

K-Shamans: K-Dramas and Changing Perceptions of *Mudang* Credibility

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Since 2020, South Korean spirituality has increasingly featured in a variety of television genres. The global appeal of K-dramas has the potential to turn *mudang* 巫堂 (shaman) into K-shamans, in the process creating idealized global spiritual leaders. This process is facilitated by the creation of trust in *mudang*, a trust fostered through specific cinematic features and narrative structures. Many recent television representations depict *mudang* as well-rounded characters with daily lives, family issues, and personal struggles. They are figures with whom the audience can sympathize and whom they can understand and even admire. This is in contrast to earlier media depictions of them as flat characters who perform bizarre rituals that affect the other characters in negative ways. Their spiritual work is now depicted in such a way as to enhance public trust in this tradition. Moreover, recent Korean television dramas have created trust in *musok* 巫俗 (shamanism) practices by featuring both authentic and fake *mudang* in parallel. In so doing, the dramas show that *mudang* work to appease angry spirits and alleviate human suffering resulting from supernatural forces. Such mainstreaming of *musok* positions the once stigmatized practice at the heart of Korea's cultural identity. This article focuses on close reading of specific scenes from recent K-dramas.

Keywords: Korean shamanism, K-dramas, trust, *mudang*, authenticity

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Introduction

Since 2020, there has been a noticeable increase in television productions highlighting Korean spirituality. While ghosts and demons are conventional characters in the horror genre, they are less common in romantic comedies or matchmaking reality shows. However, *mudang* 巫堂 (shaman) and their practices are now a familiar presence in a wide variety of television programs. The 2025 Netflix anime film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* is one such production. The global appeal of such K-productions has the potential to transform traditional *mudang* into K-shamans, idealized global spiritual leaders. I argue that such a gradual process is facilitated in part by the creation of trust in *mudang*, fostered by specific cinematic features and narrative structures in recent dramas.

K-dramas generate interest in Korea and Korean culture,¹ but until recently, *mudang* have not been part of this mechanism. The recent shift to highlight these characters in K-dramas has pushed them from the fringes of society to the center of the *hallyu* effect. This is a result of what Steve Choe calls “The poetics of K-drama.”² As he explains it, “exemplary moments in K-drama that feature a character, or a group of characters, feeling something strongly, moments that are often accompanied by sentimental music that underscores the sincerity of that emotion”³ encourage the viewer to empathize with the character and want to know more about him or her. One effect of this has been young K-drama fans wanting to meet a *mudang* to learn more about the culture. This is a case of “ferrying of emotion through media technology,”⁴ a screen mediated agency that creates actual change in the viewers’ perspective. The recent surge of interest in Korea’s spiritual mediation demonstrates that such an emotional impact can also be produced when the supernatural is at the center of a K-drama narrative.

Recent television productions portray *mudang* as well-rounded characters with daily lives, family issues, and personal struggles. Their rituals and veneration practices are entwined with their personal lives. They are also often the main protagonists of the show and evolve as the drama progresses. In most cases, they are figures that the audience can sympathize with, understand, and even admire. This is in contrast to earlier media depictions in which *mudang* were essentially evil characters whose rituals negatively affected the main characters.⁵ Contemporary dramas have the potential to enhance public trust in this tradition. Belli and Broncano describe trust as a meta-emotion, one that can lead to other emotions such as happiness or anger. In K-dramas, trust is constructed as the story unfolds, with this meta-

¹ Steve Choe, “Sympathetic Distances: *Twenty-Five Twenty-One* and K-Drama Poetics,” *Situations: Cultural Studies in the Asian Context* 17, no. 1 (2024): 1–24.

² Choe, “Sympathetic Distances,” 3.

³ Choe, “Sympathetic Distances,” 3.

⁴ Choe, “Sympathetic Distances,” 6.

⁵ For a history of the depiction of *mudang* in film and television, see Liora Sarfati, *Contemporary Korean Shamanism: From Ritual to Digital* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021).

emotion providing “the structure of emotional experiences in [the] narratives.”⁶ Moreover, “we depend on narratives to take decisions, and trust is the basis of these decisions.”⁷

Analyzing the positive representations of *mudang* in K-dramas in recent years offers an explanation for the increasing popularity of spiritual practices among young Korean and non-Korean K-drama viewers. These dramas have presented them as important social actors. In many English translations of these dramas, *mudang* are called exorcists, as their main work is to appease angry spirits who cause harm to the living, most of whom are *keunung* 구렁 (spirits of people who suffered a violent death). However, K-dramas also include other shamanic beliefs and practices, often represented by an ancient tree decorated with colorful strings that serves as a pilgrimage site. These dramas often show people praying under such a tree, asking for supernatural guidance and sometimes receiving a response from the tree. Such scenes mirror contemporary South Korea, where *musok* thrives as a counselling practice, with young people in particular turning to it for advice on life-changing decisions, health issues, and personal distress. Finding a *mudang* to consult with has become increasingly digitally mediated, to fit such young clients.⁸

Analyzing screen-created trust, I refer to it as “an emotion characterized by the belief that someone or something is good, reliable, and capable of meeting expectations.”⁹ As a meta-emotion, one of the aims of trust is “sharing knowledge between agents, when someone who provides testimony shares knowledge in an epistemic trust process with others.”¹⁰

Recent K-dramas feature a large amount of information on *musok*. Several creators and actors have highlighted the fact that they met *mudang* in person and learned from them how the practice should be depicted on the screen.¹¹ This helps the audience to believe in the authenticity of their depictions of *musok*.

