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Dark Nuns and Bright Lights: Korean Shamanism and Adapting to the Capitalist Unconscious

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Abstract: This article explores the dynamic interplay between Korean shamanism and capitalism, arguing that the shaman's (or *mudang*'s) *gut* rituals, far from being relics, are very active agents in South Korea's neoliberal landscape. Drawing on the psychoanalytic framework of Slavoj Žižek, it posits that shamanism externalizes the unconscious drives—desire, trauma, power—fueling capitalism, offering commodified hope while critiquing its disavowals. Rooted in Korea's animistic theology, the *mudang* mediates between sacred and profane, her rituals (as with every capitalist service) priced yet resonant with a surplus meaning that resists full market assimilation. This study parallels Korea's private, market-driven shamanism with state-managed belief systems, highlighting adaptation over resistance. Films like *Exhuma* and *Dark Nuns* amplify this, staging shamans as healers of modernity's fractures—alienation, loss—amid material excess. Historically, shamanism's survival —from colonial suppression to postwar miracles—reflects Korea's own reinvention, its entrepreneurial mudang mirroring capitalist ingenuity. As a Žižekian symptom the *mudang* sustains capitalism's illusions while exposing its limits, her chants echoing a past that haunts Korea's future. Globally, this sacred-profane tension invites comparisons—Malaysia's *bomoh*, America's televangelists—suggesting the persistence of the system's unconscious in tandem with its successes, dooming its subjects to the perils begotten of prosperity.

Keywords: Žižek; Lacan; Shamanism; Korea; Capitalism

Introduction

Korean shamanism is not a relic to be preserved (in folk museums, academic archives, etc.) but a living force within the capitalist present. I propose that the *mudang*'s rituals externalize the unconscious drives that animate and sustain Korea's economic order. Shamanism engages actively with the market system, offering resolutions to its discontents—broken dreams, lost livelihoods—while simultaneously reflecting its inherent contradictions: abundance paired with alienation, progress shadowed by loss. The *mudang*, with her rhythmic chants, her ecstasy, her trances, bridging worlds, her spirit-channeling performances that defy explanation, emerges as a liminal figure: a healer of spiritual wounds inflicted by modernity. She's the feminist mediator of ancestral grievances unresolved by history's march, and, increasingly, an entrepreneur navigating the waters of a neoliberal marketplace where even the sacred carries a price tag.

In Korea, shamanism adapts to the privatized, market-driven ethos of late capitalism, revealing a parallel yet distinct negotiation of the sacred and the secular, one rooted in personal rather than institutional domains. Belief systems do not simply resist modernity's encroachment—they do not stand as defiant relics against the tide—but bend to its contours, adapting their forms, reshaping their practices, while retaining an excess—an irreducible surplus of meaning, a stubborn residue of the ineffable—that resists full assimilation into rationalist frameworks, economic equations or state pronouncements.

Recent cultural productions amplify this dynamic offering a window to both the Korean psyche and the fractures afflicting said psyche by capitalism. The films *Dark Nuns* (2025) and *Exhuma* (2024) portray shamans grappling with modern-day dilemmas—cursed graves unearthed by bulldozers for high-rise condos, possessed souls tormented by familial strife in sterile apartments, fractured families undone by ambition in a society that equates worth with wealth—set against backdrops of material excess and urban alienation that define Korea's present. In *Exhuma*, a mudang is hired by a wealthy client to excavate a vengeful ancestor buried beneath a site slated for development, her ritual steeped in centuries-old tradition—incense

curling into the air, drums pounding like a heartbeat—yet framed by the greed and hubris of contemporary Korea, a narrative that ends in supernatural chaos (involving a fire-breathing Japanese demon, no less!) as if the past itself rebels against its commodification, the ground splitting open to reclaim what was stolen. *Dark Nuns* blends possession with psychological tension, depicting a lady shaman as a last resort for a family unravelling under the pressures of a consumerist age (and the failures of the male-dominated Catholic Church)—a child's screams echoing through concrete walls, a mother's pleas drowned by the hum of traffic—hinting at her role in appeasing an existential unease that no product, no purchase, no promotion can sooth (even temporarily). These cinematic narratives conceivably stage the unconscious anxieties of a society caught between its historical roots and its relentless present, its spirits and its skyscrapers, its paradoxical pursuit for meaning and profit and all the trauma these tensions bring.

