



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Popular religion

Walraven, B.C.A.; Park, E.Y.

Citation

Walraven, B. C. A. (2025). Popular religion. In E. Y. Park (Ed.), *Routledge Handbooks* (pp. 213-226). London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781003262053-19

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4210707>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

POPULAR RELIGION

Boudewijn Walraven

Popular religion is not an easily defined category. Roughly, it comprises religious beliefs and practices that do not belong to institutionalized religions with their own institutional structures and canonized scriptures that are the object of explicit hermeneutical traditions (Yi Yong Bhum 2015, 1–14). To a large extent, the practices aim to secure this-worldly benefits thanks to the force of prayer and ritual. From an alternative perspective, popular religion may denote beliefs that the government or the elite do not condone. In more positive terms, it is the religion of the ordinary people, roughly defined, and closely linked to daily life and the social occasions and units of everyday life, such as the household, the site of residence and its natural and social surroundings, or to the workplace; rather than to institutionalized, exclusively sacred sites such as churches, Confucian shrines or Buddhist monasteries. The shamans, who may be regarded as the religious specialists of popular religion, are not appointed by a formal institutional hierarchy but tend to rely on personal charisma or a more personal, inherited pedigree that lends them authority. On the other hand, popular religion tends to adopt and adapt elements of institutional religions, sometimes making it difficult to discern where one begins and the other ends.

In this way, Korean shamans have borrowed many elements from Buddhism. In a shaman song relating the myth of *Pari kongju* (“the Abandoned Princess”), who became the first shaman, she receives aid from the Buddha in her struggle to overcome all the obstacles (Seo Dae-seok 2000, 116–52). Conversely, Buddhist monks have taken up roles that also were assumed by shamans (such as that of the fortune-teller) and incorporated earlier, popular forms of worship, like the veneration of the constellation of the Great Dipper (Ursa Major; Ko. *Ch’ilsŏng*), which goes back to prehistoric times. Some Buddhist practices performed by laypeople may be deemed part of popular religion. A good example is the custom that in intercalary months, elderly women would throng to Buddhist monasteries around the country to make offerings to the Buddha to ensure rebirth in the Pure Land of *Amitābha* (Sasse 2022, 63).

Between popular religion and institutional religion, there are not a few shared deities. Thus, mountain gods were (and are) worshipped in Buddhist monasteries and by shamans, while Confucians, too, would recognize the numinous aspects of mountains. There is also overlap in terms of practice. The practices of popular religion largely concern direct human needs in the here and now, related to birth, death, and people’s livelihood, which are also important to institutional religion. Nevertheless, although a specific worldview undergirded them, no theology or metaphys-

ics somewhat distanced popular religion's practices from the believers' immediate needs, of the kind that the elitist specialists of the institutional religions formulated. In the case of childlessness or illness, for instance, staunch Confucians might judge that this was due to the will of Heaven and not to be changed by prayers or sacrifices. In actual life, however, the practices of popular religion, although spurned by religious elites, often remained part of the daily lives of members of all classes, from poor peasants to those who dwelt in the royal palaces. On the whole, women of all classes tended to rely on such practices to a much greater degree. Including certain Buddhist practices, it was arguably the most common form of religion in Korea under the rule of the Chosŏn state (1392–1897). However, the ubiquity of the manifold manifestations of popular religion, less often described in written sources, has been overlooked.

From the above description of popular religion, it follows that something that deserves to be called popular religion, despite its ancient roots, was not present from the dawn of history (Walraven 2015). There first had to be a measure of social differentiation and, above all, the emergence of religious forms based on scriptures, canonization, and hierarchical priesthood, creating a divergence between the religious practices of the elite and those of the ordinary people. Popular religion, though, does not merely consist of traditions from a hoary past. Popular practices may have roots in ancient beliefs, but they still had to adapt to changing circumstances to survive. Upon the appearance of institutional religions such as Confucianism (which certainly has religious elements in the way it functioned in Chosŏn, besides such other elements as a political philosophy and social ethics), these influenced ancient practices that flourished among all layers of society. The influence gave rise to the more or less separate realm of popular religion, which adopted some elements of the newly introduced beliefs while maintaining its own identity.

Popular Religion and Shamanism

In Korea, the acceptance of scripture-based religions and worldviews involved a gradual pushing of shamanism toward the status of popular religion, a phenomenon that started at an early date. The institutional religion that enjoyed the favor of the elite was Buddhism in, among others, Silla (57 BCE, trad.–935 CE) and Koryŏ (918–1392), and Confucianism in Chosŏn. As described in more detail below, Chosŏn ultimately excluded shamanism from any form of state ritual (at least at the level of the central government). Accordingly, there is a general tendency to equate popular religion in Chosŏn with shamanism. On the contrary, one of the main points made in this chapter is that popular religion encompassed more than the rituals of the shamans alone. Nonetheless, at least roughly defining what a shaman is in the context of Korean popular religion will be helpful. As used here, the term refers to religious specialists who, without being appointed by an institutional hierarchy and without needing a literate tradition, possess a very personal, charismatic ability to act as an intermediary between the realm of gods and spirits and the human world. Ecstasy and trance are not decisive factors in this concept of shamanism (Hamayon 1993; Walraven 2009, 75–76). Crucial, however, is the performance of traditional rituals during which the shamans are assumed to lend their voice to gods or spirits and directly enunciate messages or oracles from the invisible realm (Kendall 1985).

The functions of the shamans were manifold. Their ability to commune with the invisible world enabled them to divine the causes of all kinds of misfortune, from illness and childlessness to unnatural death and natural disasters such as the unseasonal drought that seemed to augur famine. Most importantly, it enabled them to do something about it. Also, they were supposed to have the ability to commune with the dead and lead them to a “good place,” where they would be at peace and no longer pose a danger to the wellbeing of the living because of their frustration with



Figure 14.1 Female shaman performing a ritual. This depiction is by a late nineteenth-century artist, Kisan Kim Chun'gŭn. Photo © NRIC/Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK), Hamburg.

their miserable fate in the hereafter. Their rituals would involve music, singing, and dancing, which might also serve as entertainment (Figure 14.1). For instance, King Kojong (r. 1864–1907; emperor from 1897) enjoyed watching the dancing and singing of shamans who had been called to the palace by his wife, Queen Myōngsōng (Hwang Hyōn 1980, vol. 1, 293).

