the body at mid-hip and the red border with white trim is seen to overlap below the white sash. The overskirt is green with small yellow floral designs which appear to match the design of the outer cloak. The long, triangular front panel is red with one large yellow flower design which frames the blade of the sword. The panel is secured under the top overskirt and is not folded. We can see the underskirt but not the pants which may be tucked into the boots. This underskirt has fabric and design similar to the cape of the central figure except the few visible yellow scale-like or feather-like designs appear to be thicker and more pronounced. This figure wears a rounded black cap which describes the folds of a soft fabric with thin yellow lines and the cap is edged with a red band at the forehead. There is also a transparent pinkish veil drawn with black lines. It is attached to the back of the cap, shoulder length and falling in soft folds as it curves around the back of the neck to just behind each long earlobe, framing the face. The eyes are defined with the same kind of lines suggestive of a furrowed brow as the figures behind and in the front left. Two-thirds of the pupils can be seen suggesting a downward gaze. Again, one might anticipate that the gaze is directed at the small red orb held in the proper left hand of the figure on the front left, but the gaze seems to diffuse just below it.

“Taegam”

This spirit can be male or female and is the overseer of the eight spirits of the home, standing against evil influences and insuring prosperity. *Taegam*, when female, is “*Taegam Holmoni*”, the ‘Grandmother Overseer’, and is the guardian of all the female elements of the home, traditionally represented in bright reds, yellows and blues. The research image is in red, green and pink with touches of yellow design in the green robe. However, the sword with halberd stuck under the figure’s proper left arm are traditional symbols of this household spirit.[32]

Other references which may be embedded in this image are suggested by the headdress. *Taegam* is usually described as wearing a military hat but here we see a domed black headpiece with a transparent veil extending around the back from side to side. This kind of hat often symbolizes the figure of the shaman Tangun, the legendary progenitor of the Korean people who founded the land of Ko-Choson in 2,333 B.C. After ruling for ninety-nine years, he passed his mantle on to other shamanic Tangun. Legend has it that he retreated to the mountains where he dwells in solitude as the mountain god, *San-Shin*, almost always seen with a great tiger in attendance as well as headgear that are varieties of transparent veils, caps or scarves.

Front Left Figure

The crown of this black hat is trimmed above with a red arc to which, midway, is attached a red plume, fluttering to the viewer’s left. The soft wide brim of the hat, resting on large ears, is upturned, pink with black calligraphic/organic designs and secured at the forehead with a red band. The ears show more linear detail than with the other four figures. A short tuft of thin black hair grows from under the proper right

ear. Black strands of eyebrows and/or hair emerge from under the red hatband, a black moustache with long flowing tufts on each end fall to below the mantle. A short tuft of beard defines the space between the chin and the lip and there is a patch of beard falling from the chin to the same length as the long tufts of moustache. Facial features appear full and without the furrows seen in the other two but the nose is very similar in style. The brows are similar to the middle right figure but slightly more relaxed. Again, the eyes are wide, staring, showing white above the pupils which are directed to the center of the composition and downward.

The front left figure wears a white mantle but it is swathed around the neck to open in the back rather than tie under the chin as with the others. An overcloak of red with a few large circular flower symbols drawn in yellow is trimmed at the wide sleeve with a loosely scalloped black border with narrow white trim. We can see the lining inside is patterned similar to the front right figure but in shades of blue. Three layers of overskirt top white pantaloons stuffed into the black boots. The overskirts of red with the same yellow circular symbol are trimmed in the same border of black and white and the cuffs of the cloak sleeves. Again, there is a long overskirt with a shorter one crossed over at the hips and a triangular fold of red fabric decorated with a smaller design of circular yellow symbols falling to the height of the boots from under it. The overskirts are topped with a wide band of green with red edges and there appears to be a white sash securing all. From under the sleeves of the overcloak, we see shirtsleeves of red with a small white ruffle at the wrists and one large yellow dot over each forearm.

This figure holds in his proper right hand what may be a little yellow pouch or wrapper for the round, red object in his other hand. In the left hand, between his thumb and index finger, at eye level, the figure holds aloft a small red orb, shaded with pink to indicate roundness, about the size of a tennis ball. As with the other figures, his gaze would seem to be directed at the orb, but it, too, diverts, and seems directed more downward, to the middle.