Consider the *gut* itself: a theatrical performance where the *mudang* dons colorful robes—reds, blues, and yellows swirling like a living tapestry—wields a fan that flutters like a bird's wing or a ceremonial knife (gleaming with cheeky intent?), and channels spirits through her trembling (and not unerotic) body, her voice rising and falling as if borrowed from another realm. Clients pay handsomely, sometimes millions of won (thousands of USD), for these interventions, seeking success in a cutthroat job market, health amidst the urban stress that frays bodies, or peace from restless ancestors whose voices linger in dreams. These transactional motifs align shamanism with capitalism's service economy: a *gut* costs as much as a therapy session with a psychologist, a luxury spa day or even a high-end consultation with a financial advisor. Yet it retains a profound theological weight, rooted in Korea's animistic heritage, where mountains whisper secrets, rivers carry memories, and ancestors linger with unmet demands, their presence felt in the creak of floorboards or a breezy chill.

This paradox—shamanism as both a critique of capitalism's hollow promises and a collaborator in its commodifying logic—drives the central inquiry of this article. How does shamanism survive, even flourish, under the convulsing weight of capitalism?

What does it reveal about the unseen forces—the desires, the fears, the losses—beneath Korea's economic triumph? And how does it echo broader global tensions between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the material, a past that haunts and a future that beckons?

Korea's postwar history—from the brutality of Japanese colonial rule to the devastation of the Korean War—which left scars on the land and its people, to its emergence as a global economic powerhouse—provides an inevitable backdrop to the problem. The Japanese occupation outlawed shamanic practices, branding them primitive, tearing down shrines with imperial zeal; the war that followed shattered communities, leaving widows to mourn and orphans to wander. From these ashes rose a nation rebuilt by determination—state policies that fueled factories, exports that flooded global markets, sacrifices that saw parents labor so children could study. The *mudang* bridges this trajectory and chasm, her rituals a fragile yet enduring thread linking a wounded past—of loss, displacement, and suppressed grief—to a prosperous yet anxious present marked by rapid urbanization and relentless ambition that drives both innovation and burnout (Han, 2015).

Psychoanalysis and the Capitalist Unconscious

Žižek (1989) argues that ideology operates not through rational assent—people don't sit down and rationally "buy into" capitalism's promises—but via the unconscious, structuring our enjoyment (*jouissance*) of the very systems that bind us, chaining us to their logic through pleasure rather than coercion. Capitalism, in this view, is less a cold, mechanical calculus of profit and loss than a libidinal machine, fueled by desires that exceed mere utility—desires for wealth that promises status in a hierarchical world, possessions that pledge security against an uncertain future, success that whispers wholeness to a fragmented self. The mudang's rituals, with their ecstatic trances that blur the line between body and spirit, their rhythmic drumming that reverberates like a heartbeat, and their promises of spiritual resolution that soothe restless minds, can be read as vivid, embodied performances of this jouissance, externalizing the traumas and fantasies that capitalism

simultaneously incites and represses—traumas of failure in a meritocratic myth, fantasies of control in a chaotic reality.

In a *gut* ritual, the *mudang* confronts the Lacanian Real[i]—possessed by spirits, her body shaking as if caught in a storm, she negotiates with ancestors whose voices pierce the veil or malevolent forces that defy rational explanation, forces that laugh at economic logic and its tidy spreadsheets. As Young (1995) observes, these rituals have evolved over centuries to address distinctly modern anxieties—job loss in a gig economy where stability is a mirage, divorce in a shifting social fabric that unravels tradition, financial ruin in a volatile market that punishes the unprepared—mirroring capitalism's own seductive promise of mastery over life's uncertainties, a promise it can never fully keep.

