Chapter 13

Women and Divination in Contemporary Korea

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1 Introduction

Divination has a key role in South Korean society, even today. Many people annually go to a diviner to find out what the new year holds in store for them. Koreans, usually women, go when there are difficult life choices to be made (pertaining to marriage, career change, moving, or children’s impending college admissions), or if they find themselves in challenging situations (such as depression, other illness, economic problems or family problems). Diviners can be instrumental in determining if a couple would be a good marriage match (kunghap), selecting an auspicious date for a birth (in the case of planned C-sections), wedding, or other important event, or choosing a name for a newborn baby or a business that is about to be launched. This situation may seem incongruous with the twenty-first century image of South Korea as a high-tech, economically developed country, but upon closer examination, we see how the persistence of divination and new adaptations of it reflect a unique need for women’s space and agency.

This chapter looks at some Korean1 women under the age of fifty and their experiences with divination. In contrast with older generations, women of the “386 generation”2 and their younger counterparts came of age at a time when South Korea was already industrialized, and they are less traditional in their outlook on life. I examine why these younger women continue to consult diviners and what benefits they gain from divination. The mere mention of my research topic seemed to interest women who wanted to share their experiences and insights with me. It is from this angle that I approach my chapter. I do not profess any expertise on divination. Rather, my interest in divination comes from an examination of the reasons why so many educated women, especially those under the age of fifty, go to diviners.

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1 Hereon, I will refer to South Korean and South Koreans interchangeably as Korean and Koreans.

2 The “386 generation” refers to people who were in their 30s in the early post-democratization era, that is, who were born in the 1960s and went to university in the 1980s.
Barbara Young, who conducted exhaustive research on divination in Seoul in the late 1970s, has noted that women with college degrees tend to go to diviners as much as those with less formal education. According to Young, diviners “analyze the past, predict the future, diagnose causes of problems, and give advice.” She also said divination “provides a social network, with its own sources of information and support; and for an even greater number it serves as a counseling service and family support system.” We see that diviners do more than just make predictions. They provide guidance and solace to their clients, far exceeding the simple act of telling the future.

2 Types of Divination in South Korea

While the term *chŏmjgegi* (or the more colloquial *chŏmjaengi*) can denote all types of “fortune-tellers,” some people use more specific terms depending on the diviner’s technique. The first kind is commonly called *sajujaengi*, but the term that *saju* diviners often use for themselves is *chŏrhakka* or *chŏrhakja*, meaning “philosopher.” *Saju* diviners (in a practice also called “horoscopic divination”) interpret horoscopes based on a person’s *saju* (“four pillars,” that is, the year, month, day, and time of one’s birth) by consulting Chinese classics such as the *Classic of Changes* (K: Chuyŏk, Ch: Yijing). David Kim was told by one diviner that one’s *saju* is like a “cosmic bar code” that forever marks who they are. But within this sense of fatalism is the possibility of altering one’s course. Another diviner told Kim that divination is “about learning how to control time—not only one’s personal time, but also being in time.” For example, “[i]t is about matching time and telling the patron when and where are the best times to do what.” This way, one can have some sense of agency and empowerment by mitigating negative factors and ensuring the best possible outcome.

Although *saju* divination may entail an interpretation of the “cosmic code,” diviners today may refer instead to adaptations in modern Korean or perhaps even a computer program that does the work for them. A *saju* diviner may be

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3 See Young, “City Women and Divination,” 147–148. Additionally, she reported in her dissertation that women aged 30–49 tended to go more often than women in other age groups; see “Spirits and Other Signs,” 396. Even three decades later, this age group seems to seek divination more often.

4 Young, “Spirits and Other Signs,” 39.

5 Young, “City Women and Divination,” 148.


7 Ibid., 144.