Below the roofline of the Choson Dynasty's national shrine a wooden plaque announces that this is "Kuksadang."

Two hours, four hours, or a whole day—just right for a trip to a remote mountain village just a few minutes away from downtown Seoul. It's the secluded home of a few quasi-Buddhist-flavored temples, the Choson Dynasty's national shrine, and Meditation Rock. The village is in a valley on the slope of Mount Inwang, where the spirits dwell, in the realm of the *mudang*, Korea's shaman sorceress.

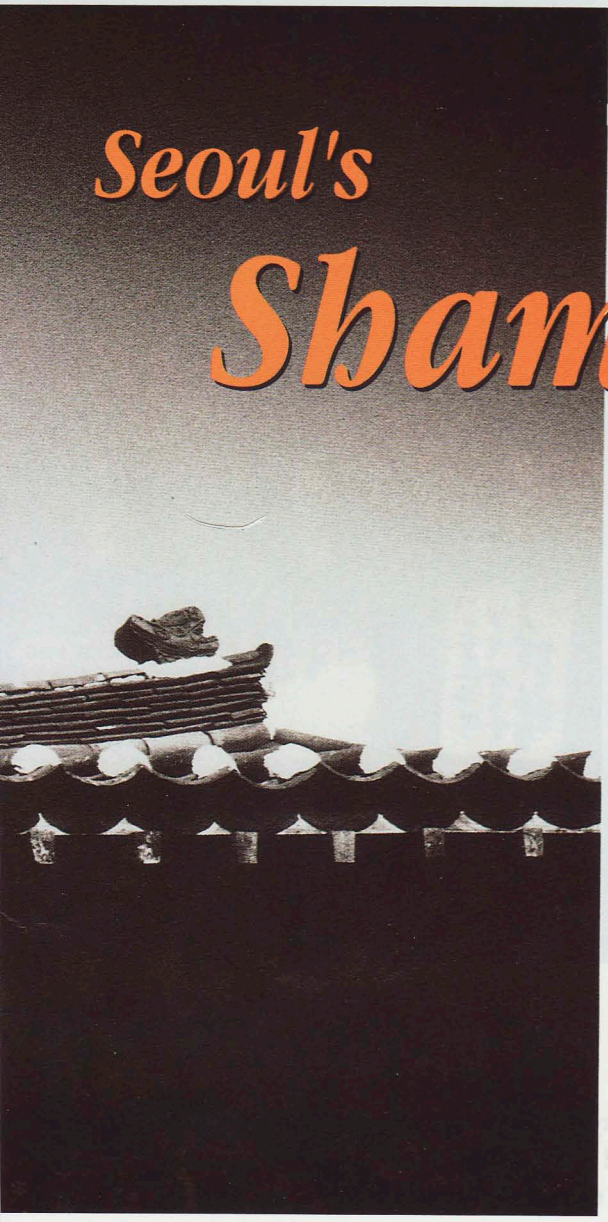
From your entrance through Inwangsa's temple gate, Seoul is no more—you have spirited yourself into another world. Now it is all trees and winding, climbing paths and tumbling streams and magpies and the gods.

From the temple gate you will see swastikas on some of the small buildings. This symbol indicates that the building is a Buddhist temple. The temples in this village, though, are either more or less than Buddhist, depending on your viewpoint. The monks are here more to assist people in their supplication to the deities for worldly favors than to guide people to virtue or a spiritually rewarding life. They are here to complement the *kut*, a shaman rite.

The most prominent temple in this village is Inwangsa. In its main hall visitors entreat the Buddha before they go off to Kuksadang for the *kut* or to Meditation Rock for individual prayers to the spirits.

A battered tree with a single limb stands in front of a small temple just above Inwangsa. People have tied long pieces of fabric in bright primary colors around this bough to register their wishes to the spirits. This shaman tree has

Seoul's Shaman Village



An important bit of Choson Dynasty history lives on at Kuksadang, the royal national shrine, where shaman rituals are conducted to this day. Located not far from downtown near a subway stop, the shrine makes an excellent place to visit on an afternoon walking tour.

by John Holstein/photos by Kwon Soon-Pyeong

cousins and ancestors in other lands, from India to Scandinavia to East Siberia, called the "Tree of the World" or "Cosmos Tree" by the people who study these things. Buddha's "Tree of Enlightment" is said to be a descendant of this "Tree of the World" from an earlier Indo-European culture. It is interesting to see the three concepts—the Indo-European, the Buddhist, and the shaman—together here in one village.

Further up the slope is Kuksadang. The original Kuksadang was established on the peak of Namsan (where the octagonal pavilion is now) in the beginning of the 15th century, probably during the reign of T'aejong (r. 1401 – 1418), third king of the Choson Dynasty. The king used this as the state shrine to the nation's guardian deities

An outside view of Kuksadang.