When potential *musok* clients perceive practitioners as authentic, they can trust them to help solve their personal problems. Having doubts about *musok* as a whole, might prevent them from seeking the help of *mudang*. If trust is an internalized practice, as Belli and Broncano suggest, then when K-drama protagonists trust the *mudang*, the viewers might trust a practicing *mudang* in real life to achieve their desire for peace of mind, reduced anxiety, and happiness.

My analysis rests on the assumption that narratives are causal accounts that create the

⁶ Simone Belli and Fernando Broncano, “Trust as a Meta-Emotion,” *Metaphilosophy* 48, no. 4 (2017): 444.

⁷ Belli and Broncano, “Trust as a Meta-Emotion,” 445.

⁸ Joonseong Lee, *The Assemblage of Korean Shamanism: Mediatization and Territorialization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 159–165.

⁹ Jack Lasky, “Trust,” *Research Starters Home by Ebsco*. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/trust-emotion>.

¹⁰ Belli and Broncano, “Trust as a Meta-Emotion,” 430.

¹¹ See, for example, Kang Sun-ae, “*The Haunted Palace* Kim Ji-yeon Says She Met with a Shaman to Prepare for Her Role,” *SBS Star*, April 8, 2025, <https://sbsstar.net/article/N1008053862/the-haunted-palace-kim-jiyeon-says-she-met-with-a-shaman-to-prepare-for-her-role>; and Joan MacDonald, “A Shaman Saves Her Unlucky First Love in K-Drama *Head Over Heels*,” *Forbes*, June 23, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joanmacdonald/2025/06/23/a-shaman-saves-her-unlucky-first-love-in-k-drama-head-over-heels/>.

meta-emotion of trust which “contributes to the taming and narrowing of the horizons of the expectable so that our social life becomes possible.”¹² Narratives are now increasingly in the form of screen productions such as television dramas. Analyzing these is crucial for understanding the relevance of stories to people’s life choices. Emotional appeal is one of the reasons for the global success of K-dramas, as they offer “a wholesome alternative to the cynical stories often featured in American television.”¹³ Tracing the ways in which K-dramas create a variety of emotions toward *musok* helps elucidate how trust emerges through complex and sometimes contradictory narratives centering on the juxtaposition of a real and fake *mudang*.

The combination of two contradicting narratives, one that *mudang* can be fraudulent, greedy people and the other that *mudang* can alleviate suffering, has been central to several recent successful K-dramas that will be discussed below. These dramas feature two main characters, an authentic *mudang*, whose work is represented as important and useful, and a fake *mudang*, who exploits his practice. Through these depictions, the dramas show that there are *mudang* who genuinely work to appease angry spirits and alleviate human suffering. Such mainstreaming of *musok* positions the once stigmatized practice at the heart of Korean cultural identity.

The sympathy to the *mudang* will be discussed using Choe’s analysis of the affective interlude, a moment that “emerges not in the verbal interactions between characters or in the development of the plot that is facilitated by these interactions, but in the moments that precede or follow them, when time is given to showcase character emotion.”¹⁴

K-Dramas Featuring *Musok*

My analysis focuses on four Korean television dramas from the 2020s where *musok*, exorcism, possession, and *mudang* are central to the plots. The first is *Haibai, mama* 하이바이, 마마 (Hi bye, mama),¹⁵ where a ghost haunts her young daughter until convinced by a *mudang* to leave for the afterlife. The second is *Usu mudang Ka Tusim* 우수 무당 가두심 (The great shaman Ka Tusim)¹⁶ which details the story of an 18-year-old girl who is destined to become a *mudang* but who tries to lead a conventional life. In the third, *Taebak pudongsan* 대박 부동산 (Sell your haunted house),¹⁷ an exorcist who is also the owner of a realty business guides vengeful spirits to the afterlife. The fourth drama, *Minamdang* 미남당 (Café minamdang),¹⁸ revolves

¹² Belli and Broncano, “Trust as a Meta-Emotion,” 430.

¹³ Steve Choe, “Sympathy for the K-Drama,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, June 11, 2024, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2024/06/11/sympathy-for-the-k-drama/>.

¹⁴ Steve Choe, “Sympathy for the K-Drama”

¹⁵ *Haibai, Mama*, written by Kwŏn Hyeju, directed by Yu Chewŏn, aired February 22, 2020, on tvN.