Because Korean shamans are not thought to travel to celestial or underworldly regions in a state of ecstasy and instead are supposed to be possessed by deities or spirits that “descend” into them, some might prefer to call them mediums. However, the fact that they remain in complete control of their contacts with the spirit world and are not just passive vehicles for transmitting the intentions and desires of that world makes them more similar to figures elsewhere, usually referred to as shamans. Therefore, the term shaman is justifiable because of its use in comparative studies, though in Korea, the term was not used before the modern era. In Korean, there are various designations for the persons we call shamans, the most common being *mudang* and—in pre-modern records—*munyō*. Both terms are used specifically for female shamans, who for a long time have outnumbered male shamans, while for male shamans, the most common term is *paksu*, or in old documents, *mugyōk*.

The preponderance of female shamans corresponded with the predominance of female clients, who were much more numerous than the men, who were more deeply influenced by Confucianism and Confucian ritual styles, even if they performed rituals that should be considered to belong to popular religion. Women consistently formed the core of the clientele of the shamans. They were less exposed to the elite literate culture, which had less to offer them and hardly addressed their particular needs. Shamans, for instance, were called when children were sick, when mothers did not have enough milk to feed their babies, or when infants were unusually naughty (Walraven 1999, 186).

Outline of the Universe as Seen in Popular Religion

Before surveying the specific rituals and practices of popular religion, considering the view of the universe that roughly determined its structure in Chosŏn will be helpful. All aspects of human life

were thought to be influenced by the invisible force of numerous deities and spirits. These were almost all imagined to be anthropomorphic or at least to act according to emotions that were quite like those of human beings. Rituals would be needed to placate their anger and dissatisfaction and move them to bestow blessings rather than venting their anger. Of particular importance were ancestral spirits and the unquiet dead, the spirits of persons who had died an unnatural death before they had completed their natural lifespan, such as victims of war, famine, pestilence, or accidents. The frustrations of these spirits were held to be the cause of all kinds of human misfortune, as was the wrath of deities whose sacrifices had been neglected or who had otherwise been offended. Taking away these frustrations and resolving the wrath of the gods, thereby ensuring the well-being of the living, was the aim of the practices of popular religion. This was generally done by placating the invisible forces rather than by exorcism (although that, too, had a minor place in the array of practices). Spatially, spirits and gods could be found in any place, but mountains, seen in many cultures as a connection between heaven and earth, were held to be highly numinous. People everywhere in Chosŏn venerated mountain gods (*sansin* or *sansillyŏng*) as the tutelary deities of particular localities.

Such was the worldview behind popular religious practices and specific shamanic rituals. Not only found among ordinary people, it was present, to some degree, among all social layers. The way of dealing with it varied, and a salient example is the treatment of the unquiet dead, which was a concern of shamans as well as of Buddhist priests and Confucian officials. In the capital, Hansŏng (present-day Seoul), shamans refer to these spirits as *yŏngsan* (Kim Hŏnsŏn 2020, 70). To deal with the nefarious consequences of the accumulated wrath of war dead not properly buried, causing epidemics and inauspicious events such as a fire in a royal palace, the Chosŏn government in 1401 decided to institute the *yŏje* ritual, which continued to be performed by Confucian officials until the early twentieth century, for the benefit of fifteen categories of restless spirits that were very similar to the *yŏngsan* (Walraven 1993, 71–75). For the same kind of spirits, Buddhist priests would perform the *suryukchae* ritual, literally the ritual for [the spirits] of water and land (Mihwa Choi 2009; Teiser 1983). Their death was vividly depicted in the Nectar Ritual Paintings (*kamnot'aeng*) produced from the mid-sixteenth century and often commissioned by palace ladies. These paintings depicted the Buddhist ritual needed to placate the dead and shamans performing their rites (Kang Woo-bang 1993). Earlier, the government had the ritual performed for more than a century for the hundreds of members of the previous royal house, the Wangs, whom it had killed *en masse* to prevent Koryŏ's restoration (Eugene Y. Park 2018, chapter 1; Mihwa Choi 2009). In the centuries that followed; however, the government instead had the ritual performed to assuage unrest among the population caused by raging epidemics.

The Elimination of Shamans from State Rituals and Their Relegation to the Private Sphere

Already in Koryŏ, the literate elite started to distance itself from the activities of the shamans (although the latter continued to serve the government in an official capacity). One example should suffice. The eminent statesman Yi Kyubo (1168–1241) wrote a poem called “An Old Shaman” (*Nomu p'yŏn*) about a *mudang* living near his house (*Tongguk Yi Sangguk chip, kwŏn 2, 2b–4a*; Yi Nŭnghwa 2008, 110–15). He ridiculed that, with her lined face and greying hair, she dared to claim that Indra, the supreme Buddhist celestial deity, descended in her body and that she had adorned the walls of her house with garish paintings of gods and pictures of star constellations. All this would lead simple, innocent people astray. He also objected to the ungodly din of the rituals, with their insistent drumming, and to the “bizarre” songs the shaman sang. Fortunately, he

noted, the government had issued an order expelling all shamans from the capital, and he admirably mentioned Ham Yuil (1106–85), who, as a local magistrate, had taken firm (and violent) action against shamanic practices. Together with its prose introduction, this poem contains several themes that remained relevant almost until the end of Chosŏn. Elite scholars like Yi Kyubo could not accept that the shamans upset the social order, with uneducated women arrogating to themselves the authority of mighty deities or former monarchs whose messages they claimed to transmit. Moreover, their rituals suggested that the common people could obtain blessings while neglecting the (Confucian) morality that encouraged them to know their station and accept hardship due to Heaven's Will. The style of the rituals, with loud music and colorful depictions of deities and spirits, also conflicted with the serene decorum Confucians thought proper. As confirmed by Pierre Bourdieu, taste is one element that sets social classes apart and contributes to defining popular religion (Bourdieu 1987).

