



Individualism and Divination in Korea: *From the Jeomchal Ceremony for Nullified Negative Karma to Future-Telling Esoteric Tools*

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Abstract

This article investigates the evolution of divinatory practices in Korea from the premodern era to the contemporary period, focusing on the shift from collective rituals to individualized forms of esoteric practice. Drawing on historical, anthropological, and sociological sources, it examines the Jeomchal ceremony and sojae doryang rituals of the Silla and Goryeo periods, ritual adaptations in the Joseon era, and modern practices with particular focus on Tarot readings. The study employs a theoretical framework integrating esotericism and social theories to analyze how engagement in divinatory rituals reflects broader social and cultural transformations. Findings indicate that, while early divinatory practices were largely collective and aimed at societal or karmic balance, contemporary forms prioritize personal insight, autonomy, and psychological well-being. Despite this individualization, modern practices maintain subtle forms of social connection through shared symbolic frameworks and digital networks. The article argues that the historical tendency of Korean divination illustrates a dynamic interplay between continuity and change, collective and individual orientations, and traditional and globalized practices. This analysis contributes to Korean studies by situating divination within a broader socio-cultural and historical perspective, offering insights into the persistence and adaptation of esoteric practices in the face of modernization and social challenges.

Keywords: Korean divination, esoteric Buddhism, individualism, collectivism, Tarot and contemporary practices

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Introduction

Academic studies of Korean divinatory practices span a wide range of disciplines, offering a revealing lens through which to examine shifting dynamics in social organization, religious practices, and individual identity. Historically, Korean ritual culture, particularly in its Buddhist expressions, was rooted in a collectivist social structure where religious practices were enacted as communal obligations and as mechanisms for safeguarding both individual and collective well-being.

This article aims to examine how divinatory practices, once integrated into the communal framework of premodern Korean society, have undergone significant transformation in the contemporary era, reflecting an emergent orientation toward individualism. The central argument is that divination in Korea has progressively shifted from functioning as a collective, state, and community-oriented institution to becoming an individualized means of self-inquiry and personal reassurance amidst the adversities of the modernized world.

To develop this thesis, this study first analyzes the historical context and ritual structure of a restricted number of Buddhist divinatory practices across different historical periods, demonstrating how these rituals operated within a collectivist focus that aligned personal *karmic* retribution, communal well-being, and state stability. Through this analysis, this article highlights the interdependence of religious ritual, social cohesion, and the maintenance of cosmic and political order in premodern Korea. The study then turns to the contemporary landscape of divination in South Korea, where practices such as *saju palja*, physiognomy, geomancy, and the more recently adopted Tarot readings, have become individualized tools for navigating uncertainty in a rapidly changing society. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from sociology, with theories regarding the direct relation between the individual and his projection to the collectivity, this article aims to explore the ways divination reflects Korea's cultural condition, wherein collectivist traditions coexist alongside growing pressures toward personal autonomy and self-realization.

Regarding methodology, for this study, research was conducted on

Buddhist rituals using historical chronicles as well modern academic studies on Korean religiosity, identity formation (K. Kim 2000), and the sociology of divinatory practices (Sosteric 2014). Through this interdisciplinary approach, the article aims to demonstrate that divination in Korea is not a static cultural residue but an adaptive and context-sensitive practice. Its evolution from collective ritual to individualized spirituality mirrors broader transformations in Korean society, ultimately revealing how individuals negotiate meaning, identity, and uncertainty within the tension between collectivist heritage and emergent individualism.

The Nature of Esotericism and the Importance of Rituals in Society¹

Before examining divinatory practices, it is necessary to address the social significance of ritual, understood as a moment in which individuals engage with what lies beyond sensory perception.

In anthropology, ritual is defined as an organized set of social practices repeated over time, through which cultural models are built. These models are essential to the transmission of collective values and norms, as well as for the creation and reinforcement of roles, identities, and social cohesion (Widmann 2007, 43). The symbolic value and social relevance of ritual mark significant moments in both existence and everyday life, reconnecting individuals to collective and supra-personal dimensions of meaning. Although rituality is often associated with a hereditary and ancestral religious sphere, it also plays a fundamental role in shaping cultural realities (Bell 1990, 299).

Ritual practices function as structured social actions that reinforce cultural values and social roles, reproducing communal organization through formalized, symbolic, and participatory performances capable of generating collective cohesion.² The most important features of rituals

1. The first and second sections of this article are derived from my PhD dissertation (Volpe 2024).

2. For a comprehensive examination of the relationship between rituality and social

include formality, which refers to the predefined structure of the ritual composed by a sequence of actions that must be performed in a fixed order; repetition, defining the cyclical nature of ritual; and the symbolism linked to objects, gestures, and words intended to mediate with the reality beyond empirical perception.³ Complex ritual systems contain semantic structures composed of languages and meanings. The forms and functions of ritual language often depend on the culture and religion to which it belongs.⁴

Clifford Geertz (1957) later developed the concept of “symbolic interpretation” to explain the meaning of ritual, arguing that rituals constitute a symbolic system necessary to communicate profound cultural meanings. According to Geertz, the meaning of ritual can only be understood by analyzing the symbols and cultural beliefs embedded within it. On the other hand, Victor Turner et al. (1969), while acknowledging the strong symbolic value of ritual, whose codification grants access to the

dynamics, see Munandar et al. (2024). This study analyzes how ritual practices enable individuals to adapt to specific social and communal contexts, thereby contributing to the formation and negotiation of identity.