¹⁶ *Usu mudang Ka Tusim*, written by Ju Pŭradŏsŭ, directed by Pak Hojin, aired July 30, 2021, on Kakao TV.

¹⁷ *Taebak pudongsan*, written by Ha Sujin, Chŏng Yŏnsŏ, and Yi Yŏnghwa, directed by Pak Chinsŏk, aired April 14, 2021, on KBS 2.

¹⁸ *Minamdang*, written by Pak Hyejin, directed by Ko Chaehyŏn, aired June 27, 2022, on KBS2.

around a detective who pretends to be a *mudang* to solve complicated crimes.

I chose these four dramas because they were produced by large broadcast or streaming companies and achieved a viewership of over 5% in Korea. In addition, they received high ratings and were subsequently broadcast by global streaming companies such as Netflix and Apple TV. The four dramas depict spirits who are complex entities but usually not evil in nature. They are simply frustrated and seeking relief. In these dramas, the *mudang* are important agents in establishing harmony in society through their negotiations with these spirits. These depictions serve to rehabilitate *musok*, which has in many ways become a marginalized tradition.

Each drama represents a different genre. *Usu mudang Ka Tusim* is a fantasy teen romance, *Taebak pudongsan* is a comedy thriller, *Minamdang* is a comic mystery romance, and *Hai bai, mama* is a tragi-comic fantasy. As in many K-productions, all of these dramas incorporate a variety of genres.¹⁹ Most significantly, they are not multi-episode low-budget soaps produced as morning shows or horror series, but high-budget limited dramas for primetime evening broadcast.

In the following, I provide an overview of the marginal place *mudang* have had in Korean society. This is then followed by an analysis of the four dramas in terms of their narrative, visuals, music, and effects. In doing this, I focus on the introduction of spirituality and spirit mediums; the depiction of spirit possession, rituals, and exorcism; and the how the characters of authentic and fake practitioners evolve. Finally, I discuss what the audience learns about *musok* through these dramas and how these televised narratives counter the marginalization of *mudang*. The analysis shows how K-dramas represent trustworthy exorcists and *mudang*, and how these depictions affect viewers' trust in *mudang*.

Reinvigorating *Musok* in Korean Media and Urban Life

Many Koreans believe *musok* to be occult, outlandish, distant, and impossible to understand.²⁰ The stigma against *mudang* in Korea has historically pushed them geographically to the peripheries of villages, while simultaneously relegating them to the fringes of society as a low-status group. Some *mansin* 萬神 (*mudang* who practice spirit possession) that I interviewed in my fieldwork deliberately limit contact with their family members.²¹ They do this with the explicit aim of shielding their children from the stigma associated with being children of a *mansin*. Several of the K-dramas discussed here depict spirit mediums who have relatives who were also *mansin*. These characters often try to escape their spiritual calling, but discover that

¹⁹ Pablo Utin, "Sliding through Genres: The Slippery Structure in South Korean Films," *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 8, no. 1 (2016): 45–58.

²⁰ Lee, *The Assemblage of Korean Shamanism*, 3–4.

²¹ *Mudang* can be one of two kinds. Some act like priests of hereditary or learned convictions, while others experience possession by spirits. See Ch'oe Kilsŏng, *Han'guk musok ū yŏn'gu: Tonghaean chiyŏk ū chungsim ūro han sabŏe illyubakchŏk yŏn'gu* (Sŏul: Asea Munhwasa, 1978), chapter 1.

they cannot avoid it.

More positive views of *musok* already started to emerge in the 1980s, when the government recognized the role of several *mudang* as keepers of Korean culture, under the government program for intangible cultural heritage preservation. The media of the 1980s and 1990s celebrated famous *mudang* such as Kim Kŭmhwa, dedicating newspapers articles and television programs to their work, focusing mostly of its artistic aspects, and the importance of preserving national heritage. At the same time, negative views have also persisted, as evidenced by recent critical comments about political figures who rely on advice from *mansin*.

While *mansin* have historically been marginalized in society, their rituals, supernatural mediation abilities, and traditions have made them popular characters in television dramas in Korea. My *mudang* interviewees tell that for many young Koreans, magic, spirituality, and mysticism are trendy subjects that can be beneficial in solving personal problems, rather than old-fashioned superstitions and traditions. They meet also clients that come for consultations because of media-ignited curiosity rather than actual distress.²² This is in contrast to the views of older Korean clients, who consult *mansin* out of desperation and only as a last resort.²³ Television dramas have been key to this renewed popularity of *musok* in Korea. They have depicted *musok* in a manner that intricately weaves the worldview and activities of the *mansin* into the tapestry of viewers' understanding of Korean culture, spirituality, and beliefs. Walraven has investigated the renewed popularity of *musok* in Korea. His observations have led him to the conclusion that the *mudang*'s manner of weaving ritual practice to fit the ideologies and values of their clients is a significant factor in this.²⁴ In this way, the *mudang* forms a bond of trust with the client. Most *mudang* in K-dramas solve personal problems rather than showcase national heritage. In this respect, the role of *musok* as portrayed through television has changed from preserving the knowledge of cultural performances, as in documentaries in the 1990s, to helping people overcome difficulties in their lives. This shift has proved beneficial in terms of the ratings *musok*-focused dramas are now receiving.