In Chosŏn, the shamans increasingly lost their role in state rituals and official recognition of their activities. The government made concerted efforts to outlaw all kinds of rituals that did not conform to ritual handbooks, labeling them “illicit rituals” (*ũmsa*). In particular, the term referred to rituals performed for officially recognized spirits by persons who did not possess the proper status to do so. At times, Confucian scholars (*yusaeng*) without official functions initiated the suppression of such cults, and they did not hesitate to use extreme violence, burning down shrines deemed improper. Thus, in 1566, Confucian scholars incensed by the sight of men and women in mixed company and in large numbers praying for luck at a shrine on Mount Songak near Kaesŏng set it ablaze (Yi Nŭnghwa 2008, 384). Such persecution, based on the perception that shamanic ritual was a waste of resources and did not accord with proper morality, substantially changed Chosŏn's ceremonial landscape but never led to the complete eradication of popular religion and shamanism.

Strident condemnation of illicit worship by Confucian scholars and officials should not create the impression that they were wholly opposed to any form of the veneration of invisible forces. Ritual codes specified such worship at the altar for the deities of Land and Grain (Sajik, who were metonymically identified with the nation), for Wind and Clouds, Thunder and Rain, at a special Rain Altar, for Mount Samgak, the mountain that protected Hansŏng in the north, for the Han River that ran south of the capital, for mountains and rivers across the land, and at the Sŏnningdan (an altar for the promotion of agriculture), Sŏnjamdan (for the promotion of sericulture), and at the Chongmyo, the royal ancestral shrine (*Sinbo sugyo chimnok*, 238). In the palace grounds and elsewhere, there were countless shrines (*myo*), ancestral shrines (*kung*), and ceremonial halls (*chŏn*) for the spirits (*hon*) of dead royals, including many women (*Tongguk yŏji pigo*, *kwŏn* 1, 116–24). The existence, at least for a limited period, of spirits of the dead was not categorically denied, although the preferred way of dealing with them differed from that of the shamans. Unless they were of persons to whom the living owed deference or were close family members like princesses, such spirits were not deemed worthy of veneration and were best ignored—certainly not to be feared. Government worship of the unquiet dead in the *yŏje* ritual was, for most of the period, the limit of what was admissible, and that, too, was at least in part performed to reassure popular sentiment at times when epidemics raged. Still, the continued performance of this ritual until the first decade of the twentieth century contributed to the blurring of the exact borderline between official ideology and popular religion.

Despite the negative attitude toward shamans of thirteenth-century literati such as Yi Kyubo, the *yangban* class still trusted shamans in the early fifteenth century. Reflecting such an attitude is the fact that *yangban* households did not immediately abandon the tradition of keeping the ancestral tablets of their forebears, the most sacred objects in the Confucian veneration of ancestors, in

the shrines of shamans or Buddhist monasteries (Han Ugün 1976). Of course, this, too, became taboo in due time. After about a century, urged by the government, elite families started creating their own ancestral shrines.

In the first decades following the founding of Chosŏn, the government still regularly employed shamans. Most prominent was the *kungmu*, which may be translated as state or royal shaman. In 1426, the Censorate urged abolishing the *kungmu*'s function and dismissing other shamans of lower status. However, 17 years later, in 1443, according to the veritable records (*sillok*), there still was a *kungmu* in the capital (Ch'oe Chongsŏng 2002). In due time, the office of *kungmu* disappeared, but the use of the term continued for shamans who, in a private capacity, served the court, particularly the ladies of the court. Such continuity is but one instance of a general trend: rituals that did not conform to Confucian standards, not only those of the shamans but also Buddhist ceremonies, were still performed and sometimes flourished—but as private events no longer on behalf of the state. A prime example is King Chŏngjo's (r. 1776–1800) dedicating a Buddhist monastery to his father, Prince Sado (1735–62), who suffered a tragic death. Chŏngjo's gesture was "private" in the sense that he had become the posthumously adopted son of his uncle, Sado's uncle, and in the veritable records, the monastery appears only in the context of the uniforms of its monks, who also performed military duties. Indeed, shamans continued to visit the royal palaces. Queen Myŏngsŏng (1851–95), the first wife of King Kojong, was famous as a patron of the shamans. Even after her murder by the Japanese, shamans were frequent visitors to royal palaces at least until 1907, that is two years after Japan turned Korea into a protectorate (Walraven 1995).

Not only forbidding shamans from entering the sacred confines of Hansŏng, but laws also prohibited sacrifices to any deity of popular religion (*sinsa*) in a radius of five *li* (about two kilometers) from the capital (*Sinbo sugyo chimnok*, 409). There was a concerted striving to spatially separate manifestations of popular religion from the court. The Chosŏn state never completely suppressed popular religion as long as it knew its place. Thus, in 1730, court ladies and *mudang* were punished with banishment because they had dared to hold a ritual near the king's route to a royal tomb (*Sinbo sugyo chimnok*, 422). Such rituals would remain unpunished only if they kept a proper distance from the monarch and his court.

Chosŏn was predominantly an agricultural society much dependent on timely rainfall. Any threat of severe drought compelled the government to take some ritual action, and early Chosŏn delegated this to shamans, properly rewarding them when their intervention was successful. Such a role of shamans invoked the ire of Confucian scholar-officials who ensured this ceased in due time. Although the regular participation of shamans probably ended much earlier, the last instance of them performing a rain ritual for the central government dates to 1638 (Ch'oe Chongsŏng 2002). In the countryside, however, shamans took part in rain rituals throughout Chosŏn, sometimes with the connivance of local magistrates (Walraven 1999, 174). At the same time, the government continued to have rain rituals performed in an unassailable Confucian style (Choi Byonghyon 2010, 452–59).