Žižek's concept of the *fetish* sharpens this psychoanalytic lens with particular force, cutting through the noise to reveal the ritual's dual role. He describes fetishes as objects or acts that disavow the fissures in reality—think of a lucky charm clutched tightly to ward off failure, a talisman promising protection against fate's whims, a prayer whispered to stave off despair (2006). The *gut* functions in precisely this way: a client pays a mudang to appease a spirit blamed for a failing business or a stalled career, disavowing market randomness, the unpredictability of human error, or personal inadequacies in favor of a tangible, ritualistic fix that can be bought and performed. Yet, unlike a mass-produced commodity, the ritual carries a surplus of meaning, rooted in Korea's animistic theology, where the world is not dead matter but alive with agency beyond human control, where trees sway with intent and rivers murmur judgments. Eliade (1964) defines shamans as mediators of the sacred, traversing the boundaries between worlds—human and spirit, earthly and divine—to restore cosmic harmony disrupted by neglect or transgression. In Korea, this mediation persists in shamanism by transforming spiritual labor into a marketable good, a service to be advertised on billboards, purchased with credit cards, and consumed like a gym membership.

Kendall (2009) documents how shamans retooled their craft in the wake of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis—a moment when Korea's economic miracle faltered, factories shuttered, and families faced eviction—addressing the economic despair of laid-off workers and bankrupt households with rituals that promised to expel "greedy ghosts" haunting finances or appease ancestral wrath stirred by neglect. A factory worker in Busan might hire a mudang to banish a spirit blamed for his unemployment, his savings drained by a market crash; the ritual, costing 2 million won, sustains the capitalist illusion—success is attainable through effort, intervention, or purchase—while exposing its fragility when the job market remains unmoved and he spirals deeper into bankruptcy.

Theologically, shamanism's animistic roots clash with capitalism's secular rationality in profound, often jarring ways. Korea's pre-modern worldview, where spirits inhabit trees swaying in the wind like dancers, rivers flowing with memory like storytellers, and homes humming with ancestral presence like a chorus, resists the disenchantment of a market-driven age that reduces nature to raw material—timber, water, real estate—and time to productivity—hours billed, deadlines met. Cho (2005) traces this resilience across centuries: despite Confucian scorn that dismissed it as vulgar superstition unfit for a civilized society and Christian proselytizing that branded it heretical in the face of a singular God, shamanism adapted, absorbing Buddhist chants, Confucian ethical undertones even traces of folk resistance against Japanese colonial oppressors who sought to erase Korean identity. Today, it absorbs capitalist elements with equal dexterity—rituals are advertised on social media platforms like Instagram and KakaoTalk with glossy photos and testimonials, priced according to demand like BlackPink concert tickets, even livestreamed for clients in Los Angeles or London who send payments via PayPal. Žižek might call this ideology's obscene supplement (2012)—a hidden excess that keeps the capitalist system running by addressing the emotional and existential voids it cannot resolve through material means alone, voids that gape wider with every economic crisis.

Shamanism, long relegated to the margins by Confucian elites (who deemed it crude and superstitious) and Christian missionaries (who condemned it as pagan idolatry threatening salvation), found new life amid this upheaval, its roots too deep to be fully uprooted. Its resurgence gained momentum during moments of crisis, most notably the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis—a cataclysm that saw conglomerates like Daewoo collapse under debt, unemployment soar to 7% (a threefold jump), and suicide rates spike as families grappled with sudden precarity, their savings wiped out by currency devaluation. As the International Monetary Fund imposed austerity measures—slashing wages, gutting social safety nets—ordinary Koreans turned to mudang to appease spirits blamed for their misfortune, seeking answers where economics offered none. Kendall (2009) recounts the story of a Seoul businessman who paid 3 million won ($2,200 USD) for a *gut* after losing his factory to bankruptcy in 1998; the ritual didn't restore his wealth—his machines stayed silent—but it restored his hope, offering a psychological balm not unlike the fleeting comfort of consumerism's promises—a new gadget to replace despair, a better tomorrow dangled just out of reach.

This resurgence was not a rejection of capitalism but an adaptation—a pivot: shamans became crisis managers, their services priced like legal advice in a high-rise office, psychotherapy in a cushioned chair, or even corporate consulting with PowerPoint slides, seamlessly integrating into Korea's burgeoning service economy where everything, even solace, has a cost.

