

## Seoul's Shaman Village

*An important bit of Choson Dynasty history lives on at Kuisadang, 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

*ASIANA In-Flight Magazine*, Vol. 6, No. 2, February 1994

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 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. Supplicants have tied long pieces of fabric in bright primary colors around this bough to register their wishes to the spirits. This shaman tree has cousins and ancestors in other lands, from India to Scandanavia to East Siberia, called the "Tree of the World" or Cosmos Tree" by the people who study these things. The Buddha's "Tree of Enlightenment" 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 (Mongmyok and Pugalak) 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 gradu-

ally taken over by the shamans who assisted the king in the rites; their power grew as that of the central government weakened. By the end of the dynasty the shrine was used as a hall for shaman kuts 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 sturdy sobriety, is based on a Yongjo/Chongjo-era design of the second half of the 18th century. Sources also disagree as to how much of the structure on Mount Inwang remains from the structure that 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 only 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, 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 the favorite of most mudangs, 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 do not make it that much bigger.

Kuksadang is an expressive symbol of modern Korea. Korea is now a fascinating blend of old and new, a schizophrenic combination of reverence and disregard for the old. On the shrine's 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. These 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 care for the shrine says he would like to do something about getting the old floor back in shape, but government regulations established to ensure preservation will not allow modification. One wonders how much of the old wooden floor would be left if he had his way.

But this all attests to the shrine's continuous relevance in modern Korea. This is not a museum piece for art buffs and tourists, it is a significant part of twenty-first century life that just happens to have a long history. Shamans still hold their kuts here and in each of the side rooms; those who commission a kut want it for what it can accomplish, not for its aesthetic or ethnographic features or historical value.<sup>1</sup>

Shamanism is Korea's original "religion." It arrived on the peninsula thirty or forty thousand years ago with the peninsula's first 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 the imported systems of Buddhism and Christianity, and the Confucian nobles and literati who scorned it in public often used it in private. Though it is intellectually regarded as superstition by much of the educated public, it retains a strong hold in the collective consciousness.

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 Chosun dynasty founder 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 that 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.

Viewed from the front, two monks, wearing the broad straw rainhat of bygone days, appear absorbed in sombre meditation. 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.

Many come for private obeisance and supplication to the deities and spirits. These come up to the rock, above the village where the kuts are conducted. A mother and her daughter visit, praying as they bow to the four directions. A sick elderly lady appears after a valiant struggle up from the city far below. The arrogant demeanor of a plump, wealthy matron cracks and falls piece by hard piece with each step she takes toward the rock.

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 shrine's personality seems to have rubbed off on the pleasant elderly lady who keeps the shrine. As she dusts the candles on the shrine's altar, she talks 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 three typically bold-colored paintings 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 backed by 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.

Just as captivating 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. Catch your breath and get a preview of what is waiting for you ahead. 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, then downtown Seoul, and off to the south is Namsan, Kuksadang's original home. Look beyond and you will find the Han River and the Kwanaksan range.

Several meters below this lookout is a mountain spring which some in the vicinity visit daily for their "medicinal water." After a refreshing drink visitors

will head over to the old fortress wall and hike on across Mount Inwang. Or they will return through the village to the road that forks off to the left at the

main gate, where there are some more temples and the homes used by married monks and their families. ☒

<sup>1</sup>Kuts are not scheduled long before they are performed. 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.

**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.