In the early 2000s, *mansin* rarely appeared in the media and the cultural industry. However,²⁵ since 2020, the number of K-dramas centered on *musok*, exorcists, and *mansin* has increased significantly. Moreover, the supernatural entities that appear in these TV shows have increasingly been depicted as creatures suffering from injustice and marginalization. According to Sung-Ae Lee, "The conscious use of ghosts as cinematic metaphors is relatively

²² I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork with *mudang* and their clients since 2005, and while this article focuses on media representations, I added a few points that my *mudang* acquaintances have mentioned in relation to the affect of media on their daily practices.

²³ Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF: South Korean Popular Religion in Motion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 52, 64, 143, 146–8.

²⁴ Boudewijn Walraven, "Weavers of Ritual: How Shamans Achieve Their Aims," *Review of Korean Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002): 90, 101.

²⁵ Jinseok Seo, "The Haunted Culture: Shamanic Heroes in the Cultural Content Industry of South Korea," *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* 12, no. 1 (2011): 93.

recent in TV drama,”²⁶ and this has affected the depiction of *mansin*. They are now people who can alleviate the suffering of supernatural beings that appear less forbidding than their earlier stereotype.

Earlier depictions of *mansin* were as comic relief in primetime television, and more nuanced representation in morning shows for the elderly and housewives. *Wangkekot sŏnnyŏnim* 왕꽃 선녀님 (Lotus flower fairy),²⁷ first broadcast in 2004, spent hundreds of daily episodes detailing the tale of the initiation of a *mansin*. However, in the 2020s, primetime series typically include only 12–18 episodes, and the story does not develop as a chronological narrative. Instead, *mansin* use possession and exorcism for solving crimes, helping others, or creating mischief, and the sources of their spiritual powers are revealed gradually throughout the show. In addition, these shows often include *keut* 굿 rituals, shrines, altars, and various symbols, including *pujŏk* 符籙 (amulets), *sinbok* 神服 (costumes that represent gods and spirits), and brass bells. This familiarizes the audience with these symbols, and they have increasingly been integrated into opening scenes and publicity posters (figure 1, 2).



Fig. 1. Publicity poster for *Usu mudang Ka Tusim*
우수 무당 가두침 [The great shaman Ka Tusim].



Fig.2. Publicity poster for *Taebak pudongsan*
대박 부동산 [Sell your haunted house].

²⁶ Sung-Ae Lee, “Lost in Liminal Space: Amnesiac and Incognizant Ghosts in Korean Drama,” *Mosaic: A Journal for The Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*. 48 (2015): 128.

²⁷ *Wangkekot sŏnnyŏnim*, written by Im Sŏngha and Kim Nahyŏn, directed by Yi Chinyŏng, aired June 7, 2004, on MBC.

K-dramas have also affected the terminology used in regard to exorcists and spirit mediums. The scholarly term for the broader phenomenon of spiritual healing and divination in Korean culture is *musok* 巫俗, literally translating to “Shamanic customs.” *Mansin* 萬神 is a title for practitioners who become possessed by the spirits of others (*sin naerim* 神내림, possession). *Mansin* translates to “10,000 spirits,” suggesting that the practitioner can be possessed by a myriad of supernatural entities, including nature gods, ancestors, and famous historical figures. Becoming a *mansin* is a spiritual calling, although some have close relatives who are also *mansin*. Most practitioners depicted in K-dramas are *mansin*, but the commonly used title in these dramas is *mudang* 巫堂, a term that means both those who are possessed by the entities with whom they commune and those who are not. Hereditary *mudang* are rarely depicted in K-dramas, although they are featured in documentary films, government sponsored stage performances, and local festivals. Practitioners that participated in my fieldwork research also use the term *posal* 菩薩 (bodhisattva, a Buddhist entity) as their title to highlight their work in alleviating human suffering. However, this title rarely appears in K-dramas.

In the late 20th century, *mudang* was perceived as a stigma-laden term. Laurel Kendall referred to it as “not only imprecise but also derogatory.”²⁸ However, in recent years, *mansin* have adopted the term *mudang* and even address their peers as such. The increase in positive depictions of *mudang* in the mainstream media reflects such changes in social and cultural perceptions. Much of the research on *musok* in popular culture in the 20th century saw it as reflecting the tragic hardship that Korea had undergone through modernity and colonialism.²⁹ *Mudang* depicted in such films were usually in rural areas and served as antagonists of modernization and technology.³⁰ Some films depicted female *mudang* as promiscuous characters, emphasizing the tension between traditional patriarchal society and women in a non-organized religion. These marginalized women gained agency through a subaltern practice and belief system.³¹

In contemporary K-dramas, *mudang* and exorcists possess abilities similar to those of traditional *mudang*, including the ability to banish ghosts and to inflict physical pain from afar.³² There is no differentiation between contemporary *mudang* and fantastical characters from the past. These dichotomies have become irrelevant. *Mudang* who are active in contemporary urban Korea are sophisticated, tech-savvy, and respected. The *mudang* depicted in dramas are not all versed in traditional ritual songs and materials, but they are capable of manipulating

²⁸ Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985), xi.