Red Orb, Sphere

The spherical shape of the orb has a twofold significance. An orb, held in the hand, represents a domain or empire over which a totalitarian authority extends. It connotes the juridical power of absolute authority and geographical totality of the universe. The orb is finite but the power limitless.[33] The sphere is likened to "...a cube of a circle..." but adds its third dimension to the meaning, expressing the whole of Heaven and Earth, which is symbolized in the pairing of the sphere and the cube. These two are, nevertheless, ambivalent, as with a person partaking of two natures; the marriage of Heaven and Earth; the primal Hermaphrodite. According to the Christian prophets, (PORS pp. 181-2), three spheres emanated from God to fill the three heavens. The first, the sphere of love was red; the second, of wisdom, was blue and the third, of creation, was green.[34]

Mirror

Alternatively, the red-shaded object held in the proper left hand of the figure at front left could be read as a mirror, and well it may be, as the mirror is a potent object all over Asia. The use of mirrors is one of the oldest forms of divination, said to originate in Persia. In Siberian symbolism, two great heavenly mirrors reflect the universe and the shaman traps this reflection in his mirror. In central Asia shamans point mirrors at the Sun or Moon, which are also regarded as mirrors, upon which is reflected all that occurs on earth. Korean shamans often wear short felt vests decorated with brass mirrors which sparkle in the light as they dance, symbolizing their power.[35]

Yŏng-Wang: “The Dragon King”

On searching the literature further, the researcher discovered that the objects held in the hands, described above, are probably intended to represent a ‘flaming pearl’ and a strand of coral, specific attributes of an ancient shamanic deity, “The Dragon King”, the reverence for whom predates written Korean history. He is said to live forever in a magnificent residence under the East Sea and he frequents the Tsushima Straits between Korea and the southern Japanese island, Kyushu. Traditional iconography of this deity would show him riding the back of a great blue or red dragon, sometimes with one foot on the head of the beast. The dragon will be chasing or sometimes has caught in one claw, a ‘flaming pearl’ drawn variously as a red round object with stylized flames jumping from its surface. Occasionally the pearl is held in the dragon’s mouth or in the hand of the “Dragon King”. The dragon and the king both symbolize the male principle while the pearl, the symbol of imminent wisdom, and its watery home, embody the *um*, the female. Coral is animal, mineral and plant and became associated with the undersea garden of the “Dragon King” by ancient fishermen. Buddhism holds coral as one of the seven sacred jewels while more ancient Chinese folklore holds that there are eight precious jewels, including the pearl.

Middle Left Figure

This figure wears a yellow cloak defined with wide ochre lines, which has a neckline bordered in dark reddish brown. One cannot see details of hands or lower torso but there may be a piece held in the hands which is rectangular with stripes of red, white, yellow and green – a folded fan? Alternatively, this object might be part of the hat decoration on the figure in front.

The figure wears a black hat with a crown rounded of two layers highlighted with a vertical yellow line. This hat, as with the other four, has a red browband but the black brim is composed of two apparently separate round, flat shapes, one over each ear. The facial affect of this figure is different from the previous three. The visage is articulated by large curved ears with long lobes and trim eyebrows indicated by two neat black arcs. The beard on the chin is smaller than on the other three figures, more goatee-like, and the moustache, although styled similarly with long tufts at each end and a short tuft under the lower lip, seem more graceful. The nose is smaller and the eyes, described with simple arcs with two-thirds of the pupil showing with no white above, are attentive but serene. The face is a three-quarter view, so the eyes are gazing, unfocused, straight ahead of the figure.

The figure described above, given the pleasant affect of the face and that he does not wear military garments, indicates that he is not a ‘spirit general’. He wears the black horse hair hat and the Chinese robes of a Confucian scholar. The yellow robes are significant in that they distinguish this figure from the three armored ‘spirit generals’ and three spiritual beings but the use of the yellow garment in this image is atypical as it is the color of the center. The use of yellow robes excludes identification of this image as *Chŏn-shin* or *Hananim*, the “Heavenly Spirit”, as Covell (1987) reports that yellow is avoided for representations of this favorite deity so as not to offend the Chinese celestial emperor, yellow being for their exclusive use.[36]