3. An eloquent example of these features is the perception of the body as an instrument through which the practitioner may establish a connection with the spiritual world and manifest specific intentions (Eliade 1964, 47). For instance, in shamanism, the body is frequently employed as a medium for entering states of trance or facilitating communication with the spirit realm. This may occur through dance, chanting, breathwork, drumming, or other sonic instruments, and visualization techniques. The body thus acts as an intermediary, mediating between social practices that produce structural arrangements and those that reproduce shared values (Bell 1990, 301). The use of the body, which requires the active participation of both performers and observers, invites an analysis of the performative dimensions of ritual. On this topic, Gavin Brown (2003, 3–5) highlights the conceptual difficulties inherent in applying the term “performance” to ritual, noting that ritual constitutes a complex and meaningful form of cultural and spiritual expression that is deeply intertwined with religion and often constitutes one of its essential components. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that the relationship between religion and ritual is neither unique nor exclusive: although most religions incorporate ritual elements, there also exist rituals not necessarily tied to a specific religious tradition but embedded instead within the social activities and belief systems of a given community (Fogelin 2007, 56).
4. The relationship between ritual and language, understood as a key medium for cultural and traditional transmission, is examined in depth by Penner (1985).

cultural and social essence of a given community, also emphasized the mystical power contained within these symbols. Rituals thus function as human modes of engagement with the supernatural, often involving prayers or incantations, the use of sacred objects, and participation in formalized ceremonies.

The interpretation of ritual, especially in its social context, has received significant attention across the social sciences and humanities. Understanding how rituals are experienced and interpreted by individuals within a society offers insights into social and cultural dynamics and clarifies the function of ritual itself (Quack and Töbelmann 2010, 14–15). Rituals often provide communities with tools to understand nature and society; they are used to resolve conflicts and to create social cohesion. Culture and religion play a fundamental role in the development of ritual, which is frequently employed to transmit social values and norms and to establish power hierarchies. For example, initiation rites may signal the transition to adulthood and group membership, while religious ceremonies may express devotion and gratitude toward a deity.

However, when examining the relationship between ritual and society, psychological dimensions and the effects of religious practices on the psyche must also be considered. Among the psychological impacts of ritual are the creation of a sense of belonging, the construction of a shared identity, and the establishment of temporal continuity and connection with the past. Participatory experience in ritual, which integrates individuals into a communal framework, transforms ritual into an immersive engagement that increases mental inspiration and the perception of historical time (Sosis and Ruffle 2018, 845–850). Rituals unmistakably reflect religious beliefs, becoming the core of social identity and reinforcing the bond between religion and community (Jaffe 2015, 7–8). These practices, it can be concluded, were and continue to be an essential point of connection between the individual and the collective, establishing themselves as the fulcrum around which a society articulates some of its most defining features.

Although this discussion may be applied to a wide range of rituals, including those of a non-religious nature, in this study it is essential to focus

specifically on the esoteric and divinatory sphere, with attention to the social value of these practices. Nonetheless, how can esotericism and divination be defined?

Esotericism concerns the cosmic order and the hidden structures underlying human life. It is neither merely the inner dimension of a religion nor a religion in itself. Its emphasis on mystery and secrecy derives from the assumption that the causes and structures with which it is concerned are not accessible through ordinary empirical experience. The esoteric point of view can therefore be grasped only through intellectual intuition, which apprehends causes beyond empirical experience. Esotericism also involves the reinterpretation of symbols drawn from different orders of reality, encompassing both natural and supernatural realms (Benoist 1965).

However, when dealing with the theme of esotericism, there is considerable uncertainty about how to define esoteric practices in the context under study. Here Zander's theory (2021) becomes particularly helpful: he conceptualizes esotericism not as a fixed set of necessary attributes, but as a polythetic category. Elements such as secrecy, higher knowledge, master-disciple transmission, or spiritual transformation may appear with varying frequency, yet none is universal or indispensable. Esotericism thus emerges as a discursive construct grounded in scholarly consensus and pragmatic usage. A fundamental methodological criterion for each study on esotericism is that it must clarify which definitional elements it is adopting. No universal concept of esotericism exists; rather, there are situated definitions, partially overlapping, continuously renegotiated within the academic community. An open, dialogical and reflexive approach makes it possible to confront intercultural challenges and avoids the illusion of an atemporal or metaphysical essence of the phenomenon.

For this reason, in this study esotericism⁵ is examined in its practical

5. In this study, the term "esotericism" is employed to denote forms of restricted knowledge accessible only to a limited group of individuals, as is the case with philosophical or doctrinal schools. By contrast, when referring to the Buddhist historical present on the

function as a relationship between individuals both singular and collective and for what is not perceptible: the uncertainty, doubt, and limits of the visible world for which answers are sought through what lies beyond it. Rituals associated with esoteric thought function as structured processes that enable participation in established traditions. They support the believer or seeker in their spiritual practice and help alleviate concerns about what lies beyond earthly life.

Within this framework, divination is understood as the practice of uncovering the hidden meanings or causes behind life events and, in some cases, through various techniques predicting or giving advice regarding the future. Divination has ancient roots and represents a central element of the cultural and religious traditions in which it occurs (Burnett 2013). In fact, divination is practiced in all cultures, encompassing a wide array of techniques, including omen-reading, to obtain answers beyond ordinary human understanding. Divination can also be a tool of individuals or groups for obtaining answers to personal or collective dilemmas. In this sense, it may have a diagnostic function, offering guidance, prescriptions, or prohibitions; a predictive function, anticipating future events; or an interventionist function, affecting the spiritual or physical well-being, or even the destiny, of the consultant. At the same time, divination is also a ritual and a traditional practice grounded in continuous interaction with intangible entities. Ethnographic studies show its enormous global variety: it may be performed through consecrated or symbolically significant objects, such as bones or cards, or through the body, particularly in practices of mediumship and shamanism, in which the medium speaks not on their own behalf, but as a vehicle for messages originating from external entities

Korean Peninsula, the simpler term “esoteric” is used. An insightful examination of the conceptual challenges and methodological approaches surrounding the category of esotericism is offered by Karl Baier in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (2021). For this reason, terms such as “occult” or “occultism” are not considered appropriate for describing Korean ritual and divinatory dynamics, as they refer to currents not rooted in the peninsula’s indigenous traditions. Regarding the nature of esoteric Buddhism more specifically, reference may be made to Richard McBride (2004), which critically reassesses the applicability of this category in Buddhist contexts.