²⁹ Zoran Lee Pecic, “Shamans and Nativism: Postcolonial Trauma in *Spirits' Homecoming* (2016) and *Mansbin: Ten Thousand spirits* (2013),” *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 12, no. 1 (2020): 70; Yi Mina, “Han'guk hyöndae hoegok üi 'pigük söng' palhyön yangsang yöngu: Rok'öllijüm kwa syamönijüm suyong chakp'um üi chungsim üro,” *Han'guk munye pip'yöng yöngu* 55 (2017): 170.

³⁰ Sarfati, “The Changing Image of Musok in Films,” chap. 2 in *Contemporary Korean Shamanism*.

³¹ Hyunseon Lee, “Shamanism in Korean Cinema and Popular Culture: The Korean Shaman Narrative, Shaman Films, and Women,” *Chungang saron* 54 (2021): 210–15.

³² Sarfati, *Contemporary Korean Shamanism*, 138–40.

the supernatural according to the specific needs of their clients. They are “good shamans” who “conduct rituals without, or with very few, traditional paraphernalia, who do not sing the traditional songs, and who use only the simplest kind of musical accompaniment.”³³ These *mudang* effectively mediate between humans and the supernatural rather than functioning as repositories of folkloric traditions. The degree to which their rituals are effective can be measured by the relief of the anxieties, pain, and sorrows of their clients.

Television representations of *musok* practitioners have improved the public image of *mansin*. Furthermore, they have liberated *mansin* from the stereotype of the suffering woman of soap opera narrative tropes. A preliminary response to these contemplations is offered through the positive reception articulated by the majority of *mansin* interviewed during the course of my fieldwork. *Mansin*’s online forums, blogs, and social network pages reveal many discussions of television depictions of *musok*. Practitioners debate how well the *mansin* and actors performed and whether the directors and screenplay writers really understood *musok*. Several practitioners have served as advisors during these productions.

With these more authentic portrayals, *mudang* have assumed an aura of formidable power. They grapple with the hardships and societal stigma entailed in being a *mansin* and manage to carve a path toward success and acclaim. They are typically characterized by youth, beauty, and charm, and are far from the stigma of *mudang* as rural, elderly, and uneducated.

First Impressions Matter: Portrayals of K-Shaman

In this section, I compare the initial sequences of the four dramas, focusing on how the creators chose to introduce the *mudang*. While in some cases, the first impression is intentionally shattered later in the drama, in others, it remains constant. These scenes include effective interludes that project constellations of emotions, allowing to begin establishing appreciation of and trust in *mudang*.

In *Pudongsan*, the first episode introduces a female exorcist and her male assistant. Both are attractive and fashionably dressed. The scene is a hospital at night. With eerie music playing in the background, the camera shows a white sand circle, a human skull, and vertebrae. A sudden flash of lightning reveals the exorcist as she turns around to confront a ghost. Underneath his sad visage are the vestiges of a handsome young man. Black smoke emanates from him, marking his ghostly nature. As he runs toward her, she takes out a weapon and shoots a beam of light at him, stopping him in his tracks. As he tries to escape, he jumps out of a window only to land inside the sand circle, where the exorcist’s assistant is waiting. The exorcist surrounds them with a wall of light, and the ghost enters her assistant’s body. He then fights the exorcist until she stabs him with her hairpin. The ghost then turns into white smoke and dissipates in the air. The assistant wakes up, remembering nothing what of what has just happened.

³³ Walraven, “Weavers of Ritual,” 90.

In the next scene, an elderly office lady promises a man seated in front of her that her realtor agency specializes in removing spirits from properties. The exorcist walks in, wearing a black business suit and asks if anyone has died in the house recently. The office lady introduces her as the owner of the agency. The exorcist asks the client if he killed anyone recently, at which point he turns white. She then laughs as he asks if he needs to prepare food for a *kut* ritual. She walks out saying that she first has to see if there is a vengeful spirit in his house. We learn that she conducts her rituals without an audience. In these two initial scenes, she is shown as a powerful *mudang* who uses new technology in private rituals rather than traditional *kut* ritual performances.