Votive lights are labeled and lit to express the prayers of the supplicants.

The shrine is an expressive symbol of modern Korea. Korea now is a fascinating blend of old and new, a combination of reverence and disregard for the old.

(Mongmyok and Pugak) and other spirits, including the spirit of T'aejo, founder of the dynasty, and the spirit of T'aejo's mentor and advisor, the scholar-monk Muhak Taesa. In fact, the shrine is named in honor of Muhak, whose court-bestowed title was The Nation's Guide (Kuksa).

Through the first half of the dynasty the shrine was used for official state ceremonies at which the king conducted rites to the guardian spirits of the city. However, over the years the shrine was gradually taken over by the shamans, whose power grew as that of the central government weakened. By the end of the dynasty the shrine was used as a hall for shaman *kut*s sponsored by Queen Min and the ladies of her court.

In the twentieth century the Japanese officially annexed Korea, and within a few years they had built their own Shinto shrine on Namsan. Kuksadang, at a higher altitude on Namsan's peak, would have to go since it was inconceivable to the Japanese that Korean shaman spirits could be above Japan's gods of state .

Meanwhile, for centuries Koreans of every social rank had been frequenting Mount Inwang's Meditation Rock (Son-bawi), because this mountain was the dwelling of powerful spirits. The village below the rock was a center for shaman activity, and Kuksadang had by now become a hall for the performance of shaman rites, so this seemed a fitting place for Kuksadang when in 1925 the Japanese insisted it be moved off Namsan's peak.

Ownership of Kuksadang was turned over to the custodian, and he was also given land in this village to locate the reassembled Kuksadang. Land and shrine have now been

passed on to his son, the present proprietor; 70 now, he was brought as an infant to this village from his birthplace on Namsan. He lives in a home of traditional architecture just below the shrine.

There is some disagreement over how much of the original Kuksadang remains in the present one. Most sources imply that it is the 15th century original, but one source says that the architecture, in its elegant simplicity and solid sobriety, is based on a Yongjo/Chongjo-era design of the second half of the 18th century. And sources also disagree as to how much of the structure on Mount Inwang is the structure just before it was moved from Namsan. Some sources say that, except for the small heated room attached at each end, it was moved in its entirety, while others say that major elements of the present structure are from the "original."

The set of paintings inside the main hall of Kuksadang, and a few more in the rooms on either side, are national treasures, individually completed between the 17th and 19th centuries. These 28 paintings represent spirits, human and otherwise, revered by many Koreans. King T'aejo, his wife, and Muhak Taesa are in the center. The mythical founder of Korea, Tangun, is in the right corner. And most *mudang*s' favorite, the Dragon King, is on the left along with Queen Min who, toward the end of the 19th century, turned the Kuksadang into a training hall for *mudang* sorceresses. Also in the set are Buddhist paintings incorporating shaman or Taoist figures.

Considering its former stature as the state shrine and its long history, the shrine is quite small. It measures only 5.4 meters across and 3.6 meters deep. The small rooms later attached to each side don't make it that much bigger.

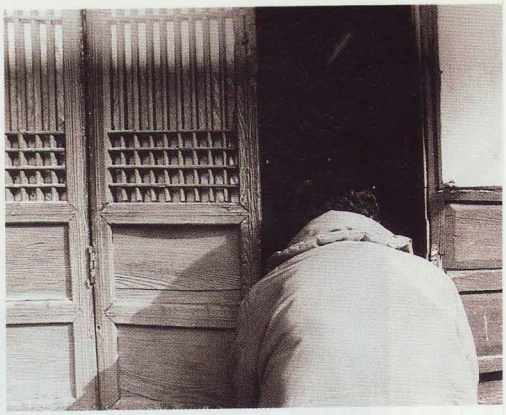
The shrine is an expressive symbol of modern Korea. Korea now is a fascinating blend of old and new, a combination of reverence and disregard for the old. On the two side walls and on the wall facing the entrance, under the valued paintings, runs a shelf cluttered with incense burners and candles and a styrofoam box of plastic dishes. Above the wooden floor, polished by centuries of stockinged feet, hang fluorescent lights, which are nailed into the grand old roof beams, as the owner's white plastic extension phone set is nailed into the door pillars. The man who helps take care of the shrine says he'd like to do something about getting the old floor back in shape, but the government won't allow modification. One wonders how much of the old floor would be left if he had his way.

Getting There.

Take a taxi or the subway to Dongnimmun Station (Stop 16 on Line 3, the Orange Line). At the southeast exit are two alleys, one at a diagonal and one perpendicular to the main road. Take the diagonal, the broader of the two, all the way up past the shops and small apartments on the slopes of Mount Inwang, where the alley ends. To your left you will see the Inwang Temple gate, the entrance to the village.