(Espírito Santo 2023, 1–2). In this context, the so-called diviners function as culturally trained experts whose refined intuition converts signs and messages into meaningful guidance, weaving together symbolic systems with the emotional and experiential realities of those who seek their insight (Tedlock 2001, 189–192).

Following this inquiry on the major concepts, it is now possible to focus on some of the practices taken into consideration by this study.

Premodern Forms of Divination

Buddhist esoteric elements circulated on the Korean Peninsula alongside the transmission of Buddhism, but they should not be understood as a separate doctrinal current. Following McBride (2004), “esoteric teaching” in medieval Sinitic and Korean Buddhist contexts often denoted advanced Mahāyāna knowledge rather than a distinct institutional tradition. This esoteric dimension should therefore be considered integrated into a broader religious framework, thanks to which it acquired greater visibility in liturgical practices aimed at divination or the protection of individuals. This section examines a limited range of divinatory rituals and their social functions, with the aim of determining their collective or individual nature while attending closely to the historical contexts in which they were performed.

After the introduction of Buddhism to the kingdom of Silla 新羅 (attrib. 57 BCE–668 CE), monks concentrated primarily on studying the numerous Buddhist doctrines and on establishing a solid connection between the state and the teachings themselves, the primary objective being to enhance the prestige of Buddhism within society.

From the 8th century onward, one notable form of Buddhist divinatory practice in Silla was the Jeomchal ceremony (*jeomchal beophoe* 占察法會), associated with Master Jinpyo 眞表. This ritual was necessary to reach karmic discernment and the accorded repentance and to obtain Buddhist precepts. It is important, however, to distinguish the ceremony carried out during Silla from the one described in the *Sūtra on the Divinatory Art of Rewarding Meritorious and Unwholesome Actions* (*Jeomchal seonak eopbo*

gyeong 占察善惡業報經).⁶ In fact, as McBride and Cho (2016) note, that *sūtra* describes a divinatory method involving spinning tops and their 189 possible outcomes, whereas the Silla practice involved sticks representing the 108 defilements. Although the detailed examination of their differences lies beyond the scope of the present study, it is possible to affirm that both the *sūtra* and the Silla ritual shared a common concern with interpreting karmic conditions. In the Silla ceremony, the casting of the sticks did not simply predict future events; it translated invisible karmic obstruction into a visible and interpretable form. The position of the sticks determined whether the practitioner's defilements had been removed and whether he could receive the Buddhist precepts.

The extensive catalogue of auspicious and inauspicious actions outlined in that *sūtra* functions as a moral, psychological, and social map through which practitioners may interpret their present conditions and orient future conduct. The dichotomy between positive and negative karma, expressed through outcomes ranging from spiritual progress, doctrinal understanding, harmonious relationships, prosperity, and longevity, to doubt, illness, social discord, political turmoil, and rebirth in unfavorable realms, constitutes a comprehensive framework for normative evaluation. Within the divinatory ritual, these categories do not merely classify actions but provide individuals with a structured interpretive tool through which personal anxieties, social tensions, and existential uncertainties may be translated into intelligible signs. On the individual level, the system guides self-cultivation by encouraging ethical behavior and doctrinal commitment, allowing practitioners to understand misfortune as the result of identifiable karmic causes. Collectively, the ritual produces a shared moral vocabulary that harmonizes social expectations, reinforces communal values, and legitimizes established hierarchies, extending karmic logic from intimate concerns (family harmony, interpersonal trust, personal aspirations) to broader socio-political realities (good governance, prosperity of the realm, avoidance of collective disaster). By linking personal experience to cosmological order,

6. *Jeomchal seonak eopbo gyeong* 占察善惡業報經, ABC_IT_K0421, Dongguk University Archive.

the divinatory system shapes a moral community united through shared interpretive practices. Ultimately, the classificatory grid serves as both a diagnostic and pedagogical device, transforming uncertainty into meaningful guidance and enabling individuals and groups to re-situate themselves within a coherent social and cosmic order.

The Jeomchal divinatory ceremony remains among the most emblematic features of Korean Buddhist divination practices. Although it primarily addressed the personal concerns of those participating in its ritual practice, its popular nature endowed it with the character of a collective divinatory rite. Its inclusion among canonical scriptures was shaped both by political considerations and by the appeal of its divinatory form, which made it widely accepted as a skillful means to attract popular engagement. Only through the combination of these efforts could practitioners advance along the path toward Enlightenment (Lee 2018, 43).

During the Goryeo 高麗 (918–1392), Buddhist practices underwent a significant collectivist evolution. For instance, the ceremonies performed during the Assembly of the Eight Prohibitions (Palgwanhoe 八關會) constituted a clear moment of collective participation from which no member of society could exempt themselves. Participation was required not only from the residents of the capital or central regions but also from rural and provincial communities. The Pōṣadha days (*posalil* 布薩日)⁷ required particular attention, as they were believed to be the moments when deities and spirits descended among sentient beings to assess their actions. The ceremonies carried out on these days thus fall within the penitential tradition already observed in the *Sūtra on the Divinatory Art of Rewarding Meritorious and Unwholesome Actions*.

Throughout the six days of penance, Goryeo citizens were required to observe the eight precepts (*palgye* 八戒): abstaining from killing, stealing or taking what is not offered, improper sexual conduct, lying, drinking wine, adorning oneself or engaging in dancing and music, sleeping on raised beds instead of mats laid on the floor, and refraining from eating during

7. For further discussion of the dates and modalities of convening the Assembly, see the studies by Vermeersch (2007), K. Seo (2016), and Bae (2016).

designated meal times. Despite the moral discipline required, the Palgwanhoe functioned simultaneously as a public festival where the entire population gathered in celebration, while also featuring ceremonial activities that expressed the artistic, traditional, and historically rooted nature of the kingdom. They were moments of collective participation to the ceremonial and ritual life of the kingdom.

