

CHAPTER NINE

LEARNING KOREAN WAYS

THE “GOLDEN FISH”



Shamanism, birth dreams, and Buddhist temple painting are among the interests of the three Americans you meet in this chapter. After reading the discussion, you respond.

Reading and writing tasks—Write a paper of 500 words or more answering these questions. Or take notes and respond in a discussion session.

1. Define the stereotype many Koreans have of Westerners living in Korea.
2. How do Brian, Frank and Jeremy each fit or not fit this stereotype? Explain in detail, using examples from the round-table discussion.
3. How would you evaluate the understanding each has of Korean culture?
4. What did you learn from doing this assignment?

LET'S JOIN THE ROUNDTABLE.

“Well,” Anne announces with some satisfaction, “today our guests are all former U.S. Peace Corps volunteers. Frank came here with the Peace Corps in 1966, Brian in 1967, and Jeremy went to Africa as a land-reform lawyer about the same time. They’re all very much involved with some form of ancient Korean culture.”

“Welcome,” Jane adds. “I think people sometimes underestimate how interesting Westerners find Korean culture to be.”

An introduction to shamanism

“When did you get interested in Korean shamanism, Frank?” Sun-ok asks. “Was that when you were doing Asian Studies in graduate school?”

“Yeah, that’s right. The Harvard library had everything, and I found most of it fascinating. I did a couple of papers on Siberian shamanism. When I returned to Korea in 1970, my interest in shamanism continued. Whenever I heard the sound of cymbals and drums I stood around until someone invited me in. I enjoy the music.” He laughs. “It may not sound like music if you’re not used to it. There are hourglass drums and cymbals, and the shamans sing and chant.”

“Don’t you take your classes with you to observe the rituals?”

That’s right. Every year I teach a university class in Korean shamanism on the U.S. Army post at Yongsan. The students learn about the various gods, the segments of the ritual, and the function shamanism plays in society. Last weekend I took students to a place the Pukhan Mountain in northeastern Seoul.”

“What are these rituals like?”

“The shaman wears different robes and hats dedicated to one spirit or another, and these gods descend and speak through her. For example, there’s a *Taegam* spirit, a kind of



greedy official who often argues with the women sponsoring the *kut*, trying to charge them more money to fix things up for the spirit in the other world. The women fight back, and that lends a kind of humor to the ceremony. I heard a man's sister say, 'Why didn't you do something for him when he was alive? Now he's dead, you want all this money.'



A SHAMAN DEMONSTRATES FOR FRANK'S CLASS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND.



“Anyway, I was watching a *kut* with about ten students when the ancestor segment came. This is where the ancestors of the person sponsoring the *kut* come back and speak through the shaman, starting with the most distant ones. After several spirits had come and gone, the shaman suddenly put on tennis shoes and wrapped a sweatshirt around her waist—clothes a teenager would wear. I thought this must be the spirit of the dead son. The shaman danced and became possessed with his spirit. After jumping up and down on her toes and doing the dance, she came up to the mother and started crying and yelling, ‘Mother! Mother!’ The mother burst into tears, and the daughter-in-law started crying. That kind of outburst is common.”

“What do people think about having all these young anthropologists watching?” Anne asks with a smile.

“Sometimes the musicians don't pay any attention, but this time they were kind of loud. When I looked over I thought they were embarrassed because ten guests—

most of them foreigners—were sitting watching the three people, who were crying buckets. The musicians served us a little tonic drink to distract us.”

Is a shaman made or born?

Jane looks thoughtful. “I suppose there are some characteristics shared by shamans have all over the world, aren’t there? Don’t American Indian shamans also have some connection with insanity?”