But this all attests to the shrine's life. This is not a museum piece for art buffs and tourists, it's a real, living piece of history. Shamans hold their *kut*s here and in each of the side rooms. The one who commissions a *kut* wants it for what it can accomplish, not for its aesthetic features or historical value.

Shamanism is Korea's original "religion." It came here thirty or forty thousand years ago with the peninsula's first



(right) A visitor at prayer.

(below) The paintings on the wall behind the alter are national tresures painted in the 17th to 19th centuries.

The view from here is stunningly beautiful—and informative. Here you can see the layout of the entire village. Village? You can see almost all of Seoul.

inhabitants, is the core of foundation myths, and was an essential part of state ceremony in the first centuries of Korean civilization. It has altered such imported systems as Buddhism and Christianity. Though it is now intellectually regarded as superstition by much of the educated public, it retains a strong hold in the collective consciousness.

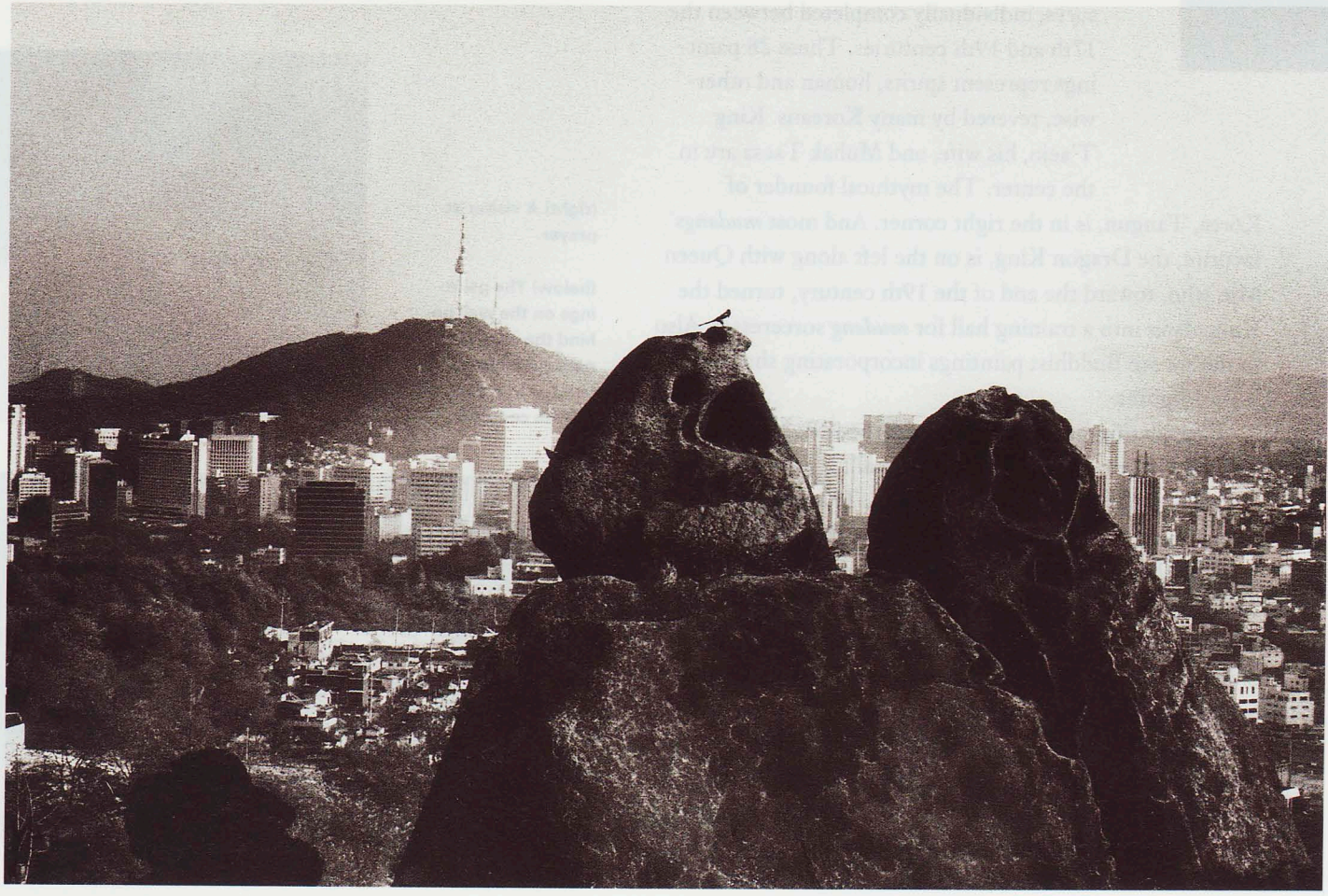
*Kut*s are not scheduled long beforehand. Usually the shaman calls the owner of the shrine on the morning of the day she wants to rent use of it. Visitors may watch. Call 737-4429 around 10 or 11 a.m. and ask if a *kut* is on for the day. You should be able to catch it later that day, because they go on for hours.