The Goryeo period is widely regarded by scholars of Korean Buddhism as the most productive era for the development of divinatory and apotropaic rituals. The rise of the new dynasty marked a period of cultural and commercial openness toward neighboring states but had as a consequence the exposition of the peninsula to complex political and territorial pressures from continental powers.⁸ In a landscape characterized by constant transformations aimed at consolidating state authority and maintaining social equilibrium, rituals became a means through which rulers, aristocrats, and commoners alike could collectively express fears and uncertainties, while simultaneously participating in the religious and political life of the realm. This was possible precisely because Buddhism and the state had been deeply interconnected since the founding of Goryeo.

The religious landscape of this period distinguished itself through a greater emphasis on ritual practice, building upon the doctrinal foundations of Silla while integrating influences from China. The shifting political environment prompted a stronger focus on state-protection rituals and ceremonies aimed at requesting blessings and merit. Esoteric Buddhism became deeply integrated into the ceremonial activities promoted by the court and emerged as the core of all major rituals starting from the 10th century. Sacred scriptures were no longer regarded primarily as doctrinal texts but were increasingly used as ritual instruments for generating merit (J. Kim 2017, 138–140).

From the 11th century onward, divination through astrology and celestial omens gained increasing prominence. Rituals belonging to this tradition were known as *sojae doryang* 消災道場, performed to avert calamities by observing planetary movements, constellations, and especially

8. On the political dynamics of early Goryeo, see Shultz (2017).

solar (*ilsik* 日蝕) and lunar (*wolsik* 月蝕) eclipses, all meticulously recorded in the *Goryeosa* 高麗史 (History of Goryeo), specifically, 135 solar and 215 lunar eclipses (Stephenson 1998, 710). These celestial events, together with planetary alignments, were interpreted by state officials as omens that could signal imminent natural disasters or threats requiring political intervention (Bruneton 2013, 46). The means of averting such misfortunes were identified in the *sojae doryang*, performed whenever deemed necessary based on astrological readings. Within this ritual context, astrology and esoteric Buddhism were combined, as the deity venerated during the ceremonies was Buddha Tejaprabhā (Chiseonggwang yeoraedo 熾盛光如來圖), associated with the *Dhāraṇī-sūtra of the “Great and Majestic Tejaprabha Tathāgata, Golden Wheel Uṣṇīsa that Dispels All Calamities and Difficulties”* (*Bulseol chiseonggwang daewideok geumnyunwang sojae gilsang darani gyeong* 佛說熾盛光大威德金輪王消災吉祥陀羅尼經).

The above text explicitly refers to rulers, their families, the aristocracy, and sentient beings as commoners as recipients of the apotropaic power generated through the ritual (Sørensen 2010). This is consistent with the fundamentally collectivist nature of rituals performed during the Goryeo period: once restricted to monastic participation, they became an integral component of the shared religious and civic life of society. Through such communal ceremonies, Goryeo Buddhists cultivated a collective response to uncertainty, reinforcing group cohesion and expressing a specifically Korean form of ritual collectivism in which cosmic order, state protection, and communal well-being were deeply intertwined.

Analysis of the Joseon-period ritual tendency presents particular challenges due to the dominant influence of the Neo-Confucian philosophical system, which strongly discouraged Buddhist ritual and cosmological practices. Despite these ideological constraints, several references to Buddhist forms of divination can still be identified, most notably those associated with Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara: the coin divination ritual based on the *Gwaneum yeonggwa* 觀音靈課 (Numinous Lessons of Avalokiteśvara), a manual dedicated to practices centered on the deity figure. This method employs five coins, which may be cast either individually or simultaneously. When used together, each coin should bear

on one side one of the five Chinese characters representing the five elements. As in many other divinatory systems, the ritual begins with purification: the practitioner burns incense and passes the coins through the smoke. This preparatory act is reminiscent of analogous stages in other traditions, such as tarot reading, when the tarot deck is passed over smoke for nullifying any type of preexisting energy. The practitioner then raises their hands toward the sky, recites a prayer, shakes the coins, and casts them onto a mat or cloth. The possible outcomes number 32, each corresponding to events in the past, present, or future as happened with the Jeomchal ritual. The results were interpreted as positive, neutral, or negative, offering insight or guidance mediated through Avalokiteśvara's compassionate wisdom (S. Kim 2020, 6–9).

Another ceremony was the Chilseong 七星 ritual, known as one of the surviving Korean Buddhist ceremonies dedicated to the Big Dipper (Bukdu chilseong 北斗七星). It functions as a hybrid devotional and protective rite through which practitioners seek blessings related to longevity, prosperity, and the resolution of afflictions. As Seong Uk Kim (2023) affirms, the ritual lost its collective and social role due to the limitations imposed on Buddhist practices, however, it remained popular with individuals in the private sphere. The ritual unfolds through a highly structured sequence that combines offerings, invocations, and visual or textual engagement with deities. Monks conduct the liturgy, but its intended efficacy relies on the active participation of lay devotees, who contribute to the ceremony and align their intentions with the ritual's cosmological framework. In this sense, the rite not only mediates between human and celestial realms but also reinforces a shared symbolic universe that binds individuals to the broader moral community, though limited. The ritual's social function becomes apparent in its simultaneous cultivation of personal aspiration and collective identity.

What is clear is that such forms of divination were deeply rooted in Buddhist ritual culture and often aimed at securing practical or spiritual benefits for participants. Within the Korean religious sphere more generally, there has long existed a persistent orientation toward seeking tangible or spiritual rewards. This tendency is particularly pronounced in esoteric

Buddhism, where the practice of making *won*⁹ occupied a central place in devotional life. It is possible to affirm that such practices reflected a broader tendency to seek guidance, protection, and favor from the spiritual and divine world.

To summarize, the examples presented in this section illustrate how, in the premodern era, ceremonies tended toward a more collectivist perception of rituality. Individuals operated primarily within the community and ritual activities constituted an integral part of communal life. Moreover, those practices functioned as mechanisms of protection for both individuals and the collective.