Although what happened in the provinces was of less concern than what transpired in Hansŏng, the central site of royal authority, the government made a serious attempt to bring the worship of local guardian deities in the provinces under control. These deities were generally mountain gods but often known as Sŏnghwang, the Korean pronunciation of Chinese *chenghuang*, literally the gods of the city walls and moats. In Korea, the term became a general appellation for local guardian deities venerated by the entire population of particular localities. To the government, the practice was *ŭmsa* that should be stopped. Instead, the Chosŏn state devised a bureaucratic structure, codified in the ritual handbooks, in which the *sŏnghwang* was the spiritual counterpart of the local magistrate; no one else should worship them (Walraven 1999, 174–77). This move

was only partly successful. Local people and shamans continued to worship local guardian deities they called *sŏnghwang*, usually simplified to *sŏnang*. These deities received veneration not at the official *sŏnghwang* altar but at places called *sŏnangdang*. Despite the suffix *-dang* (hall, shrine), these were generally more natural places of worship, such as an imposing tree or a stone cairn.

Local guardians were sometimes also identified with historical persons, ideally martial figures, who had met with an untimely end, leaving them with a residue of spiritual power that might be marshaled to protect the living. The government attempted to undo the anthropomorphizing of deities worshipped as local guardians with images of the gods and their spouses. One example of a historical hero worshipped as a tutelary deity was the general and Meritorious Subject Sin Sunggyŏm (d. 927), who had sacrificed his own life to save King T'aejo (Wang Kŏn; r. 918–43), the founder of Koryŏ. He enjoyed popular worship as the *sŏnghwang* of Koksŏng, his native place. This custom created some ambiguity because the official *sŏnghwang* was not supposed to have such a personal character. The government nonetheless supported Sin Sunggyŏm's veneration at a special shrine, Tŏgyangsa (not the regular Sŏnghwang Altar of the ritual handbooks), which presented him as a paragon of the Confucian virtue of loyalty (*Chodurok*, 27a). His continued popular veneration was testimony to the resilience of popular beliefs.

The government did not condemn the veneration of images in all cases. In the eighteenth century, the government attempted to curb the tendency of lineages to create new shrines where a likeness of a famous forebear was venerated (*Sinbo sugyo chimnok*, 232). However, the practice might be condoned if done by persons whose status entitled them to it. As the case of Sin Sunggyŏm also suggests, this might create ambiguity and sometimes misunderstandings. In 1904, a campaign to root out *ŭmsa* destroyed an image of the celebrated scholar Yi Saek (1328–96). His portrait, however, was enshrined in a small shrine (still in existence, on prime land in the very heart of Seoul) maintained for centuries by the Hansan Yi descent group to which Yi belonged (*Han'gyŏng chir-yak* 1956, 283–84) and therefore fully authorized to pay homage to his likeness. Thus, destroying his image caused the person responsible great embarrassment (Walraven 1995, 112).

Another ambiguous case was the worship of the Chinese God of War Guan Yu (Ko. Kwan U), also venerated as a paragon of loyalty. The worship began at the instigation of the Chinese, who had come to the aid of the Koreans during the Imjin War (East Asian War; 1592–98) and argued that Guan Yu had lent supernatural support in battles—therefore meriting worship by the Koreans. Official worship was conducted at the Tongmyo (Eastern Shrine) and the Nammyo (Southern Shrine) in the capital area, while homage was also paid to Kwan U at military events. But as true in China (ter Haar 2017), the worship of Kwan U spread among the general population, and the nature of the deity changed, turning him, among other things, into a god of wealth and a moral example. Accordingly, by the end of the nineteenth century, merchants would visit the Nammyo in great numbers in the tenth lunar month of the year, whereas at the capital's Six Markets (Yugŭijŏn), they worshipped a clay image of Kwan U in a small shrine next to the Posin'gak, the site of the City Bell (Yi Nŭnghwa 1981, 314, 487). Kwan U had at the time garnered a great following in a morality cult that supported Confucian values and also enjoyed the court's support (Walraven 2000, 191–95; Jihyun Kim 2020).

But this did not mean that the authorities encouraged all and sundry to worship Kwan U in any way they liked. In 1761, King Yŏngjo (r. 1724–76) noted that lately, at the Tongmyo and Nammyo, there had been “illicit worship” of “King Kwan” (Kwan-wang, Kwan U's official title) and ordered to put an end to it (*Yŏngjo sillok* 1761/12/13 entry 3). Yet much later, in 1904, to stamp out illicit cults, the police impounded 3,000 images of Kwan U in Hansŏng. This suggests that, at the time, this popular cult in the city of roughly 200,000 inhabitants was very widespread and had only grown in the intervening years. That Kwan U deserved to be venerated in the eyes of government

officials is confirmed by the fact that the confiscated images were respectfully deposited in the official shrines (Walraven 1995, 127).

Evidence that shamans, too, venerated Kwan U comes from an unexpected corner. Queen Myōngsōng put great trust in two shamans, who both claimed to be possessed by Kwan U, and thanks to their protection by the queen resided in shrines that were called Pungmyo (Northern Shrine) and Sōmyo (Western Shrine), suggesting equivalence with the Tongmyo and Nammyo (Yi Nūnghwa 2008, 140–41). This shows, once again, that popular religion and officially recognized religion were not entirely separate universes, even though the authorities might forcefully suppress the former.

It is tempting to describe official efforts to suppress shamanic rituals as the marginalization of shamanism, but this would be misleading. Shaman rituals and popular religion generally remained meaningful to most of the population, including the court women (Ch'oe Kilsōng 1981, 83–90). In the eighteenth century, the encyclopaedist Yi Ik (1681–1763) noted that shamans still frequented royal palaces and provincial offices (Yi Nūnghwa 2008, 139).