The *gut* ritual itself exemplifies this fusion with vivid, visceral clarity, a spectacle that bridges eras. Picture the scene: a mudang stands in a vivid hanbok—silks of red, blue, and yellow swirling like a living flame, embroidered with cranes or flowers—drumming furiously on a *janggu* drum, its beat calling to the unseen, her voice shifting in pitch and timbre as spirits possess her trembling frame, her eyes rolling back as if seeing beyond the room. Historically, these rites were communal affairs—villagers gathered under open skies, their breath visible in the cold, to honor ancestors with rice wine, avert droughts with offerings of grain, or heal collective wounds with shared song. Today they are bespoke and tailored to individual clients

in cramped apartments or rented halls: a mother seeks her son's success in the grueling college entrance exams that could lift him from poverty, a CEO begs for divine favor to clinch a merger that could define his legacy, a widow pleads for peace from a husband's restless ghost who haunts her sleep. Kim (2018), in Korean Shamanism and Cultural Nationalism, estimates that urban mudang can earn up to 100 million won annually ($75,000 USD), their clientele spanning the socioeconomic spectrum—from factory workers scraping by on overtime to chaebol heirs managing billion-won empires.

Cinema hauntingly captures this shift, reflecting shamanism's dual role as both tradition and commodity in a society that consumes its past as readily as its present. *Exhuma* (2024) follows a mudang hired by a wealthy family to exhume a cursed ancestor buried beneath a development site—a plot of land destined for luxury condos; her ritual unearths not just bones but a legacy of greed, the spirit's wrath spilling forth in a storm of wind and shadow, ending in supernatural chaos that indicts capitalist overreach—a revenge of the past against a world that digs too deep for profit, heedless of what it disturbs. *Dark Nuns* (2024) weaves possession into a tale of familial fracture, casting the mudang as a desperate fix for modern alienation—a child's screams echoing through a sterile apartment block, a mother's pleas drowned by the hum of air conditioners and traffic. I see these films as externalizing Korea's unconscious: the *mudang* heals what progress shatters—relationships strained by ambition that leaves no time for love, psyches frayed by competition that spares no one, histories buried by development that paves over graves—her chants a requiem for the lost, her dance a protest against forgetting.

The Shaman as Capitalist Symptom

I view Shamanism's integration with Korean capitalism is not a historical accident but as symptomatic of the system's internal contradictions (Žižek, 2008). A symptom, for Žižek, is not a flaw to be eradicated or a bug to be patched but a truth that ideology conceals, a rupture that reveals what the system denies in its polished promises and relentless optimism. The *mudang* embodies this duality with striking clarity, her presence a living paradox: her rituals soothe capitalism's casualties—the

unemployed who queue at job fairs, the heartbroken who scroll dating apps, the desperate who pawn heirlooms—while propping up its myths of control and redemption, the fantasy that effort or intervention can bend fate. A Busan entrepreneur hires her to bless a failing startup, pouring 4 million won into a gut that promises prosperity with incense and song; the business collapses anyway—creditors calling, screens dark—yet he returns, hooked on the hope she sells, much like a gambler buying lottery tickets with dwindling savings or a worker chasing self-help seminars that peddle success in ten easy steps. Can we not see this as Lacan's *objet petit a* at work? The unattainable object-cause of desire that drives endless pursuit, a shimmering mirage that recedes with every step?

The mechanics of the *gut* reveal this dynamic in granular, almost hypnotic detail, a choreography of meaning and ambiguity. The mudang dons vibrant robes—silks that flare like firelight, reds and blues catching the dim glow of candles—wields a fan that flutters like a bird's wing or a ceremonial knife that gleams with intent, and falls into trance, her body trembling as a theater of the Real unfolds before hushed onlookers. Clients arrive with concrete demands (a promotion, a cure, a child's success etc.) yet the ritual's power lies in its ambiguity—it promises without guaranteeing, its outcomes as elusive as capitalism's "work hard, win big" ethos that fills motivational posters and corporate retreats.