The Jeomchal ceremony flourished during a period when Buddhism was widely practiced across all layers of society. Although its impact on individual *karma* was deeply personal, the ceremony also held a strong collective significance, both doctrinally and traditionally, helping the individual to move inside society. The divinatory rituals designed to avert natural disasters were conducted within temples and during royal audiences, where all court members were required to participate and recite scriptures. These practices thus acquired a collective dimension, as astrology was deeply embedded in the social element, since celestial events were widely regarded as omens capable of influencing the destiny of the nation and its people.

During the Joseon dynasty, due to the pervasive influence of Neo-Confucianism, ritual practices of non-Buddhist nature retained their

9. The term *won* refers to what Seung-hak Koh (2014) defines “vows” (Skt. *praṇidhāna-bala*) as a category referring to two types of commitments: those made by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for the universal salvation of all sentient beings, and those formulated by Bodhisattvas when they resolve to devote their existence to assisting beings along the path toward liberation from suffering. In the *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), however, the notion of *won*/vows diverges from this classical doctrinal framework and reflects the historical orientation of Korean Buddhism toward the protection of society and the welfare of its members. According to Koh, narratives involving such vows often portray eminent figures or ordinary devotees acting to achieve personal aims, request healing, resolve crises, or safeguard the kingdom and Buddhist sacred sites. In this context, vows function not solely as universal salvific commitments, but as pragmatic and situational appeals aligned with the socio-religious needs of the period.

essential role, particularly at the state level, where ceremonies could mobilize thousands of participants (K. Park 2018). In this context, the individual became part of a larger ritual mechanism, acting collectively for the benefit of the state and the proper execution of governmental functions. While, on the other hand, individuals tended to engage in Buddhist ceremonies and rituals in their private sphere, preserving their personal devotion and putting their issues and future in the care of the divine.

Shamanism as Connection between Premodern and Contemporary Divination

Discussing divination in Korea requires that shamanism be taken into consideration, given its fundamental role in shaping and sustaining the cultural and religious practices of the peninsula. From its earliest stages, shamanic rituals have permeated all levels of Korean society, functioning as a central component of Korean cosmological thought and systems of spiritual mediation. Korean shamanism is grounded in the belief that ancestral spirits and deities may be invoked and can communicate through the shaman, who acts as an intermediary between the human and spiritual realms. Present on the peninsula since the earliest tribal formations, shamanism endured alongside Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism. In the 20th century, it underwent a process of rediscovery, as scholars and practitioners increasingly turned their attention to local traditions and indigenous cultural roots. Today, it continues to be practiced in various contexts, including funerary ceremonies, purification rites, weddings, healing rituals, and especially divinatory consultations.

More specifically, shamans access the spirit world through the *kut* 굿, a complex ritual performance involving music, dance, chanting and the invocation of deities, when they may embody various divine figures and communicate with spirits in order to obtain information, instructions, or blessings for individuals or for the wider community. In this sense, the ritual operates not merely as a spiritual performance but as a structured divinatory mechanism embedded within social and communal life (Yun 2019, 82).

Prior to Korea's Three Kingdoms period, Shamanism functioned primarily within a tribal framework; shamans served as healers, seers, and mediums, occupying positions of considerable authority within communities. With the establishment of the Goryeo dynasty, their sphere of influence expanded and at times they could even be advisors to rulers and members of the aristocracy. They played a significant role in ancestral rites ceremonies intended to secure the well-being of the deceased and ensure their continued support for future generations. Shamans also participated in court rituals, including royal enthronements, as well as in state-sponsored ceremonies aimed at invoking rain or protection from natural calamities. Their practices were closely intertwined with agricultural cycles and popular religion, making the *kut* a moment where the visible and invisible worlds, life and death, nature and culture, the human and the divine intersect. Korean shamanism thus constitutes a significant component of the peninsula's religious and cultural heritage. Its deep connection to nature, its emphasis on relationality, and its openness to individuals' spiritual experience contribute to its distinctive character.

Although from a collective perspective shamanism may be perceived as an archaic remnant of Korea's past, it has demonstrated notable resilience. In contemporary contexts, ritual services may also be commodified, becoming purchasable spiritual services within a broader religious marketplace. Nevertheless, the core function of the practice offers means to dispel misfortune and attract prosperity or to bring balance in the lives of both individuals and the community. It is indeed possible to affirm that Korean shamanism represents a form of spirituality that combines belief in nature and spirits with a strong sense of communal cohesion and moral order, while continuing to function as a living and meaningful framework for divination and ritual mediation. As Kil-sŏng Chŏe (1989) has demonstrated, the *kut* unfolds through a processual structure that moves from an initial phase of formalized song and dance to an anti-structural climax characterized by ecstatic breakdown, possession, and oracular speech. This transition from narrative order to ritualized disorder is not incidental; rather, it constitutes the very condition through which communication with the divine becomes possible. The divinatory moment, when the shaman

delivers oracles, diagnoses misfortune, or pronounces blessings, emerges only after the intentional dissolution of ordinary linguistic and social structures. In this sense, shamanic fortune-telling was not a mere predictive act but the culmination of a collective emotional and cosmological process.

In contemporary urban contexts, Korean shamanism continues to function as a dynamic divinatory system, though its mechanisms have adapted to new social conditions. As Chungmoo Choi (1989, 236) has shown in her study of urban god-descended shamans in Seoul, ritual efficacy depends not only on spiritual power but equally on acute social sensitivity. The shaman's capacity to read and understand clients' situations and needs by grasping their economic anxieties or emotional vulnerabilities constitutes a crucial dimension of divinatory practice. Divination thus emerges as a complex interpretive process in which spiritual diagnosis and social analysis are inseparable. Recent scholarship has shown that shamanic prayer and divination frequently take place in public spaces formally regulated by the modern state, such as parks and historic sites (D. Kim 2021). In these contexts, divination persists within environments shaped by modern perception, operating as a form of everyday negotiation with institutional power while sustaining cosmological authority. Taken together, these dynamics reveal shamanism not as an archaic survival but as a continuous and adaptive divinatory system. Across premodern and contemporary settings alike, it has provided a structured means to access divine knowledge and shape both collective and personal decisions.