The *mudang* in *Minamdang* is also a business entrepreneur. In the first scene, an aerial camera follows a fancy car as it drives across the Han River, highlighting the whole city. The car stops in front of Lotte Tower, an iconic building in Seoul. Two lines of employees bow as the young male exorcist gets out of the car in a wine-colored designer suit. A woman in a business suit leads him through a corridor to a meeting where a team of executives are interviewing candidates for a managerial position. The exorcist watches the meeting on a screen from another room and advises a female manager through an earpiece, revealing the weaknesses of each candidate. Suddenly, he bursts into the meeting room, stands in front of a foreign candidate, and begins shaking a bunch of brass bells. Then he spreads a painted fan and starts dancing around the candidate. In the background, we hear *musok* cymbals and gongs. He says there is an angry spirit there, but he suddenly turns to the head manager of the team and accuses him of harassing a secretary who committed suicide. Guards then appear and take out the screaming manager. The scene ends with the shocked candidate asking who he is, to which he replies, “The wonder of Yonghae-dong, *paksu mudang* (male shaman) Nam Hanjun.”

The next scene shows a colorful popup with his name and phone number and the statement “Reservation required,” as in a YouTube commercial for a contemporary *mudang* in Seoul. We see Nam, his sister, and two assistants walking and dancing in the streets with messages such as “Good for all ages,” “Solves family problems,” and “Call if you have money issues.” They then walk across a bridge on the Han River, followed by a line of twenty people. These sequences include well-known *musok* symbols used by most *mansin* on their YouTube channels.³⁴

Later, we learn that Nam is a private detective who rents an office that used to belong to a *mudang*, leading his clients to believe that he has superpowers. He uses this belief to supplement his sophisticated computer hacking, through which he solves crimes and helps the police to catch criminals. The police officers, however, believe that he knows the information because he is a *mudang*. They trust his communications with the supernatural, as do his clients. Although he is not a believer, Nam performs rituals and solves problems, thus alleviating the sorrow of many, and in that respect, he fulfills the function of a *mudang*.³⁵

³⁴ See for an example of a web page promoting a *mudang*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6M8nfwo4N8>

³⁵ Kim Hosŏn, “Tŭrama *Minamdang* sok katcha mudang ŭi hyŏngsang kwa ŭiŭi,” *Hanguk musokhak* 50 (2025): 7–8.

In episode 7 of *Minamdang*, an authentic *mansin* performs a *kut* ritual, but her actions appear confused. Her character is flat, similar to the marginal *mudang* of earlier films. She is middle aged, not very elegant, and rather unconvincing. In contrast, in episode 9 introduces a pretty, young *mudang*, who then plays a central role for several episodes. In her first appearance, she performs an elegant ritual in aid of one of the candidates in the mayoral election. She stabs the photograph of one of the candidates, and he then gets a heart attack. Even though she is not the main character, she uses her supernatural powers to devastating effect. Episode 11 explains that her spiritual mother discovered that she was involved in a fraud and drove her away from the spiritual family. She then burned down the house with her spirit mother in it and began to use her spiritual powers for evil. In contrast to the helpful fake *mudang*, she creates suffering and sorrow, the opposite of the role of the traditional *mudang*.³⁶

In *Haibai, mama*, the main character is not a *mansin* but the ghost of a mother who cannot leave her child. Many other ghosts appear throughout the drama, and the *mudang* strives to appease them. In her introduction, she is in a funeral home trying to convince the ghosts there to move on to the afterworld. She is dressed in old clothes, with fuzzy hair and colorful uneven makeup. When the mother's ghost tries to hide in her urn, she entices her out of the ashes using brass bells and scolds her for not leaving the human world and her daughter in peace.

While this *mudang* is not beautiful or fashionable, she is presented as a true practitioner who earnestly mediates with the supernatural. Her sole wish is to help spirits leave this world in order to be reborn and to prevent the disruption caused by their unwillingness to do so. Moreover, the spirit of the mother is not an evil or vengeful spirit, but more an "incognizant ghost, [that] does not know that she has died and cannot understand why everybody seems to be ignoring her."³⁷ This depiction parallels common Korean folktale narratives about the tragic deaths of young people.

An urban setting is also the background of *Usu mudang Ka Tusim*. In the first episode, a spirit appears in a high school building. The ghost has bright yellow eyes and emanates black smoke. Two exorcists wearing high school uniforms fight him with an ax, bells, and paper talismans. Then there is a flashback in time, and we see a child with her grandmother go upstairs in a tall building where a possessed man is about to jump. During the interaction between the child and the possessed young man, she rubs her palms and sends some energy his way. He laughs, his eyes yellow, and tries unsuccessfully to enter her body. Then he goes to the roof edge and jumps to his death. Black smoke leaves his body and materializes as a ball outside the building where the grandmother manages to trap it in a stone she keeps in a small bag. The black smoke dissipates but not before saying that it will come again for the child when she turns eighteen.

The next scene returns to the present with the destined exorcist now a high school student. She visits the burial site of her grandmother's urn, where she encounters a number

³⁶ Kim, "Türama *Minamdang*," 7–8.

³⁷ Sung-Ae Lee, "Lost in Liminal Space: Amnesiac and Incognizant Ghosts in Korean Drama," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 48, no. 3 (2015): 125.

of ghosts and chases them away. The viewer learns that she is a good student in a very expensive high school but that her destiny is to help society.