Many group images used by *manshin* will include the kindly and beloved “Mountain Spirit”, *San-Shin* but it is rare to see him without his spirit guide, the white tiger, and white feather fan. The headdress portrayed is that of a Confucian scholar, also atypical, as described above, but Covell (1987, p. 54) presents one depiction of *San-Shin* in this kind of hat. Another possibility, if the striped object might be a tablet or roll of documents, is that this figure is the “Messenger of the King of Hell”, *Iljik Saja*, whose responsibility it is to appear with warrants in hand and drag souls off for judgement. As Taoism and Buddhism gradually

introduced the populace to the ideas of punishment and reward after death, according to one's deeds, shamanism incorporated these notions. Theretofore, shamanism had no felt need to explain afterlife possibilities, believing that awareness after death was essentially the same as it is in life.

Swords, Knives, Spears, Lances

In Korean shamanic imagery, various images of weaponry are common, including the lance, trident, club, bow and arrow, knife and sword. But three objects are always present for use by the *manshin* during a *kut* ritual: the bell and the drum, along with the sword and/or the knife. The lance and the trident are often found in the *tang*, as well. The sword is first and foremost the symbol of the warrior lending the character of virtue and valor. It symbolizes a 'holy war', an inner struggle, a quest. Swords and knives possess a dual aspect in that they are destructive, but what they destroy may be injustice, malevolence and ignorance. In the positive, constructive aspect, they maintain peace and justice. They are cutting and thrusting instruments, weapons of decision, instruments of the active pursuit of truth.

Seven

As noted, important number symbolism in the research image goes from one, (the central figure and/or the figure middle left), to three (three haloed figures), five tutelary spirits (excluding the two buddhist *bodhisattva*) and seven (the whole group), as well as nine, by implication; all *yang*. The number seven, in prehistoric times the world over, was associated with the seven planets, that is, the visible five planets along with the sun and the moon,[37] as well as the planets of the great dipper, all favorite images of Korean shamans.

Concluding observations:

Worldwide, shamanism appears to have its roots in the first inkling of the human imagination suggesting that death may be more than the end of life. From that suspicion springs the universal awe of nature and the perception that everything is a potential residence of the spirits – the trees, rocks, waters and animals, real and imagined. From that conviction followed the idea that spirits could affect the course of human welfare and stimulated the development of rituals for petition as well as appeasement. The origins of shamanism are traceable back to the Alpine Paleolithic, some 30,000 to 50,000 years ago.[38]

Andreas Lommel, who was director of the National Museum of Ethology in Munich, was among the first to make a strong connection between shamanism and the development of art forms. Lommel's *Shamanism: The Beginnings of Art* (1964). N.Y: McGraw-Hill, offers that the imagery created by shamanic practice, poetry, song, dance, theater, painting, sculpture, as well as musical instruments, weapons and garments are mnemonic forms that serve to recollect and celebrate the myths handed down the generations.

Through the special ability of a shaman to achieve a trance state, the centering oral traditions are given context and expression through the art forms of imagery, song and ritual which then address the needs of the day – healing, prophecy or retribution. Cultures may change slowly or they may be subject to rapid and debilitating influences such as disease or subjugation. It is the responsibility of the shaman to reshape the foundational cultural mythology with fresh iconography and creative expression to reorder and strengthen the collective psyche and facilitate the absorption of an ever changing worldview.