Framing shamanism as a shift from collectivism to individualism in ritual practices is complicated by its broad social diffusion; it is a phenomenon that operates deeply and across multiple social layers simultaneously. Even today, as noted above, such practices are understood to benefit both the individual and the group on whose behalf they are performed. It may therefore be argued that, by its very nature, shamanism occupies an intermediate position within this discourse. As such, its influence cannot be ignored when considering divinatory traditions on the peninsula and the development of a culturally and traditionally rooted reliance on the invocation of divine, spiritual, and otherworldly forces in confronting existence and its inherent uncertainties.

Divination in Contemporary Korea and the Rise of Individualism

When moving to the contemporary era and examining the new dynamics of divinatory practice, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that religious rituals, although still present in Korea and associated with several doctrines, no longer possess the same collective and essential feature they held in the past, when ritual participation constituted a social norm. Today, the landscape is considerably more various, offering a wide range of divinatory modes that may differ in swiftness, accessibility, and doctrinal depth. Before examining the divinatory dimension in detail, it is necessary to consider the broader religious landscape of contemporary South Korea. According to the “2025 Religious Awareness Survey,” 51 percent of the South Korean population does not identify with any specific religious affiliation, while the remainder is distributed among Protestants (20%), Buddhists (16%) and Catholics (11%) (D. Lee 2025). The survey further highlights a significant generational pattern: advancing age correlates with higher levels of participation in institutional religious life, whereas such engagement is markedly weaker among the 18–29 age group. This indicates a pronounced generational gap in institutional religiosity that allows the solidification of an environment particularly beneficial to practices such as divination, both in offline settings and through digital platforms. This kind of doctrinal and practical disjunction represents a pattern that facilitates the choice of alternative forms of divination, whose forms considered in this section tend to involve individual participation rather than collective ceremonial engagement, further reflecting the broader shift toward personalized modes of spiritual consultation.

When addressing these contemporary modalities in detail, however, it is essential to reflect on the ongoing scholarly debate concerning the increasingly individualistic orientation of present-day South Korean society. South Korea is frequently described, even in the contemporary era, as a predominantly collectivist society, where group-oriented goals, conformity to social norms, and respect for tradition and authority play a central role (Arora et al. 2011). Within this kind of cultural framework, individuals tend to align their actions with shared expectations, prioritizing a deep social

harmony and the well-being of the collectivity. What is notable is that subjective and individual welfare is often perceived as a projection of the community one. As noted in Tajfel's "Social Identity Theory" (1981), the fact of belonging to a group constitutes a fundamental component of personal identity; this concept sustains the notion about the variation of the self across cultural contexts. In East Asian societies such as Korea, individuals tend to develop an interdependent self, shaped by cultural traditions that emphasize relationality and mutual obligation (Ha and Jang 2015).

Equally, individualist societies, as the Western ones, place greater emphasis on personal autonomy, the determination of the self, and the pursuit of individual fulfillment (Ball 2001). In such settings, as highlighted by Triandis (1990), personal interests often take precedence over collective ones. South Korea, however, is undergoing a gradual cultural shift: rising individualism coexists with persistent collectivist values, producing growing attention to psychological well-being, increased pressure from social expectations, and a heightened desire for personal meaning and self-realization (De Nicola 2018).

It is within this evolving cultural environment that one must understand contemporary divinatory practices. The search for existential orientation in moments of uncertainty often leads individuals toward what lies beyond the discernible world toward more spiritual resources. As Andrew Kim (2005) observes, Koreans often approach divination through the enduring influence of shamanic traditions; what is clear, however, is that divinatory practices have continuously adapted to Korea's shifting social landscape, including its entry into the digital age.

Among the most widespread and enduring forms of divination in contemporary Korea are *saju palja* 四柱八字, name-based destiny analysis, marital compatibility reading, physiognomy, and geomancy. These practices, rooted in longstanding East Asian cosmologies, are widely consulted across gender, age, class, educational level, and professional status and many Koreans turn to them at least once during their lives.

The "2025 Religious Perception Survey: Awareness of the Existence of God and Transcendental Worldview" (D. Lee 2026) moves beyond questions of formal religious affiliation by including items that illuminate the extent to

which the population accepts elements of a supernatural worldview despite not adhering to any institutional religion, as well as beliefs in events that cannot be scientifically explained and may be attributed to divine intervention. Particularly significant is the survey's inquiry into direct experience with, or recourse to, traditional and popular practices. The results indicate that 40 percent of respondents engaged in divinatory practices, including fortune-telling, tarot card reading, and physiognomy. This figure underscores the substantial diffusion of such practices within contemporary South Korean society. The data further reveal notable variations by religious affiliation. Buddhists appear to rely on these practices to the greatest extent, while a comparable proportion is found among those who do not adhere to any formal religious doctrine. By contrast, the percentage declines among Protestants and Catholics, falling within the range of approximately 20–30 percent. These differences suggest that engagement with divinatory practices is shaped not only by generational or cultural factors but also by institutional frameworks associated with particular religious traditions.

As noted by Yoo (2017), the prevalence of divination in Korea reflects a cultural and religious identity that is both socialized and institutionally embedded, while also forming part of a broader East Asian context in which divinatory practices are widespread, including in China and Japan. Divination is a part of everyday life and functions as a socially shared practice thanks to individuals experiencing participation in a broader communal way. Although not designed to yield empirical accuracy, divinatory consultations provide reassurance, a sense of orientation, and an impression of greater control over personal and individual affairs, across the personal, relational, or professional sphere (J. Kim 2018).¹⁰ By revisiting past experiences and offering guidance for the future, divination contributes to the management of uncertainty in a society in continuous and rapid

10. In her study, Jennifer Kim cites the scholar Barbara Young, whose work is particularly relevant to the topic of divination in Korea and its prevalence among the female sector of society. Two of Young's publications (1980; 1983) are especially noteworthy for understanding the contemporary landscape of Korean divinatory practices and their gendered dimensions.

transformation.