Frank shakes his head. “On the Korean peninsula there are two different kinds of shamans, the hereditary shamans and the possessed shamans. Supposedly, a hundred years ago the Han River was the dividing line between the two. Shamans south of the Han were hereditary priestesses. The ones to the north were the possessed variety, and they sometimes talk about their early experience, which is similar to the early sickness of Siberian shamans. They start acting strange. They have stomach complaints. They see visions. They prophesy fires. They walk around shouting, ‘I’m this god. I’m that god.’ They wander through the woods. Then traditionally a shaman will see that they are possessed, rather than crazy. If you are behaving that way and a shaman says a spirit is calling you to be a shaman, you can’t refuse. Otherwise, you go crazy and die. So this person—usually a woman—becomes apprenticed to a ‘spirit mother.’ Then she’s cured. It’s therapy for her. After she returns to normal, she has to shamanize to remain well. She may not want to do it because shamans are in a difficult position. People look to them for help and depend on them, but despise them at the same time.”

Teaching future shamans

Anne smiles at Frank. “Didn’t you attend a class where shamans were being trained?”

Frank nods. “There’s a shaman’s union here with about two thousand members. Down in the basement is an institute where people learn the chants, the dances and the other things shamans need to know. One day I sat through an hour and a half of the class, and they were doing the segment of the spirit who rides on the knives.”

“You mean,” Sun-ok interrupts, “those parallel blades which are used to chop up food for the animals?”

“Right.” He explains to Jane, “these are bolted together so that the sharp side of the blade stands up from the base. The shaman climbs on top. At first the shaman can hold onto something for balance or rest her feet on a cloth, but then she moves her feet so that each foot is right on top of the blade.”

“Are they sharp?” Jane asks.

“I once saw someone take a radish and strike the blade with it so that slices of radish fell off—to show the blade was sharp. I’ve felt other blades myself and found they weren’t particularly, but I’m not sure I could stand on them.”

“But getting back to the class,” Anne prompts.

Frank continues, “The shaman asked his students, ‘Well, why ride on these knives? It’s dangerous, it can be painful, why do we do it?’ The students all sat there staring at him with open mouths. ‘Well, what are ghosts and spirits afraid of?’ Then his assistant blurted out, ‘Knives!’ ‘That’s right. The spirits are afraid of knives and blades. So imagine how afraid they are when we stand on the blades and show our mastery over them.’”

Rituals

“I take it knives are used in other ways?” Jane asks.

“Sure. In fact, during a regular *kut* there are rites which involve waving knives over people and throwing grain and salt at them to drive away the spirits. The woman sponsoring the *kut* and her husband will kneel down in the room, facing out into the courtyard, and the shaman will put divination flags over their heads, wave chicken and pig legs over their heads, toss these things out in the courtyard or spit rice wine over their heads and out into the courtyard. This is to purify them. It’s more complicated if someone’s ill or crazy.”

“Wow!” someone says. There is a pause.

Jeremy leans forward with a question. “It seems to be the role of the possessed shaman to let the gods descend into her body or to bring messages from the gods. But what about the hereditary shamans?”

Frank looks thoughtful. “The hereditary shaman doesn’t become possessed during the ritual, although she may mimic it a little in dance. In other words, when she’s dancing she may show with her movements that the spirits have descended, but she doesn’t speak in the voices of spirits. I think what she does is help ordinary people become possessed. Once down in the southeast coast, a group of young men drowned in a fishing accident. The families had a *kut* because unmarried males who have died are especially likely to cause trouble for the living. At this *kut*, family members of each of the drowned men danced and held a spirit basket. When the basket started shaking, the shaman asked them yes-or-no questions. The spirits indicated by shaking the basket if the answer was yes and not moving it at all if the answer was no. But sometimes the mother or the sister or another family member was possessed by the spirit of the dead boy and spoke in his voice.”

Shamanism and human psychology

Sun-ok looks doubtful. “Didn’t you say something earlier about the function shamans serve in society?”

Anne shrugs. “These beliefs give some power to women. All the Confucian stuff is for men only, although that is clearly changing.”

“That’s clearly one of its functions,” Frank agrees. “Also, people feel anxiety about the future, so they want to be prepared for what’s going to happen. I’ve read that in the country’s past there were probably times when people used shamans to hurt others—to put a curse on a husband’s girlfriend, for example. Today there’s almost none of that. A Korean psychiatrist says that the Korean shamanism is very humanistic. It aims toward harmony—people in the family getting along well together, children, a good life. According to the psychiatrist, the bad thing is that people aren’t encouraged to accept the responsibility for what happens to them. People are encouraged to see their good fortune or bad fortune as a result of something outside themselves.”

