Shamanism and Politics in South Korea

After publishing the materials about the traces of shamanism in Yoon Suk-yeol’s case, the author received many comments asking him to clarify this case in more detail. Therefore, it was decided to offer some more insights on such issues as shamanism and politics in South Korea.

Despite traditional role and popularity in the society, the social status of a shaman in South Korea has been always low. Two more important aspects complicate this situation:

Firstly, Koreans, similarly to Japanese, confess a certain type of syncretism, which means that you can visit a shaman, go to a Protestant church, and to a Buddhist temple. However, shamanism does not have a status of a religion, and most shamans describe themselves as Buddhists, especially as in some temples, near the Buddha statues there are also statues of mountain spirits.

Secondly, in religious issues Koreans behave like consumers or pagans, which can be expressed along the lines of “I’ll light a candle in your name, and you give me a salary raise and help my son enter the university.” If the problem looks important enough, it is allowed to light and candle in a church and bring a gift - a pork head - to a shaman.

In addition, for most shamans such things as contacting the spirits of their ancestors or exorcising the spirits of illness are not their core competence, as they are mostly engaged in fortunetelling and predictions about the future,
and are in effect akin to personal growth coaches, by simply issuing “differently encoded” recommendations. This is the reason why visiting shamans, on the one hand, is considered a sign of being a superstitious and dark person. On the other hand, many people visit shamans. And as a result, it works out to be like with bribery cases, when a person is brought to trial not so much for stealing, but for getting caught or attracting attention under the existing political conditions.

Some experts and researchers of Korean political culture emphasize that along with authoritarianism, hierarchy, clientelism, etc., another important element of this culture is a kind of fatalism which means that people prefer to rely on good luck, or the intervention of external forces instead of putting in hard work. It is commonly believed that people may plan certain events, but it is up to Heaven’s will to let those plans become real, and the outcome of an event is not a result of cause-effect relationship, but the result of good or bad luck or destiny.

This leads to an increased role of superstitions and increased trust in shamans and other occultists, whose competence is not about planning events, but to predict the reaction to them. The hope for a magical solution to the problem is based on faith in fate and the help of some external forces, including representatives of the authorities. So when you address your request to an official, it is almost the same as addressing supernatural forces in the person of a shaman: both of them are expected to ensure good outcome. It is not surprising that university graduates visit shamans with a list of their potential employers to help them choose which job to apply for, businessmen often ask supernatural forces which investments to make, and young people see this as a way to gain confidence and psychological comfort.

The data about the number of practicing shamans in Korea varies. According to the Korean Statistical Office in 2019, there are 10,745 prophets and shamans in the country. It is believed that there are much more of them than the official statistics shows, because many shamans work without any licenses: only ‘supernatural power’ is needed and some training with those who already know the craft. This is why “during the economic recession more and more people choose to become shamans or fortunetellers,” and, according to The Economist and Korea Economic Daily reports in 2018, the market of mystical services at the time reached USD 3.7 billion.

According to Baek Yoon Sang, the head of the Korean Association of Fortune Tellers, there are more than 300,000 fortune tellers and 150,000 shamans in the country. For comparison, the headcount of the Korea’s Armed Forces is 610,000 persons.

Not only ordinary citizens, but also some decision-makers are among the clients of shamans. In the shamanist community, it is said that it was shamanism which played a role in Park Geun-hye’s political games. It is worth noting that during the military regime shamans were out of favor.

Some say that shamanism in Korea’s political life dates back to the country’s first president - Syngman Rhee (1952-1960), who was believed to have changed his name following the advice of some shaman, as he wanted to “become president at the advanced age” and he really became president at 73. Also, shamans had allegedly predicted the death of President Park Chung-hee 20 years before he was killed by one of his closest aides in 1979. And the President Chun Doo-hwan’s mother had three of her front teeth pulled out after a monk had told her they would hinder her son’s future career.