Indeed, the 2022 Korean General Social Survey entitled “A Survey on Perceptions of Divination and New Year’s Fortune” indicated that 41 percent of the population had participated in fortune-telling sessions during the preceding five years, with women constituting a particularly significant proportion of respondents (D. Lee 2022). With regards to the specific practices mentioned above, 49 percent reported consulting *saju palja*, 40 percent referred to *Tojeong bigyeol*, and 31 percent to tarot readings.¹¹ This dataset is especially significant because it demonstrates that, alongside traditional East Asian divinatory systems, contemporary Korea has also incorporated practices of Western origin, most notably tarot consultation. The coexistence of these forms reflects a pluralized and hybrid divinatory landscape in which inherited cosmological systems operate in parallel with globally circulating esoteric practices. Across age groups, the most common motivations for consulting fortune-tellers concerned one’s overall life trajectory, general fortune, and daily matters. However, generational differences emerge with particular clarity: younger respondents were significantly more likely to seek divinatory consultation for issues related to education, employment, career advancement, and romantic relationships. These findings suggest that divination functions not merely as a ritualized cultural residue but as a pragmatic resource mobilized in response to specific life uncertainties, especially within contexts of heightened social and economic competition. It should nevertheless be noted that explicit belief in the actual predictive efficacy of divinatory practices declined considerably between 2008 and 2021, as evidenced by data from the Korean General Social Survey (2022) cited above. Responses to the question concerning the genuine ability of diviners to foresee the future reveal a marked decrease in affirmative positions during this period. At the same time, the proportion of respondents selecting neutral responses remained relatively stable over this

11. *Tojeong bigyeol* 土亭秘訣 is a divinatory text attributed to the scholar Yi Ji-ham 李之菡, also known as Tojeong. It is used to predict an individual’s fortune for the coming year through calculations based on date of birth and age. Its interpretations focus on fortune, wealth, family matters, and personal relationships.

same period. This pattern is particularly revealing: while a growing segment of the population may express skepticism regarding the factual or deterministic validity of divination, many continue to consult such practices for reasons of personal need, curiosity, symbolic reassurance, or even entertainment. Rather than indicating the disappearance of divination, these trends point to a transformation in its social function, from a system grounded in cosmological certainty to a flexible, situational, and individualized mode of guidance within late modern society.

Alongside traditional East Asian divinatory systems, contemporary Korea has also embraced practices of Western origin, the most notable being tarot reading. This study does not aim to reconstruct the historical introduction of tarot into Korea nor to analyze its symbolic system in detail. However, it is important to note that, like all esoteric and divinatory instruments, tarot is associated with a corpus of specialist knowledge accessible only through sustained study, practice, and symbolic literacy. Each card is an instrument of reflection that offers interpretive pathways to help individuals reconsider their circumstances and life path (He 2025). In a divinatory context, tarot serves as an intermediary between the human and the transcendent, opening deeply personal interpretive spaces while also addressing broader existential concerns. That is the reason tarot consultation generally outlines a field of possibilities rather than a predetermined fate, unlike other forms of divination that draw upon the notion of fate and a preordained destiny, enabling the querent to reframe their situation from a fresh, and often transformative, perspective.

The integration of tarot into Korean society has produced a certain degree of cultural ambivalence. On one hand, tarot has proliferated because its highly individualized and introspective structure resonates with the increasing individualism of Korean society; on the other, many remain uncertain about its legitimacy or spiritual efficacy. This ambivalence reflects tarot's dual status: accessible and popular yet not fully integrated within indigenous cosmological frameworks. Its appeal lies partly in the fact that it corresponds to the experience of depersonalization and psychological insecurity characteristic of life in a technologically advanced and highly competitive society. In a social landscape marked by instability, individuals

seek forms of clarity and reassurance as they feel helpless and lost in adapting themselves to social norms, and tarot becomes a resource that helps them in navigating this uncertainty.¹²

Despite such ambiguities, tarot functions, like other divinatory and fortune-telling tools, as means for autonomous spiritual inquiry, operating largely outside formal religious structures. This autonomy strongly appeals to contemporary Koreans, especially younger generations, who increasingly explore spiritual meaning through individualized practices rather than communal religious participation. Divination in this form becomes a personalized encounter aimed at understanding private concerns while remaining situated within broader social dynamics. In this sense, tarot may be understood as a comparatively lighter instrument in relation to other divinatory systems more deeply embedded in philosophical and cosmological frameworks. Tarot readings are often conducted through methodologies that emphasize intuition and symbolic interpretation; their responses are neither doctrinally binding nor deterministically long-term but rather function as provisional guidance accompanying the seeker step by step. The Western dimension of tarot must also be taken into consideration. As an imported practice, tarot entered a cultural environment in which divination was already a foundational element of the symbolic landscape. Emerging in South Korea in the late 1990s, tarot initially appeared as a non-institutional and unofficial tool, distant from the established doctrinal and philosophical traditions of the country. It was perceived as innovative and modern, despite its long historical trajectory in Europe. Engaging with tarot requires primarily openness and interpretive receptivity; it is presented less as a mechanism of categorical resolution than as a medium of genuine self-exploration and discovery. A tarot reading typically involves a dialogical exchange between practitioner and client: impressions are shared, symbols are interpreted collaboratively, and

12. For a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the diffusion and cultural significance of tarot in Korea, see Riotto (2024), which offers essential insights into the emergence, reception, and sociocultural implications of tarot practices within the contemporary Korean context.