Popular Rituals Performed by Others than the Shamans

Important as the shamans were for popular religion, they were not the only persons who could commune with the invisible world and conduct rituals. Ordinary women would also address prayers to higher forces accompanied by simple offerings like a bowl of pure water. During shaman rituals for the dead, female relatives of the deceased might also become possessed by his or her spirit and transmit messages specifying the desires and complaints of the dead. Children who suffered from smallpox were supposed to be possessed by the much-feared and much-respected smallpox deities. Dallet wrote in his nineteenth-century history of the Catholic Church in Chosōn, which was based on the reports of missionaries who had illegally entered the country: “Everyone is convinced that during the illness the afflicted children are in communication with the spirits, that they have the gift of second sight, and that they perceive through the walls what goes on, even if it is at a great distance” (Dallet 1874, vol. 1, cxlviii). Dallet incidentally was convinced that some of the spirits were real: “[T]hat there are true sorcerers, and especially sorceresses [*mudang*], who by magical rituals establish contact with infernal powers, that is an absolutely incontrovertible fact” (Dallet 1874, vol. 1, cl).

Rituals similar to those of the shamans were also conducted by blind exorcists, who had their roots in Daoist traditions. Although Daoism in Korea never developed into a full-fledged institutionalized religion the way it did in China, its influence was not negligible, and practices of Daoist derivation cannot be ignored in a survey of popular religion. One of the most prominent scholars of Chinese Daoism, the late Kristofer Schipper, held that Korean shamanism was nothing but a form of popular Daoism (personal communication). In Koryō, the government frequently had Daoist rituals performed.

In Chosōn, there still existed blind exorcists with Daoist roots. They drove away or prevented calamities by reciting scriptures of both Buddhist and Daoist origin, sometimes in rituals in which *mudang*, who tended to approach the invisible world in a more placatory way, also participated. The exorcists were blind and accordingly called *maengin*, *changnim* (both meaning blind person), or *p'ansu* (Figure 14.2). Although they offered services such as praying for good luck or rain and healing, which also were part of the tasks of the *mudang*, they were treated differently. They were allowed entrance to the capital and were famous for knowing their way everywhere in Hansōng without the benefit of eyesight. Also, they would always be addressed in polite language by *yangban*, as if they were *chungin* (members of the status group comprising government-employed professionals). Typically, *maengin* were male, although some women were also among them (Yi



Figure 14.2 Blind exorcist (*p'ansu*) at work, as depicted by Kisan Kim Chun'gün. Photo © NRICH/ Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK), Hamburg.

Nūnghwa 1981, 262). It is doubtful, however, that they were shown the same deference as the men. Over the centuries, the male *maengin*, too, gradually declined in status. In 1745, Yōngjo had *maengin* rituals (*maengje*), scripture reciting rituals, *maengin* rituals to pray for rain (*maengin kiuje*), and *maengin* scripture rituals held when the king changed residence (but had not been performed for a long time) struck from the roster of the Ritual Office, the T'aesangsi (Yi Nūnghwa 1981, 265, 463). This does not mean, though, that the *yangban* no longer sought the services of *maengin*. Rather, the status of the *maengin* ritual as a form of popular religion was secure.

Thus, a popular ritual of Daoist derivation survived in the pursuit of private goals, also of the members of the *yangban* class. The constellation of Ch'ilsōng, literally the “Seven Stars” (of Ursa Major), was worshipped as an astral deity in Daoism. In early Chosōn, a Daoist government office, Sogyōksō oversaw the veneration of Ch'ilsōng before being discontinued after the Imjin War (Yi Nūnghwa 1981, 142–43, 410). Even in the early nineteenth century, though, encyclopaedist Yi Kyugyōng (1788–1856) mentioned that literati would privately go to a Ch'ilsōng shrine on Mount Inwang located at the northwestern periphery of Hansōng to pray that they would come first in the government examination to recruit new officials (Yi Nūnghwa 1981, 293, 477). Apart from that, Ch'ilsōng received worship by shamans and in Buddhist monasteries.

The House as a Sacred Space

Unsurprisingly, the house, as the fundamental environment where daily life takes place, occupied a central place in popular religious rituals, partly performed by household members and partly by shamans. The god of the house itself and, by extension, the guardian of the male head of the house and the household as a whole was Sōngju. He was worshipped as a piece of paper with rice affixed to the main beam of the house, the latter the metonymical representation of the desired sturdiness of the house and family (Walraven 1994, 143–200). Every tenth lunar month, a shaman should invite the god again to the house and renew the representation of the deity (Sasse 2022, 54). The women's quarters maintained a paper envelope covered by a paper monk's cap (*kokkal*), identified with the Buddhist heavenly deity Indra (Ko. Chesōk), whom Korean shamans had fully integrated

into their pantheon as a deity in charge of childbearing, children's health, and health and fertility in general. Likewise venerated in the women's quarters was the Birth Grandmother (Samsin halmōni). Outside, in a corner of the courtyard, there would be a representation of the god of the site of the house in the form of a sheaf of straw. Around the house, there were also a female deity of the toilet, sometimes called Puch'ul kaksi, "Miss Squatting Board," and many other lesser spirits, including the kitchen god (Chowang) and the gate god (Walraven 1994, 192; Choi Jong Seong 2015). Taking care of all these spirits was as much the task of the women of the household as of the *mudang* called in on special occasions. As Laurel Kendall wrote of the twentieth century, "Shaman and housewife perform analogous tasks and deal with the same spirits (Kendall 1985, 166), which undoubtedly also applied to earlier periods.