Each of the dramas suggests that it is their deep suffering that causes ghosts to be dangerous. *Mudang* are thus important and useful members of society as they are the only ones who can release these spirits from their torment. In addition, the handsome young *mansin* are depicted as professionals who are fashionable, clever, sophisticated, and admired, and in most cases, they succeed in solving the problems of their friends and clients. These *mudang* can see them and negotiate with spirits and possess unique powers. The only deviation from this is *Minamdang*, where the first episode introduces the fake *mudang*, while the authentic evil *mudang* appears only in episode 11.

Depictions of Possession and Ritual

In most dramas, the role of the *mudang* or exorcist is to create harmony in the human world by sending ghosts to the afterlife. This recurring theme is a basic belief in Korean shamanism and the central role of contemporary *mudang*. Their clients attribute their problems, including bankruptcy, illness, and personal disasters, to ghosts, often deceased family members or spirits related to places and natural elements.³⁸ While some K-dramas show *kut* rituals that resemble traditional *musok* practice, others depict innovative technology-enhanced performances. An example of a traditional *kut* occurs in episode 15 of the psychological thriller *Tō kǔllori* 더 글로리 (The glory).³⁹ After being threatened by the vile protagonist that used to bully her schoolmates, the *mansin* performs a ritual and is possessed by the protagonist's main abuse target, who died because of her bullying and became a vengeful ghost. She falls to the ground, with the people around her deciding that she is being punished for using the ghost for her benefit. This depiction of *mansin* possession within such a widely viewed show increases the awareness of *musok*, its rituals, and its potential for solving real problems.

In *Taebek pudongsan*, the *mansin*'s male assistant is possessed, whereas the *mansin* speaks to the spirits without being possessed. This act of an exorcist using a spirit medium is reminiscent of the southern hereditary *musok* tradition, where possession is not a constant feature of the *mudang*. The possession is explained to the audience through flashbacks to the *mansin*'s childhood in which her mother explains to her that spirits that do not leave the human world become vengeful ghosts and cause harm. It is the role of the *mudang* to send them to the afterworld. Only then can their destructive acts stop. The mother says that being a ghost that remains in the human world is like standing outside on a stormy night in your underwear. In episode 16, the male assistant feels very sad after absorbing the memories of an exorcized spirit. He asks the *mansin* how she endures such sadness after all the years she has been practicing. These reflections are offered as factual, and are accentuated through the

³⁸ Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF*, xx–xxi.

³⁹ *Tō kǔllori*, written by Kim Ŭnsuk, directed by An Kilho, aired December 30, 2022, on Netflix.

emotional response of the protagonists. This affective interlude creates sympathy for the harsh life of a *mudang*.

In *Minamdang*, the first shamanic consultation in Nam's sindang 신당 (shrine), located in the basement of his café, occurs ten minutes into the first episode. The scene begins with him getting out of the shower and going into his tidy walk-in closet, full of colorful suits and white shirts. He dresses and looks in the mirror, pleased with how he looks in an expensive green tailored business suit. Minamdang coffee shop, where the shrine is located, is full of giggling young women. This is in stark contrast to the client who appears at the entrance. He is a short, middle-aged man followed by a massive bodyguard. The café attendant takes him down two flights of stairs into a fancy wood-decorated corridor with leather couches and several rooms. When she opens the door, he sees Nam on an elevated platform seated in front of red-lit *musindo* 巫神圖 screens (paintings of deities), holding a fan. Nam shouts, "How dare you bring bad energy!" He tells the client that he cheated on his wife and she cheated back and escaped with his money, both shocking and terrifying the client at the same time. However, we then discover that the information comes from Nam's sister, an intelligence officer, who obtained the information through computer hacking. Through monitoring CCTV cameras, she finds the wife on the verge of fleeing with her lover and her husband's money, allowing the client to send his men and police officers to stop her. After this, they all praise the supernatural powers of Paksu Mudang Nam. The divination ritual is only a brief part of this sequence but includes traditional symbols such as bells, a fan, and paintings of deities. Even though Nam is a fake *mudang*, everyone accepts the idea that spirits can be present and communicate with humans.

In scene 4 of *Haibai, mama*, the *mudang* is in a consultation room, but the clients are not human. They are ghosts that look like people. The shrine features *musindo* and statues of deities, offerings such as sweets and liqueurs, and lit candles and incense. The *mudang* sits behind a low table with yellow paper and red ink available to paint *pjŏk* amulets when needed. One of the "clients" is a multi-generational family. From their outfits, it is clear that some of them are from more than a hundred years ago. They explain that they are still in the human world because they are waiting for a living son to die so that they can all go to the afterworld. The *mudang* is upset and throws rice and red beans at them saying she will break the family line if they do not go to the afterlife right there and then. The scene is reminiscent of a regular consultation with an ordinary *mudang*, with the client asking for advice and amulets, also depicted in *mudang* promotional videos on YouTube.