meanings emerge through interactive engagement. Questions often concern love, work, family, or personal direction, enabling individual concerns to be contextualized within relational and societal frameworks. For these reasons, tarot constitutes an individual practice that nevertheless operates in relation to collective values and social narratives. One of the most significant developments of recent years is the rapid expansion of digital divination, a new trend that can be observed on a global scale and that is also present in South Korea, a country where technology is highly advanced and widely accessible, and where the web often functions as a space of refuge and exchange among individuals. The study by Ruah-Midbar (2014), through the concept of the “sacralization of randomness,” already highlighted more than a decade ago how the virtual world was becoming, in a sense, a mirror of the religious and divinatory dimensions of contemporary society. Her analysis emphasized the remarkable capacity of divinatory practices to adapt to new digital media, which offer anonymity, speed of consultation and, above all, immediate accessibility. This theoretical framework can also be applied to contemporary South Korea, where it is extremely easy to navigate the web and encounter numerous websites offering rapid online consultations. In the specific case of tarot reading, it is possible to distinguish between practices that take place on social media and those hosted on dedicated websites. In the first case, individuals who manage channels or profiles provide general readings that followers can watch or listen to, subsequently interpreting the messages according to their own daily experiences and hopes. In the second case, websites can be further divided into two main categories. Some primarily advertise the services of professional tarot readers, offering consultations that may take place online rather than in person, but still involve an interaction between the reader and the client. Others instead provide direct, informal, anonymous, and largely automated consultations. These latter platforms differ in terms of format and specificity of the readings offered. Some include pre-set questions such as “Does the person I love love me in return?” “What does the person I love think of me?” “How will my day be?” or “Will I be lucky today?” Other websites allow users to select one or more cards which, once revealed, generate a response. In many cases, however, these readings resemble a

general explanation of the meanings associated with the cards, whether Major or Minor Arcana, rather than a personalized interpretation. This form of divination is therefore characterized by speed, anonymity, individuality, and the absence of mediation. Yet this absence also represents its most significant limitation. Esoteric tools traditionally rely on the mediation of individuals who bring experience, study, and intuition to the interpretative process in order to provide meaningful responses. A tarot reading session is not an automatic procedure but rather begins with an exchange of information: the client expresses doubts, vulnerabilities, and questions, revealing personal concerns to someone who assumes responsibility for these elements and seeks answers within the symbolic language of the cards. In digital divination this relational dimension is largely absent. On the one hand, this contributes to its popularity, since individuals are not required to devote significant time to the process and can access divinatory responses instantly from virtually any location with a simple click. On the other, it removes the element of human interaction and shared interpretation that has historically characterized divinatory practices. In this sense, digital divination may also be interpreted as an example of contemporary social individualism, in which the individual increasingly engages with spiritual or symbolic practices in isolation, detached from the communal and relational contexts that traditionally framed them.

Whether practiced in person or online, the enduring appeal of divination in Korea rests in its capacity to provide moments of introspective clarity within the psychological pressures and uncertainties of contemporary life.

Contemporary forms of fortune-telling may also be interpreted within the broader framework of the “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) phenomenon, which has increasingly attracted scholarly attention in recent decades. Individuals who identify as SBNR typically emphasize personal spiritual experience while distancing themselves from institutional religious structures. Rather than adhering to organized systems of belief, as was noted above, spirituality is often conceived as an individualized and experiential relationship with the sacred or with a transcendent dimension of reality. As remarked by Li (2024), religion is generally associated with structured belief

systems and communal practices, whereas spirituality tends to be defined as a more personal sense of connection with something beyond the self. Within this context, practices such as tarot reading and other forms of divination can be understood as part of a broader landscape of individualized esoteric, occult, and spiritual practices that allow individuals to explore meaning, guidance, and self-reflection outside traditional religious institutions. The growing popularity of these practices therefore reflects wider global patterns of personalized religiosity, in which spiritual authority increasingly shifts from institutional frameworks to individual interpretation and experience. In this sense, divinatory practices continue to operate at the intersection of individual agency and collective cultural frameworks, mediating the tensions between Korea's collectivist heritage and its increasingly individualistic present.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is first necessary to highlight that contemporary Koreans continue to rely on divinatory practices as mechanisms for coping with uncertainty. In ancient and premodern times, divination addressed concerns such as karmic obstacles, reincarnation, protection from calamities, and survival during wartime and crisis. Today, however, it responds more directly to the psychological and emotional pressures associated with modernization. In the past, the community represented a fundamental component of social life: through practices connected to shamanism and Buddhism, divinatory activities were embedded within collective structures that allowed citizens to participate in a shared ritualistic life. In contemporary society this communal dimension appears to be increasingly challenged by more individualistic dynamics, often reflected in the difficulties individuals experience in navigating family expectations, interpersonal relationships, educational pressures, and professional demands. In seeking support and reassurance, individuals are therefore increasingly turning to less doctrinal but more direct forms of consultation, often involving private sessions that take place outside the scrutiny of the

wider community and beyond the constraints of contemporary social expectations. At the same time, when describing this emerging individualistic tendency in Korean divination, it should be emphasized that such practices are nevertheless oriented toward helping individuals achieve a sense of serenity and stability within the community they aspire to belong to. In this sense, divination does not necessarily represent a withdrawal from social life but rather a means through which individuals attempt to restore balance between personal uncertainty and social belonging. Expanding the perspective beyond South Korea, it is also possible to situate the relevance of divination within a broader global framework. Tarot cards in particular have become widely disseminated across different regions of the world, including Europe, North America, as well as China (Zhuang 2025) and Japan (Miller 2017) in East Asia. South Korea therefore does not represent an exception but rather participates in a wider trend characterized by the re-evaluation and contemporary reinterpretation of divination. Originating from doctrinal and folkloric foundations, divinatory practices have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adapt to the transformations of modern society, both in terms of the relationship between the self and others and in the evolving dynamics between individuals and communities. These developments have contributed to a reconfiguration of the religious sphere, whereby divinatory practices are no longer necessarily tied to a specific religious cult but increasingly function as forms of contemporary urban refuge, reflecting dynamics that can be observed in many parts of the world today. Modernization, technology, and contemporary social challenges do not eradicate the collective dimension of divination but have caused it to evolve in individualized forms.

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