“Shamans, Ghosts and Healing the Community”

a talk by

Michael J. Pettid
Binghamton University

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Mendenhall Lab 0129
125 S. Oval Mall
4:00 - 5:15 p.m.

Shamans often came under fire in Chosŏn Korea (1392-1910) for being charlatans who deceived the people with their lies and as the source of social corruption. Nonetheless, during the over five-hundred year dynasty and despite numerous attempts by lawmakers to eradicate the shamanic worldview and its practitioners, the influence of shamans did not wane. This leads to the obvious conclusion that shamans had great social utility to the people of Chosŏn. This paper will focus on one important aspect of shamans: the ability to rid the secular world of unwanted preternatural beings such as ghosts.

The link between illness, misfortune and otherworldly spirits was quite clearly understood in the cultural practices of premodern Korea. Shamans played a vital role in healing a sick individual or community through the practice of rites of exorcism that purged the human world of baneful entities such as ghosts. By so doing, both people and communities plagued by sickness were healed and able to move forward in a productive fashion, once again in balance with the cosmos. This was the role of the shaman: to put things in their proper places and bring about harmony. The present study will use period accounts from the Chosŏn dynasty to examine this process of healing and how shamans facilitated greater health for their communities.

Michael J. Pettid is Professor of premodern Korean Studies in the Department of Asian and Asian American Studies and also serves as the Director of the Translation Research and Instruction Program at Binghamton University (SUNY). He received his PhD in premodern Korean literature from the University of Hawaii at Manoa and teaches courses on premodern Korean history, literature, religion and Confucianism. He has published widely on premodern Korea including monographs on the history of Korean cuisine (Korean Cuisine: An Illustrated History, 2008) and an annotated translation and analysis of a seventeenth century novel (Unyŏng-jŏn: A Love Affair at the Royal Palace of Chosŏn Korea, 2009). His most recent book is a co-edited volume entitled Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in Korea: Critical Aspects of Death from Ancient to Contemporary Times (with Charlotte Horlyck, University of Hawaii Press, 2014). His current research projects include a translation of the 18th century Kyuhap ch’ongsŏ [Encyclopedia of women’s daily lives] and a co-edited anthology of premodern Korean prose.