Kendall (2009) recounts a Seoul mother who spent 5 million won to appease her son's "exam ghost," a spirit she blamed for his faltering grades; he passed his entrance exam, but she credited the mudang, not his late-night study sessions fueled by instant coffee—a fetishistic disavowal of reality's complexity that Žižek (1989) would recognize as ideology at its purest, a refusal to see the mundane beneath the mystical. Eliade (1964) also describes shamans as guardians of a living cosmos—spirits dwelling in rivers that ripple with memory, mountains that loom with judgment, homes that hum with ancestral presence like a chorus of the past—a worldview fundamentally at odds with markets that reduce nature to raw material—timber felled for furniture, water dammed for power, land zoned for profit—and time to billable hours or production quotas.

Yet shamanism also critiques capitalism in ways that cut deeper than its commodification might suggest, its rituals a quiet rebellion against forgetting. Its focus on trauma—ancestral curses that echo through generations like a family's shadow, wartime ghosts that refuse to rest in unmarked graves—excavates what Korea's triumphalist narrative of progress obscures beneath its sheen of GDP growth and global rankings. Kim (2018) describes a gut for a family haunted by a grandfather killed in 1951; the ritual named his death—a soldier's betrayal during the Korean War, shot by his own retreating unit—defying the official silence that cloaks such losses in favor of economic glory, a history rewritten to celebrate steel over blood. This aligns with Žižek's call to "tarry with the negative" (2006)—to confront the failures and losses that capitalism denies in its relentless march forward, its ads promising happiness in every purchase.

This duality reflects capitalism's psychic economy with uncanny precision, a mirror held to its soul. The system thrives on lack—there's always more to buy, more to achieve, more to become, a horizon of satisfaction forever receding like a desert mirage. Shamanism mirrors this insatiable structure: one spirit is appeased with offerings and tears, another arises to take its place, a cycle of need and intervention that never ends.

This symptomatic role extends beyond individual clients to the societal level, a reflection of Korea's broader psychic landscape. In a nation where suicide rates remain stubbornly high—a legacy of stress, isolation, and a culture that equates worth with achievement—shamans address the emotional fallout of a system that leaves little room for failure or rest. A mudang in Incheon related the story of a young man who sought her after failing the civil service exam, a gateway to stability in a precarious economy; his "failure spirit" was exorcised with a flurry of bells and a sacrificed chicken, but his despair lingered, a reminder that spiritual fixes cannot undo structural cruelties—low wages, long hours, a society that discards the unsuccessful. Another, in Busan, performed a gut for a woman whose daughter vanished into the city's underbelly—drugs, debt, disappearance; the spirit offered no

answers, only presence, a contrast to a police report filed and forgotten. Here, shamanism both sustains and critiques: it offers hope where capitalism fails—where jobs vanish, where families fracture—yet its price tag binds it to the very system it questions, its rituals a bandage on wounds too deep for markets to heal.[ii]

Conclusion

Korean shamanism's dance with capitalism suggests that the sacred adapts to the pressures of the profane, bending under its weight, but it does not vanish. Psychoanalytically, it intimates the unconscious, that realm of desire that capitalism channels into its machinery yet cannot fully subdue. The *mudang's gut* stages this drama with visceral intensity, her trance a portal to the Real—death that silences ambition, chaos that mocks order, the limits of meaning that no profit can fill—that markets obscure beneath their veneer of progress and profit, their billboards promising happiness in every sale. Theologically, shamanism's animism challenges capitalism's sterile rationality with a worldview where the world is alive—trees breathe with intent, rivers sing with memory, ancestors watch with expectation—yet its commodification blurs that challenge, tethering the sacred to the ledger, its purity muddied by money.