“Like Westerners look at the stars,” Anne comments.

“That’s right. So if things aren’t going right it’s because of an ancestor or a spirit. It’s not because of anything you are or aren’t doing. There seems to be some truth in that.”

“Don’t shamans take advantage of people?” Sun-ok asks.

“Sure. Once you get into this thing, once a shaman gets to know you and your history, then every time you see her, she’ll say, ‘You know we really need to do a rite for this spirit.’ Then it’s hard not to be completely involved. You let the spirits determine what your life’s going to be like, and then you’ve got a lot of obligations to these spirits. You have to give robes to the gods, and all kinds of other things come up. Maybe that’s where all your available money goes.”

“That’s really interesting, Frank. Thanks,” Anne says.

Birth dreams

Jane turns to Jeremy. “How did you happen to start analyzing Korean birth dreams?”

Jeremy looks around the table and smiles. “My wife used to tell me stories about her family. Her mother had had five children. With each pregnancy she had a dream which told something about the sex, the personality and the fortune of the child that was going to be born. In all five cases my mother-in-law’s dreams were accurate.”

“Really?” Sun-ok asks.

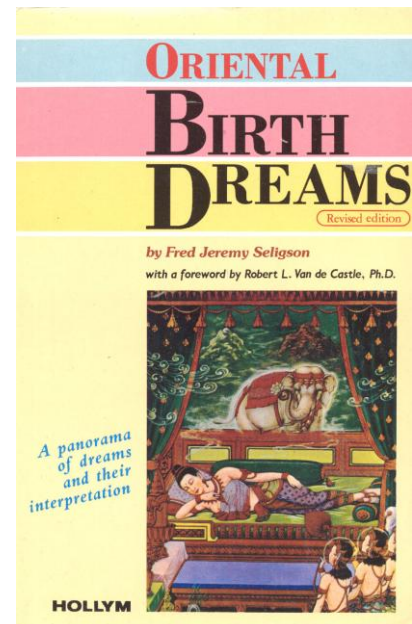
“Well, for one child she dreamed that she went to a tree and picked a beautiful peach. She took it home, laid it on the table and cut it open with a knife, but the inside of the peach was rotten. Now, there are Chinese, Japanese and Korean stories of a woman seeing a peach floating down the river and opening it to find a boy inside.”

“Mmm,” Frank nods.

“When my mother-in-law had the child, it was a very handsome boy. The boy’s grandfather said, ‘This boy’s going to be a star, a general, because he’s so handsome.’ But after a hundred days the child became sick and died. He was rotten inside, just like the peach. Then when she was pregnant with my wife’s older sister, my mother-in-law dreamed that she was walking along and saw a very beautiful persimmon in a tree. A bird knocked the persimmon down. She caught it and brought it home. But instead of cutting this one open, she put it behind the glass door of a cabinet where she could only look at it. The child was a girl who was very distant. Her mother could never get close to her. She became a nun, and she eventually committed suicide by jumping off a rock. It was strange—like the persimmon falling from the tree.” Jeremy pauses.

“So you got interested,” Anne prompts, indicating her own interest.

“Right. I had never heard of birth dreams before. I started collecting dreams from my students at the university. I gave workshops for high school and junior high school teachers and asked them to give me dreams. I collected about two thousand before I wrote the book. Now I have about four or five thousand. Almost all of them follow a pattern which indicates whether the child will be male or female and something of its personality and destiny. No two dreams were identical, and they were real. The dreams you read about in folk tales don’t sound the same as the ones you hear about from the people who dreamed them. So that’s how I decided to write this book on Oriental birth dreams.”



A Taoist interpretation

“This isn’t just a collection,” Brian says as he looks through Jeremy’s book. “You also interpret the dreams from a Taoist perspective.”