Village and District Rituals

The village was one of the primary forms of communal life, cemented by the cult of village guardian deities. Written sources from Chosŏn rarely mention this form of popular religion, but village rituals and beliefs—of which evidence from the first half of the twentieth century abounds—had existed in a quite similar form for centuries. A very early description of a "Five Dragons Shrine" (Oryongmyo) in a book written about Korea by a Chinese envoy who visited Koryŏ in 1123 still broadly fits the current state of that village shrine on the island Sŏnyudo in North Chŏlla Province (Lee Kyung Yup 2015, 20–21; Vermeersch 2016, 140). What changed was that in Chosŏn, men increasingly adopted Confucian-style worship to honor village deities, although *mudang*, too, continued to venerate them in the community festivals. In most cases, the village guardian deity was the god of the mountain near the village. These deities were sometimes identified with historical figures, particularly generals who had died a violent death, and also with the *sŏnghwang*, who, as noted above, were mountain deities rather than true city gods as they were in China.

One of the relatively rare sources from Chosŏn describing local rituals is the nineteenth-century *Tongguk sesigi* (Record of the Seasonal Customs of Korea) by Hong Sŏngmo (Hong Sŏk-mo), who frequently quotes older sources. (Hong's work is available in an English translation, Sasse 2022.) Doing so, Hong describes customs in Kunwi, Kyŏngsang Province, where at the West Mount Peak outside the town was a shrine devoted to the Silla general Kim Yusin (595–673). For the Tano Festival (fifth day of the fifth lunar month), the county's head clerks would lead the people to welcome the deity to the town (Sasse 2022, 48–49; *Sinjŭng Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam, kwŏn* 25). This custom was typical in several respects. A tutelary deity who was not the officially recognized *sŏnghwang* (whom only the magistrate appointed by the central government could worship at a special altar reserved for the purpose) received veneration by the population led by the local clerks—a common pattern throughout Chosŏn.

According to Hong, in Kosŏng, Kangwŏn Province, sacrifices would be offered at the local shrine by persons from the local magistracy (probably the clerks) on the first and fifteenth day of each lunar month. The representation of the deity was a satin mask kept in the shrine. From the twentieth day of the lunar month, the deity would descend in a person from the town, who wearing the mask would dance in the public offices and the streets of the town to be welcomed and entertained in every house. Only on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month would the deity, who was supposed to protect against misfortune, return to the shrine (Sasse 2022, 63). Clearly, the ritual was popular (the form alone in which the deity was represented suffices for that conclusion), with the local clerks playing an important role condoned by the authorities. That a spirit or deity descends in a person who is not a shaman is not unusual. It has often been witnessed in the twentieth century,

and in the nineteenth century, Dallet observed that people treated children suffering from smallpox as if they were smallpox deities themselves, as mentioned earlier.

In Ch'ŏngan in Ch'ungch'ŏng Province, the head of the local clerks would lead the people of the town to bring down two guardian deities (Kuksa, literally the National Preceptor, originally a Buddhist title, and his spouse) from a tree on a nearby mountain in the third lunar month. They would be fêted for 20 days by shamans, and rituals were held for them with loud music "in the county office and at every government office building" (Sasse 2022, 42). The pattern seen here was similar to that seen in other places. The tutelary deity was a mountain god (in this case worshipped in the form of a tree, although the deity was anthropomorphic) and from time to time (once every year or once in two years) escorted down from the mountain by the people from the town and local clerks, assisted by shamans, who would fête them in a raucous fashion that ran counter to Confucian decorum. Yet, the highest authority in place, the magistrate sent by the central government, would condone this, though, at the same time, he kept some distance from forms of worship that might invoke the ire of Confucian stalwarts.

To get a picture of the ubiquity of community rituals, one may also look at rituals of this kind that survived into the twentieth century, as these undoubtedly have roots in the nineteenth century or earlier. A study devoted to the popular beliefs of twentieth-century Seoul counted in 1990 no less than 35 community shrines (Yi Chaegon 1996, 189–97). Many of these shrines were called Pugun-dang. None of the shrines was within the old city walls, the area that the Chosŏn state intended to constitute a kind of Confucian sacred city, free of Buddhist monasteries and *ŭmsa* (Walraven 2000). All this undoubtedly represented forms of popular worship, with a variety of deities that would have no place in Confucian rituals performed in the Munmyo, the national Confucian shrine within the old city walls, or the *hyanggyo* (the local schools in the provinces that were small-scale replicas of the Munmyo). Although part of the rituals performed might be Confucian in style, in most cases, shamans would also be involved in the rituals, and the spirits would not be on the roster of official worship.

Rituals Conducted by Occupational Groups with or without the Aid of Shamans

One form of occupational worship has already been alluded to, involving the provincial government clerks, and those in Hansŏng were no different. One example is the worship of Im Kyŏngŏp (1594–1646), venerated at the Kyosŏgwan, the government agency in the capital charged with printing books. A historical general, Im was the Kyosŏgwan's subject of veneration not so much for any involvement in printing books as his residence in the neighborhood (*Han'gyŏng chiryak* 1956, 291; Walraven 2000, 197).

Rituals were particularly important to people whose work was potentially dangerous or involved an element of chance. A shaman song about the god of the house recorded in the 1920s or 1930s describes some occupational rituals performed by the woodcutters who felled trees for building a house and those who bound together the timber to form rafts before setting them afloat downstream on the Han River to the capital. These rituals were undoubtedly conducted in Chosŏn, as the song mentions the tax payment to a government bureau abolished in 1883. The song provides a good description of what would be involved in popular rituals (Walraven 1994, 165–66):

When they wanted to cut wood,
Would there not be a sacrifice?
Three *mal* and three *toe* of rice cake
Three *toe* and three *hop* of sacrificial rice [they sacrificed].