For Korea, this fusion reflects a nation suspended between irreconcilable worlds—past and present, spirit and steel, loss and ambition. The mudang heals a society racing forward yet mourning backward, its progress haunted by the price of its miracles—villages razed, families split, bodies broken by labor. Films like *Exhuma* and *Dark Nuns* crystallize this tension, their shamans cast as both saviors and cautionary tales—figures who mend the fractures of modernity while exposing its costs, their rituals a bridge and a warning. In *Exhuma*, the mudang's ritual unleashes a spirit that ravages the living, perhaps a metaphor for a past that refuses to stay buried beneath concrete and greed, a reminder that capitalist development breeds its own peril. In *Dark Nuns*, her chants pierce the silence of a family undone by isolation—a child possessed, a mother lost—a cry against a culture that commodifies connection, turning love into a transaction measured in time or gifts. Žižek might even call the *mudang* capitalism's obscene supplement (2012)—essential yet

disavowed, a figure who keeps the system afloat by naming its shadows, her presence a reminder of what lies beneath the surface of Korea's gleaming success, a whisper beneath its roar.

Globally, this case resonates with striking parallels that stretch across continents and centuries. From Malaysia's *bomoh*, who blend Islamic mysticism with entrepreneurial flair to heal personal woes—love potions sold in markets, prayers whispered for a fee—to America's televangelists, who peddle salvation on cable networks with toll-free numbers and donation pleas, the sacred bends to capital's demands across cultures, its forms shifting to fit the market's mold. In Brazil, Candomblé priests navigate urban sprawl, their rituals a lifeline for the marginalized; in India, astrologers hawk predictions on apps, their stars aligned with profit. Yet each retains an excess—an insistence on meaning beyond profit, a refusal to be fully subsumed—that echoes Korea's mudang. Shamanism's survival in Korea suggests that the unconscious remains a potent force, a reminder that even in a world of algorithms, stock tickers, and relentless optimization, the unseen endures—spirits linger in the margins, traumas whisper through generations, desires defy containment in spreadsheets or slogans. Future inquiries might probe other traditions—Japanese *onmyoji* weaving spells in urban shrines amid Tokyo's neon, Indonesian dukun balancing folk magic with modernity in Jakarta's slums—to map this sacred-profane nexus across diverse landscapes, tracing how belief adapts to, resists, and reshapes the global spread of capitalism that flattens difference into sameness.

This resilience carries implications for Korea itself as it hurtles into its next chapter, a nation at a crossroads of its own design. A country that transformed from postwar ruin to economic giant in mere decades now faces new challenges—aging demographics that strain pensions, climate crises that flood coasts and parch fields, cultural saturation that risks turning K-pop into cliché—each demanding answers beyond the material, beyond the next export boom. The mudang offers no solutions to these structural woes—her rituals don't halt rising seas or birth rates—yet her presence signals a deeper need: for meaning in a society that measures value in GDP and test scores, for connection in a culture of isolation where apartments stack lives without touching them, for acknowledgment of a past that progress cannot

erase, its ghosts as real as the towers that rise. Her rituals, though priced and packaged (even booked via smartphone, paid with digital wallets) retain a trace of the Real—a refusal to let the world be reduced to numbers, a stubborn echo of a Korea that once danced to the rhythm of spirits rather than markets, that once listened to the wind through bamboo rather than the ping of a stock alert.

In the end, the *mudang* poses a question that reverberates beyond Korea's borders, a question for our age: Can capitalism assimilate the sacred without losing itself in the process? Her answer is both yes and no—a paradox that intimates the abyss beneath our markets, an abyss of longing and loss that no system can fill.

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[i] Jacques Lacan’s foundational triad of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real provides further clarity and depth to this analysis, offering a map to navigate the psychic terrain where shamanism and capitalism collide. The Imaginary offers illusions of coherence—a perfect job that defines one’s worth in a competitive society, a harmonious family that shields against the chaos of modernity—mirrored in the mudang’s assurances of spiritual balance, as she promises to align discordant lives with a cosmic order that feels just out of reach. The Symbolic supplies the language, laws, and structures of society—capitalist contracts that bind buyer to seller, market exchanges that turn time into money, social norms that dictate success—within which shamanism now operates as a priced service, its sacredness quantified in won and dollars, its rituals scheduled like appointments. The Real, however, is the unrepresentable excess: death that mocks ambition with its finality, chaos that defies control despite our plans, the limits of meaning that no system can fully suture or explain away.

[ii] Derived from conversations with the author’s friends from Seoul.