“The interpretations started with Taoism,” Jeremy says, “but they were also based on all this data I collected. Lee Jae-hyung, a friend and an old Taoist philosopher, taught me how about yin and yang elements. Fire, a yang symbol, would indicate a son—or success. Water is more a female element, but also yin.”

“Mmm,” Frank nods.

“In birth dreams water is a general element indicating conception. The shape of certain vegetables indicated a male or a female. A wild animal was male, a tame and quiet animal female. Almost always the dream and the sex of the child matched.”

The connection with ancient Korea

“There are dreams in the Bible foretelling the birth of a child, like Joseph’s dream about the birth of Jesus. Are these the same thing?” Anne asks.

“Yes, but in the West we have lost this ability, where here it’s still common. Koreans don’t always know how to interpret birth dreams, but the scheme is part of their nature. They inherit it from birth. It comes from the days when there were no doctors around to tell people the kind of child they were going to have. They had to find out for themselves. I think that in ancient days people could dream about the future—and maybe even nowadays in some places. Long ago people didn’t have a television in front of them or a radio beside them or a newspaper on the table. If they wanted to know something they had to sit and think, ‘I wonder what’s happening?’ They had to send their minds out into space and listen. In the ancient Asian way of thinking, there’s no break between heaven and earth. It is all one thing, and we are all part of it, so all information is available. Most of the women who have birth dreams pray for a child, and they try to make themselves very clean and pure-minded. They believe they are going to have a dream, so they are waiting for one. They know what’s happening inside their bodies. If the mind is the entire body, then the mind should be able to know everything that’s happening inside. I think this is an ability that has developed over maybe a hundred thousand years—since very ancient times. It still exists, but many younger people don’t believe it anymore. They think it’s superstition. If Koreans lose their belief in birth dreams, they’ll lose the ability to have them.”

In response to the doubtful expression he sees on Sun-ok’s face, Jeremy continues, “If you think about it, you know there are times when you feel an itch. This is because of some tiny reaction to something in the body. You can close your eyes and meditate and become really aware of the different parts of your body. A woman can become aware of something in her body, search for it and find it, and then translate what she finds into the language of dreams. The dream brings her the information, and it seems so real that she can’t forget it. It’s like it really happened.”

“Of course,” Brian says, “People who meditate can become very sensitive to their own bodies.”

Jeremy nods at them. “In a birth dream, it seems that the mind of an incoming spirit is also involved. It’s as if the spirit comes and says, ‘Look, Mom, I’m here. Come and see me.’ She comes to the spirit, and they share the dream together. Then she wakes up and says, ‘I’m pregnant.’”

“That’s a long way from Western rationality,” Jane comments. “Were you looking for something like this when you came to Korea?”

“When I came East, certainly,” Jeremy says. “After law school I traveled around the world, and I discovered that there was a totally non-Western way of looking at life. I wanted to experience it for myself.”

What road leads to the temple?

Anne turns to Brian, “You know, when I first met you, I thought to that you were no longer a Westerner. Your way of looking at the world has become so Asian.”

Jane asks, “Didn’t you come here in 1967?”

“That’s right. I became a public health worker out in a village. I really got into it, loved the people and enjoyed the experience. After my first assignment, I returned to Korea to train new Peace Corps volunteers, and I stayed on, working part-time and learning about the culture. I got involved with Buddhism and studied at a Buddhist night college. I did folk dancing, a traditional farmers’ band and then arts and crafts.”

“Are you leading up to the story about the butterfly?” Anne prompts.

Brian nods at her. “One day in 1983 I was some rice-paper dyes, and I had a strange feeling. So I did a chant, closed my eyes and folded the paper and dyed it without planning the results. Then I put it out to dry overnight. The next day when I opened it up, there was a design of a large monk’s robe, but empty, with a butterfly sitting at the top where the monk’s head would be if it were worn. The colors and design could only have happened spontaneously and unintentionally. I said, ‘Oh dear, what does this mean?’ An American friend said, ‘Why don’t you name it for the *Nabi Chum*, or Butterfly Dance, and enter it in the Buddhist art contest?’ I did enter it, and it won a place in the show. One day I was in the hall when I saw a monk looking at it with great interest. I explained how it was done and asked him what he thought it meant. He said, ‘Go to a place where they do the Butterfly Dance and study Buddhist art.’ I walked away confused, wondering what I should do. Then I forgot about it. About three months later, I got a call about an American professor of architecture who wanted to examine the patterns on temples. I agreed to interpret for him. At the temple we were talking to the master in the studio when the music for the Butterfly Dance began. Two days later I started studying temple painting with the master. I feel the Buddha sent me to it.”