True Versus Fraudulent *Mudang*

One of the interesting innovations in supernatural K-dramas in the 2020s is the frequent appearance of fraudulent *mudang*. In *Taebek pudongsan*, a handsome young man competes with the realtor *mudang* to remove vengeful spirits from properties. He tells his clients that he has invented a machine that drives ghosts away. His friend and he fake holograms of dead people

and convince homeowners to pay to get rid of them, all the while joking about the stupidity of people steeped in superstition. However, he gradually discovers that not only do vengeful ghosts exist, but they can also possess him. He remembers incidents from his childhood when he was violent to others but did not remember a thing afterward. In the end, he realizes his abilities as a medium, and this convinces him that he should be a spirit medium (*yŏngmae* 靈媒). After this, he and the real *mudang* collaborate in sending ghosts to the afterlife. Similarly, in *Usu mudang Ka Tusim*, the male exorcist learns of his abilities while following the original *mansin*, who is his classmate. In both cases, they inherit their spiritual abilities from a mother or grandmother who died because of her connection with ghosts.

The main character in *Minamdang* is also a fraudulent *mudang*. He does not believe in spirits but uses the beliefs of his clients to convince them of his abilities to solve their problems. Here too, he begins to believe in the spiritual world when he gets involved with a *mansin* who is a consultant to the villains in the series. In episode 9, she curses one of the election candidates while circling in front of the altar of a shrine in a traditional house. The ritual is a full *kut*, with musicians, and offerings. She kills a chicken and splashes the blood over the candidate's photograph, whereupon he collapses on a live televised broadcast. She then appears with blood spattered on her face, talking to the winning candidate over the phone and asking him to fulfill his promises to her. In these dramas, the fraud is a man, and he uses technology to give the appearance of being a *mudang*, whereas the young beautiful woman is the real thing. In all these dramas, there is a pair of *mudang* or mediums, a man and a woman, who have complex relationships and interactions. In each case, the female *mansin* is more traditional and powerful than the male. This aligns with reality, where more than 70% of shamans are female.⁴⁰

Conclusion: K-Dramas and Changing Perceptions of *Mudang*

The portrayal of *musok* in K-dramas differs in significant ways from common perceptions of this tradition. The first difference relates to the stigma of *mudang* as low-class, rural, uneducated women.⁴¹ In contrast to this stereotype, the dramas often show male and female *mudang* who are young, attractive, well dressed, intelligent, and tech-savvy. In addition, their clients treat them with respect, as they both believe in their powers and fear them. In most cases, skeptical characters turn into firm believers after their encounters with the supernatural. Even the fake *mudang* are respected members of society, and sometimes make a positive contribution to it.

A second difference is related to the narrativization of an older *mudang* in the drama protagonist's family. This convention is in contrast to the aforementioned defined difference between hereditary *mudang* who do not get possessed and *mansin*. Another feature of K-dramas is a mix of traditional *kut* rituals or spirit shrine consultations, and high-tech sophisticated

⁴⁰ Keith Howard, "Why should Korean shamans be Women?" *In Korea: The Past and the Present* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 325.

⁴¹ Kendall, *Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF*, 9.

shortened spirit exorcisms. Most of the villain bad *mudang* use traditional shrines, while the younger, more sophisticated main characters, use unique imagined modern versions of these rituals. This feature might raise concern for those interested in Korea's heritage preservation. If the sympathy and trust created by these dramas is aimed at *mudang* who are not trained in the traditional manner, the reaction of younger practicing *mudang* might be to abandon the artistic heritage of *musok*. Such concern has also been shared by senior *mudang* in Seoul, who noted that many young apprentices show meager interest in learning complex ritual performances in favor of short divination and exorcism rites.

K-drama depictions of *musok* have moved beyond established stigmas to focus on the important roles modern *mudang* play in society. By portraying such things as *mudang* helping spirits move to the afterlife and making society safer, these dramas have the potential to strengthen trust in this traditional practice. This is perhaps exemplified by recent surveys which have shown that many young Koreans are now consulting *mansin* without feeling stupid or cheated.⁴² This is a significant change from the perception of *mudang* as old-fashioned remnants of a harmful premodern culture of superstition, still common in some social circles in Korea. One reason for this shift in the general public's perception of *mudang* is potentially their favorable depiction in popular K-dramas.

It is worth pondering, however, whether recent representations of *mudang* and *musok* in K-dramas have indeed resulted in increased trust or mere curiosity. Not all forms of *musok* are represented equally in these dramas. In particular, they depict traditional shrine-based practices in a more negative manner, while they portray younger, more stylized, and technologically-mediated figures in a more heroic light. In this regard, rather than rehabilitating *musok* as a whole, K-dramas highlight certain forms of practice as legitimate while marginalizing others. Nevertheless, K-dramas effectively make the case that some *mudang*, at least, can make positive contributions at both the societal and personal level.

⁴² Yi Söngwön, "Miadong ttöna Nonhyön-dong sö suök suik ... chömjip to Kangnam pulp'ae," *Han'guk ilbo*, October 10, 2024, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/news/article/A2024101310300003815>.

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