A couple minutes' walk up the mountain's slope is Meditation Rock. The rock is named for its resemblance to an image of two monks in meditation. Many see a reincarnation of King T'aejo and his mentor and close adviser, the monk Muhak; they used to come here together to talk and meditate.

This rock had such power that Chong To-jon, another close adviser to the King, feared its influence. When King T'aejo established the new dynasty's capital in Seoul and laid plans for the fortress wall which would encircle the city, they had to decide whether the wall would include the rock in the city or leave it outside. Muhak wanted this important rock included inside the wall, but Chong argued that its inclusion would increase the power of Buddhism, which the new dynasty was trying to eliminate and replace with Confucianism as the nation's major spiritual institution and system of thought. Chong's argument won the day. It is ironic that this rock, which holds the spirit of Muhak, and the new home of Kuksadang, Muhak's namesake, are both outside Seoul's city fortress wall.

This village is not only for *kut*s. Many come for private

Meditation Rock is named for its resemblance to an image of two monks meditating.



obeisance and supplication to the deities and spirits. On one of my visits a mother and her daughter were here at the rock, praying as they bowed to the four directions. Then a sick elderly lady appeared, after a valiant struggle up from the city far below.

The approach side of this rock shows two monks with heads bowed in sombre meditation. One seems to be wearing the broad straw rainhat of bygone days. But go around to the back and nature plays an eerie trick. From here you see a couple old friends well into their cups, faces turned up and howling at the moon.

Ch'ilsonggak is a tiny shrine a little further up the path from Meditation Rock. It is a pleasant place, shaded by the elm in front and wisteria on its roof, and commands a good view of the environs. The elderly lady who keeps the shrine is also pleasant. As she dusted the candles on the shrine's altar, she talked on and on about the shrine's history and the people who come there and how the spirits will help you if you are good to others. She lives in the one-by-two-meter ondol room attached to the right of the shrine.

Above the altar are three paintings which attest to Buddhism's accommodation of shamanism and, in fact, to the syncretism of all spiritual institutions in Korea. In the center painting appears the Buddha with one line of seven Taoist gentlemen and another line above them of seven Bodhisattvas. (*Ch'ilsong* in the shrine's name means the 'Seven Stars' of the Big Dipper.) To his right is a painting of a white-bearded Taoist immortal, and to his left is the Mountain Spirit with his tiger companion. The ceiling is hidden by a hundred votive lanterns hanging from it; to these are attached yellowing paper streamers with the name and complete address (but not the supplication) of the one who bought it and hung it here last Buddha's birthday.

Pick a day with good weather for your trip here. Just as interesting as the village's temples and shrines is the surrounding nature. A narrow path leads from Ch'ilsonggak up to a broad rock perched on the mountain's slope. From here you get a good view of the city. Continue up Mount Inwang's granite slope, your steps aided by small rocks cemented into its cracks and depressions, and you soon arrive at another rock formation on a clearing just large enough for a picnic with several friends. The view from here is stunningly beautiful—and informative. Here you can see the layout of the entire village. Village? You can see almost all of Seoul. A couple hundred meters' walk off to your east, along Mount Inwang's ridge, winds the 15th-century city fortress wall with its original rocks forming a foundation for the rocks more recently set on top. Where the wall descends with the mountain's southwestern slope is Kyongbok Palace, way off to the south is Namsan, Kuksadang's original home, and beyond that Kwanaksan, the mountain across the river.

A shamanist painting inside Kuksadang.

Below this is a mountain spring which some in the vicinity visit daily for their "medicinal water." Drop by for a drink, then either head over to the old fortress wall and hike on over Mount Inwang. Or go back down through the village and try the road which forks off to the left at the main gate, where there are some more temples and the homes where married monks and their families live.

John Holstein is a professor of English at Seoul's Sungkyunkwan University. He has translated a number of works of Korean fiction and nonfiction and writes occasionally on Korean culture for Asiana. *Kwon Soon-Pyeong is a graduate of New York University and now works as a free-lance photographer.*

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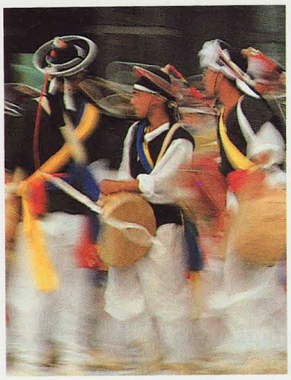

cover: Performances of farmers' music will be featured throughout the Year of Korean Music.(photo by Park Ki-ho)

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