Buddhist temple paintings

Smiles go around the table in response to this coincidence. Jane asks, “By ‘temple paintings’ do you mean the paintings on the walls and altars inside the temple or the ones on the outside walls?”

“Well, I’ve done both, actually, but I was meant the paintings on stretched cloth which usually go behind the statues on temple altars. It’s a visual art form which supports Buddhist ritual and devotion. The most common and most popular type is a large composition based on the Lotus Sutra or the Garland Sutra showing the historical Buddha giving a talk. With the Buddha are several Bodhisattvas, the Guardians of the Four Directions, and, depending on the size of the painting, from two to ten disciples.”

Sun-ok asks, “Now, a Bodhisattva is a being who has reached enlightenment, but doesn’t go to nirvana because she or he wants to return to earth and help the rest of us.”

“Right.”

Learning the discipline

“I’ll bet this painting course is pretty demanding,” Jane speculates.

“Well,” Brian responds, “The traditional course involves 9,000 practice works. First you take a line drawing of one of the Ten Kings of Bardo, and you make a thousand tracings of it using a transparent rice paper placed on top. This teaches you the basic strokes and the line which always has the same width and strength, reflecting the Buddhist concept of equality. Then you do a thousand sketches of the drawing, and then you draw it from memory a thousand times. After you’ve completed the three thousand copies of the first drawing, you’re given a more complicated drawing of one of the Four Guardians, and you do the same process again.”

“Because of the body positioning you have to do all of the drawings on the floor in order to get a ‘weighted’ line. You can really see the difference between lines drawn on the floor and lines drawn on an easel. You also have to breathe properly. Take a deep breath, hold it and do the line, then breathe out and do another one. At the beginning of the training process, you place your elbow and forearm on the floor, bring the brush down by moving the hand from the wrist, lift the whole arm and bring your arm down to continue the line. You have to practice linking the lines so that nobody can tell you stopped and started again. This takes concentration and control. It also takes practice and eye training to see the art and the difference in the lines.

“After having done several hundred tracings, you can tell that your lines express your feelings that day. When you learn to see that, you can read other people’s lines, and you can see what state of mind they’re in, the flow of the emotion, the mood. The lines are a reflection of your heart. I get a tremendous joy from this work. I love the meeting of black ink on white paper—both the visual effect and the way it reads your mind like a perfect mirror.”

“How long have you been at this?” Frank asks.

“I’m now in my seventh year at the studio. I’ve done not quite three thousand copies. I have increasingly less time to do copies, although I certainly feel the need for them. But a lot of other work comes into the studio, and I have to make a living in the afternoon.”

Accepting ancient ways

“You know,” Anne comments, “it wasn’t always true, but nowadays Westerners place a great deal of emphasis on creativity and the creative process.”

Brian nods. “There were times when I was very frustrated because the master was strict and often acted indifferent. You sat there doing the tracing and drawing, and he wouldn’t let you do things you weren’t ready for. As a Westerner I wanted to be ‘creative,’ and I wanted to try everything. But this is training, and his job as a National Treasure is to train people in a centuries-old tradition. In the Buddhist books, the temple paintings are described exactly—the figures and how they are supposed to be painted, the position of the colors on their clothes, everything. You can’t just do your own thing when it comes to a temple wall painting.”

“That’s because it’s handed down as a craft,” Jeremy interjects.

“Right. It makes a difference that this is considered a handicraft, not an art form. In the National Art Exhibition you have creative Buddhist art—water colors or oils of Buddhas and temple scenes. That’s fine. Creativity is important with those things.”

“Has this way of learning worked for you when you started doing the actual paintings?” Jane asks.