Of course, people tend to expect shamans to bring luck and ignore real life circumstances. For example, the history says that President Kim Dae-jung, who lost the presidential elections three times, was elected in his fourth attempt in 1998, after he had moved his father’s grave to a place which was better from the geomancy point of view. The financial recession and the split in the ruling party side remained out of focus, as did the fact that his contemporary and well-known conservative leader Lee Hoi-chang lost the presidential election race even after he moved the graves of his ancestors several times. The shaman Shim Jin Song became famous when he predicted the death of North Korean President Kim Il Sung in 1994 and the election of President Kim Dae-jung. However, after some bad forecasts his popularity drastically dropped. Other famous Korean fortunetellers could not guess that Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, Lee Myung-bak and Roh Moo-hyun would be elected.

However, during the military regime, shamans were given the cold shoulder, and many politicians began to visit shamans and fortunetellers only after democratization and liberalization. According to the former Environment Minister Yun Ye Jung, Korean politicians and businessmen consulted with shamans “almost without exception.”

The political commentator Park Sang-byung said that shamanism has naturally penetrated the Korean institutional culture, and “... visiting a shaman cannot be prevented because it is the freedom of the individual. ... However, this is problematic and causes public distrust.”
The most interesting thing is that Choi Soon-sil, Park Geun-hye’s friend, who is usually introduced as a shaman herself, was in fact only the daughter of a shaman. However, the propaganda of the Democrats presented her as the second Rasputin, and they played on the people’s annoyance described above, despite the fact that at the time when Choi “had especially strong influence on her friend, the president,” she was living in Germany.

In this context Yoon Suk-yeol is being made look like a puppet of shamans, taking into consideration the well-known telephone conversations - when his wife Kim Keon-hee said that she would move to the Blue House if she became the president’s wife, because the shamans advised her to do so. She also met her husband, who is 12 years older than her, following the advice of a Buddhist monk.

This is the basis to accuse Yoon and his wife of their close relations with religious figures who allegedly gave them advice on the verge of interfering in politics.

In January 2022, the Segye Ilbo newspaper “reported on the suspicions” about an incident in February 2020, when Yoon (at that time the Prosecutor General) refused to execute the order of the Minister of Justice on the repressions against the Shincheonji religious sect in connection with the fact that its members spread the coronavirus (there was a clear instruction to dig the dirt about the sect and show them as guilty in the disease spread), and he refused to do that because the shaman Chong Gong Jin allegedly told him: “Don’t get your hands dirty with blood.”

The same person allegedly took part in the work of Yoon’s election center - the so-called network headquarters, which was disestablished after the above news.

Then the representative of the Democratic Party, Kim Yoo-geum, said that back in 2018 (when Yoon was the prosecutor General), Yoon Suk-yeol and his wife were involved in a dubious religious ritual conducted by a shaman who informally participated in Yoon’s election campaign as a consultant.

Kim showed photos of the ritual held in Chungju, North Chungcheong Province, where tags with the names of Yoon and his wife and some Conservative Party members can be seen. Participation in the ritual is very expensive, and the ritual includes skinning a cow and hanging it on the altar wall next to a pile of 10 slaughtered pigs.

In response, the opposition party stated that in the same videos and photos from this ceremony, there are tags with the names of some prominent figures of the ruling party, including President Moon Jae-in and Lee Si-jong, governor of North Chungcheong Province. After that this conviction was not mentioned anywhere in the news.

Thus, this seems to be an attempt to reproach Yoon Suk-yeol for doing things everyone else was somehow engaged in, playing on those fears that were artificially created during the candle revolution. However, most voters are dissatisfied with the close relationship that some politicians maintain with shamans. According to the two-day survey by the Southern Post when 1,002 persons were interviewed at the CBS’s request in January 2022, 60.7% of respondents said that relationship with shamans would have a negative impact on their attitude to Yoon Suk-yeol.

It is up to you to decide what effect this had on the outcome of the elections.

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