Notes

1. Both Covell, Alan Carter (1986), *Folk Art and Magic: Shamanism in Korea*, Seoul: Hollym Press and Laurie Kendall (1985), *Shamans, Housewives and Other Restless Spirits*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press note that one often hears the word *mudang* but that the term *manshin* is more polite and respectful. The term *pansu* refers to those specializing in exorcism, according to Kendall, p. 23.
2. The literature appears to use the terms 'trance' and 'ecstasy' interchangeably but some distinguish between the terms, saying they represent quite different religious experiences, trance being characterized by stillness, silence and solitude while ecstasy depends on sensory over stimulation with movement, sound and company. Piers Vitebsky (1995), *The Shaman: Voyages of the Soul, Trance, Ecstasy and Healing From Siberia to the Amazon*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, p. 64.
3. Covell (1986), p. 18.
4. Op. cit., pp. 26–27. The use of the black line 'templates' is similar to those used by Tibetan *Thangka* painters.
5. Adams, Edward B. (1980), *Art Treasures of Seoul: with walking tours*. Seoul: Samhwa Printing Co., p. 2.
6. The researcher finds two more variations on the romanization for this earliest Korean secular hero: 'Dakun Wanggum' in KIM Duk-Whang (1988). *A History of Religions in Korea*. Seoul: Daiji Moonhwasas Pub. Co., p. 449. Andrew C. Nahm (1993), *Introduction to Korean History and Culture*. Hollym Press, p. 15, refers to the legend of *Tan'gun Wanggŏm* having ruled the kingdom of Chosŏn with its capital of Asadek, in the 50th year of the reign of Emperor Yao of the Hsia dynasty of China (c.2333 BCE).
7. See page 71 in Adams (1980), op. cit.
8. Nahm (1993), loc. cit., pp. 8–9.
9. Op. cit., pp. 45 ff.
10. It is not known when the ethical philosophy of Confucius (550-478 BC) arrived in Korea but there are records of Confucian universities operating in the Koguryŏ (37- AD) and Paekche (18- AD) kingdoms of the fourth century while the Silla Kingdom (57- AD) had made Buddhism the official religion. After the fall of Koguryŏ and Paekche and the rise of the Unified Silla Dynasty (66-935 AD) a new Confucian university was founded in 682 AD. During the 13th century, Buddhism declined against the continuing rise of Confucianism. Christianity was introduced in 1777. Adams, David (1987). *Korean Folk Art and Craft*. Seoul: International Publishing House, *passim*.
11. KIM Duk-Whang (1988), op. cit., p. 21.
12. Covell, Dr. Jon Carter and Alan Covell (1987). *Korean Impact on Japanese Culture*. Seoul: Hollym Press, p. 52.
13. Covell (1986), op. cit., p. 13.
14. See Rosemary Wright (2000). "The Great Round and the Kumano *Kanshin Jukkai Mandara*". *Kawasaki Journal of Medical Welfare*, **6**(2) 99–116.
15. Chevalier and Gheerbrandt (1996), *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, pp. 206–207.
16. See Chevalier and Gheerbrandt (1996); Udo Becker (1994). *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols*. New York: Continuum, p. 211 and J.C. Cooper (1979). *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*. London: Thames and Hudson, p. 112.
17. Lash, John (1993). *Twins and the Double*. New York: Thames and Hudson, p. 94.
18. The first version is recounted in Covell (1986), pp. 100-101 but the second is found in *Folk Tales from Korea* (1982) by ZONG In-Sob. Seoul: Hollym Corporation, p. 7 ff.

19. Covell (1986). *passim*.
20. See pages 28–29 in Adams (1980). This screen shows a five-peak mountain range, the number five being as auspicious as seven. Here, the five peaks represent the “Five Happinesses” as well as the five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal and water. To the eye of this Western artist, the assignment of the color red to the moon and white to the sun in this image is so dissonant that the researcher wonders if the negative was reversed in printing. Studying other Korean images using similar orbs, such as on the manshin fans, the sun is always red, while the moon may be white or yellow.
21. See Covell (1986), and Mason, David A. (1999). *Spirit of the Mountains: Korea’s San-Shin and Traditions of Mountain Worship*. Seoul: Hollym International Corp.
22. Also Romanized as Dangun, who is believed to have returned to the mountains of Korea to become the beloved “Mountain Spirit”, *San-Shin*, where he watches over his race. Covell (1987), p. 46.
23. The central teaching of the Hwaom sect is that the phenomenal world and the spiritual world interpenetrate to form a whole. Alan Covell (1986), pp. 33–34.
24. Covell (1986), p. 35.
25. Op. cit., p. 14–15.
26. Williams, C.A.S. (1941-1976). *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism & Art Motives* [sic]. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., pp. 121–125.
27. Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996), op. cit.
28. Referred to above in the discussion of primordial twins.
29. Covell (1987), op. cit., p. 86 ff.
30. Op. cit., p. 109.
31. Ibid.
32. Op. cit., p. 112.
33. Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1969-96), op. cit., p. 724.
34. Op. cit., p. 902.
35. Covell (1986), op. cit., p. 152.
36. Op. cit. p. 102.
37. Moon, Beverly (1997). *An Encyclopedia of Archetypal Symbolism*. Vol. 1. Boston: Shambala Press, The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, p. 251.
38. Andreas Lommel (1964). *Shamanism: The Beginnings of Art*. N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, p. 149.