“I’ve done a lot of paintings, and I’ve found that’s true. After all those drawings, I’ve found that suddenly ideas and improvements will come out of nowhere. So I have verified for myself that there is something to this way of learning.”

Painting as Buddhist practice

“And, of course, doing this work also helps you become a better Buddhist,” Anne comments.

“There are lots of Buddhist teachings in the process,” Brian says. “First, there’s reverence for everything. Before you start tracing, when you’re sitting on the floor with your equipment ready, you do a half-bow from the waist with hands folded. This is an expression of genuine humility and a sense of awe at the universe and everything in it. Second, patience.

Third, equality, as expressed in the equal width and strength of the lines. Fourth, purity of mind and body—you have to be physically clean, and your mind has to be pure. Fifth, concentration on the here and now—absorption in what you’re doing at the moment. Sixth, ‘beginner’s mind,’ being completely in the tracing you’re doing and not in the 799 others you did that year. Seventh, emphasis on the process, rather than the result. Of course, when you have a deadline for large temple paintings, you have to have the result, and timing is crucial, but when you’re doing practice work you should be completely inside the process. Eighth, the peeling away of the ego. You can’t continue with an attitude of wanting to do things before you’re ready. You forget about yourself. You realize that it’s not important who did the painting. Maybe it will inspire someone. Over the years, millions of people have seen the master’s paintings, have prayed before them and been inspired by them. That thought gives you perspective. You see how the ego is responsible for a lot of trouble in the world. Before I came here I might have bragged about having done something like the two paintings I just finished. Now, I didn’t even sign them.”

Coming home

Sun-ok frowns, “And has your work been accepted?”

“Yes, I get commissions. At first it seemed amazing because nobody ever thought a foreigner would be asked to do one of these.”

“But it’s much more than that,” Anne comments.

“Of course,” Brian says. “I find a tremendous joy, not only being with the master, but just working. After decades of searching, I found what I really wanted to do. There are good times and bad times. It’s a question of faith and trust.

“It’s funny how things come full cycle. As a Buddhist, I’m likely to call it karma. A friend of mine belongs to a computer forum. He was writing to a man in Wakefield, Massachusetts, my home town and asked me for something about Wakefield that he could put in his e-mail. Now, I had noticed once when I was flying out of Logan Airport that the shape of Lake Quannapowitt looks like the shape of the Korean peninsula. So I said jokingly, ‘Why don’t you tell him that Wakefield and Korea have a karmic relationship?’ The next day my friend received a reply saying that a Korean Buddhist temple had recently opened in Wakefield. That’s the last place on earth I would expect a Buddhist temple, let alone a Korean temple. So here I am. I’ve spent twenty-five years in Korea and become a Buddhist and a temple painter, only to find a Korean temple opening in my home town. When I went home this summer, I met the monk in charge. I had brought with me a small painting as a gift, a painting of the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. The monk asked me to do a big painting for the temple. I can’t think of anything nicer to do than a painting for my home town. I’m so happy. I have always had this longing that sometime the Buddha would make his way to Wakefield and people would learn his teaching there.”

Frank grins. “It’s a long way from Korea.”

“As far from Korea as you can get. Here’s this boy who was brought up ten miles north of Boston, played Little League baseball in a quiet little suburb and chased the ice cream man down the street in order to buy an orange popsicle. I wonder what that ice cream man would think about my doing a Korean Buddhist temple painting.”

“You’ve had an interesting life so far,” Sun-ok comments.

“I have no regrets whatsoever. I find joy that wells up from the heart. To be able to paint a Bodhisattva or a Buddha—this is paradise. It could not be anywhere else. I don’t know what enlightenment is, but I don’t need it. I can think of no greater joy.”

Where do we go from here?

For a few moments there is a peaceful silence as people smile back at Brian. Then Anne says, “I think it’s clear that all of us have been touched by Korea and have learned Korean ways, probably much more than we think we have. What do you think about all this, Sun-ok?”

Sun-ok shakes her head. “I have to say this. I’m amazed. I really had no idea.”