They slaughtered a whole ox and cut it in pieces.
Clear rice wine and cloudy rice wine [they offered]
And dried pollack complete with the head.
They lit two pairs of yellow wax candles,
And three sheets of paper they burned.
The thirty-three workmen
Washed their hands and feet in the lower pool.
They washed their bodies in the middle pool
And they washed their hair in the upper pool.
[and they prayed]
“We pray, we pray
To the sun- and moon-gods of far-away mountains and nearby mountains
We pray to the Mountain God and to the Spirit of the Earth
That even though we enter these mountains
And cut trees,
You will annoy nor harm us,
That you will help us [to ensure]
That the thirty-three workmen
Will have no diseases of the body or the feet.

The song shows that the work crew conducted a quite elaborate ritual and took care to ritually purify themselves for the sacrifice—without the aid of ritual specialists. When the raft was set afloat, a simpler ritual was also performed, again without the intervention of shamans. Once the construction work for the house began, moreover, another ritual had to be performed by the builders, with prayers for the wealth and fame of the occupants of the house and also for the safety of the workers: “Please assist us, so that the carpenters will not hurt themselves with their tools” (Walraven 1994, 180).

Part of the ritual conducted by the woodcutters was motivated by the belief that their work constituted an invasion of the numinous realm of the mountains and might invoke the ire of the mountain deities (or perhaps attract tigers, who sometimes were identified with the mountain god). This belief also applied to the men who would go into the mountains to dig the roots of wild ginseng—men because the occupation emphatically excluded women. Every year in spring, before the ginseng diggers would enter the mountains for the first time, they would have a small ritual (*kosa*) with the usual offerings: a pig’s head, rice cake, and rice wine.

The danger and hardship involved in their job performance prompted the boatmen who steered the rafts of timber down the Han River to pray for safety. Similarly, the sailors who ventured out to the open sea as merchants or fishermen had recourse to ritual to ensure safe passage and profit. They might do this simply, by themselves, but also with the help of shamans. There is a description of the latter in a Chinese poem by Yi Kōnch’ang (1852–98), in which the deity worshipped speaks through the mouth of the shaman and promises the sailors the “treasures of the water palace [of the dragon king],” that is an abundant catch of fish (Im Hyōngt’aek 1992, 308). Rituals for merchant ships’ safe sailing were also considered indispensable (Tsuruya 1908, 55). Rituals for success in fishing were not only devoted to dragon deities (water gods) but also to the aforementioned Im Kyōngōp, the guardian deity of the Kyosōgwan. For remaining loyal to China proper’s Ming dynasty (1368–1644) when the rising Manchu Qing dynasty (1616–1912; Later Jin until 1636) forced Chosōn’s capitulation and allegiance, he paid for it with his life. For his loyalty, in the centuries that followed, Im remained the subject of worship at government-approved shrines (Saeyoung Park 2014): the Ch’ungnyōlsa in his home county, Ch’ungju, Ch’ungch’ong Province (*Chodurok*, 15a); the Sungūijōn in Majōn, Kyōnggi Province (*Chodurok*, 14a); and the

Hyönch'ungsa in Ŭiju, P'yongan Province (*Chodurok*, 32b). The fishermen venerated Im because while serving as a naval commander, he supposedly discovered a better way to catch yellow corvina, a popular fish in Korean cuisine. The various forms of his worship show that at times, popular and elite worship shaded into one another.

Final Thoughts

The rituals of popular religion were often suppressed by the government or at least regarded negatively by the literati. Nevertheless, they survived in many forms, sometimes disguised by a light Confucian veneer. The blurring of the borderline between popular practices and the worldview of the elite that sometimes occurred contributed to this. Popular religion remained part of the warp and woof of Chosŏn society. Shamans continued to visit the houses of the *yangban* and the royal palaces, although primarily catering to the women. Moreover, despite official condemnation of their beliefs and rituals, shamans can be said to have supported the state and elite ideology. The prayers of the shamans were for the birth of children who would become loyal subjects (*ch'ungsin*), filial sons (*hyoja*), and virtuous women (*yöllyŏ*), asserting essential Confucian virtues. The vernacular shaman songs (*muga*) also affirmed and propagated the elite view of the history, territory, and culture of Chosŏn, thus contributing to the emergence of national consciousness among all layers of the population (Walraven 2010).

It should be evident from the above discussion that Chosŏn's popular religion encompassed much more than only shamanism. At almost every level of society, there existed forms of ritual and worship, some of which were part of daily routines, especially in the case of women, and performed without the intervention of shamans. The latter were only called in on special days or when people had to deal with crises. When the totality of Chosŏn's popular religious practices is considered, including the popular rituals in which shamans did not take part, some popular Buddhist practices, and popular rituals of Daoist derivation, it becomes clear that the still limited body of scholarship in no way reflects the importance popular religion had in the daily goings-on of life in Chosŏn.

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1987. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Harvard University Press.
- Ch'oe Chongsŏng [Jong Seong Choi]. 2002. *Chosŏnjo musok kukhaeng ūrye yŏn'gu*. Ilchisa.
- Ch'oe Kilsŏng. 1981. *Han'guk musok non*. Hyŏngsŏl ch'ulp'ansa.
- Chodurok*. Undated woodblock print. Referenced in *Bibliographie coréenne*. By Maurice Courant, 1894–1901, no. 1156. Ernest Leroux.
- Choi Byonghyon. 2010. *Admonitions on Governing the People: Manual for All Administrators*. University of California Press.
- Choi, Jong Seong [Ch'oe Chongsŏng]. 2015. "Family Popular Beliefs." In *Korean Popular Beliefs*, edited by Yong Bhum Yi, Kyung Yup Lee, Jong Seong Choi, and Boudewijn Walraven, 55–80. Jimoondang.
- Choi, Mihwa. 2009. "State Suppression of Buddhism and Royal Patronage of the Ritual of Water and Land in the Early Chosŏn Dynasty." *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 22, no. 2: 181–214.
- Dallet, Charles. 1874. *Histoire de l'église de Corée*. Victor Palmé.
- ter Haar, B. J. 2017. *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero*. Oxford University Press.
- Hamayon, Roberte N. 1993. "Are 'Trance,' 'Ecstasy' and Similar Concepts Appropriate in the Study of Shamanism?" In *Shamanism in Performing Arts*, edited by Tae-gon Kim and Mihály Hoppál with Otto J. von Sandovszky, 17–34. Akademiai Kiado.
- Han Ugŭn. 1976. "Chosŏn wangjo ch'ogi e issŏsŏ ūi yugyo inyŏm ūi silch'ŏn kwa sinang chonggyo: saje munje rŭl chungsim ūro." *Han'guk saron* 3: 147–228.
- Han'gyŏng chiriyak*. 1956. Reprint. Seoul t'ŭkpyŏlsi sa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe.

- Hwang Hyŏn. 1980. (*Chŏnyŏk*) *Maech'ŏn yarok, kwŏn chi sang*. Translated by Im Pyŏngju. Ch'ŏnggu munusa.
- Im Hyŏngt'aek. 1992. *Yijo sidae sŏsasi, sang*. Ch'angjak kwa pip'yŏngsa.
- Kang, Woo-bang. 1993. "Ritual and Art During the Eighteenth Century." In *Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor and Simplicity*, edited by Hongnam Kim, 79–98. Weatherhill.
- Kendall, Laurel. 1985. *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Kim Hŏnsŏn. 2020. *Chŏnt'ong Hanyang kut sin'ga chip*. Pogosa.
- Kim, Jihyun. 2020. "Enlightenment on the Spirit-Altar: Eschatology and Restoration of Morality at the King Kwan Shrine in *Fin de Siècle* Seoul." *Religions* 11, no. 6: 273.
- Lee, Kyung Yup. 2015. "Village Beliefs." In *Korean Popular Beliefs*, by Yong Bhum Yi, Kyung Yup Lee, Jong Seong Choi, and Boudewijn Walraven, 17–53. Jimoondang.
- Park, Eugene Y. 2018. *A Genealogy of Dissent: The Progeny of Fallen Royals in Chosŏn Korea*. Stanford University Press.
- Park, Saeyoung. 2014. "Memory, Counternarrative, and the Body Politic in Post-Imjin War Chosŏn Korea." *Journal of Korean Studies* 19, no. 1: 153–78.
- Sasse, Werner. 2022. *Record of the Seasonal Customs of Korea: Tongguk sesigi by Toae Hong Sŏk-mo*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Seo, Dae-seok. 2000. *Myths of Korea*. Edited by Peter H. Lee. Jimoondang International.
- Sinbo sugyo chimnok: Chosŏn hugi sae pŏmnyŏng moŏm*. 2000. With translations and annotations by the Han'guk yŏksa yŏn'guhoe. Ch'ŏngnyŏnsa.
- Sinjŏng Tongguk yŏji sŏngnam*. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/bZSPD>.
- Teiser, Stephen F. 1983. *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*. Princeton University Press.
- Tongguk Yi Sangguk chip*. 1958. By Yi Kyubo. Reprint. Tongguk munhwasa.
- Tongguk yŏji pigo*. 1956. Seoul t'ŭkpyŏlsi sa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe.
- Tsuruya Kairyū. 1908. *Chōsen no shūkyō*. Shūkyō kenkyūkai.
- Vermeersch, Sem. 2016. *A Chinese Traveler in Medieval Korea: Xu Jing's Illustrated Account of the Xuanhe Embassy to Koryŏ*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Walraven, Boudewijn. 1993. "Confucians and Restless Spirits." In *Conflict and Accommodation in Early Modern East Asia: Essays in Honour of Erik Zürcher*, edited by Leonard Blussé and Harriet Zurndorfer, 71–93. Brill.
- Walraven, Boudewijn. 1994. *Songs of the Shaman: The Ritual Chants of the Korean Mudang*. Kegan Paul International.
- Walraven, Boudewijn. 1995. "Shamans and Popular Religion around 1900." In *Religions in Traditional Korea*, edited by Henrik H. Sørensen, 107–30. The Seminar for Buddhist Studies.
- Walraven, Boudewijn. 1999. "Popular Religion in a Confucianized State." In *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*, edited by JaHyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler, 160–98. Harvard University Asia Center.
- Walraven, Boudewijn. 2000. "Religion and the City: Seoul in the Nineteenth Century." *Review of Korean Studies* 3, no. 1: 178–206.
- Walraven, Boudewijn. 2009. "National Pantheon, Regional Deities, Personal Spirits? *Mushindo*, *Sŏngsu*, and the Nature of Korean Shamanism." *Asian Ethnology* 68, no. 1: 55–80.
- Walraven, Boudewijn. 2010. "Divine Territory: Shaman Songs, Elite Culture and the Nation." *Korean Histories* 2, no. 2: 42–57. Available at: https://koreanhistorieswebsite.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/kh2_2_walraven_divine_territory.pdf.
- Walraven, Boudewijn. 2015. "The History of Korean Folk Beliefs and Popular Religion." In *Korean Popular Beliefs*, edited by Yong Bhum Yi, Kyung Yup Lee, Jong Seong Choi, and Boudewijn Walraven, 201–19. Jimoondang.
- Yi Chaegon. 1996. *Sŏul ūi min'gan sinang*. Paeksan ch'ulp'ansa.
- Yi Nŏnghwa. 1981. *Chosŏn Togyosa*. With Korean translation by Yi Chongŭn. Posŏng munhwasa.
- Yi Nŏnghwa. 2008. *Chosŏn musok ko*. With Korean translation and annotations by Sŏ Yŏngdae. Ch'angbi.
- Yi, Yong Bhum. 2015. "Understanding Korean Popular Beliefs." In *Korean Popular Beliefs*, by Yong Bhum Yi, Kyung Yup Lee, Jong Seong Choi, and Boudewijn Walraven, 1–14. Jimoondang.
- Yŏngjo sillok*. In *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*. Available at: <https://sillok.history.go.kr/main/main.do>.