

# Ethnic Aesthetic Differences in the Ontology of Shamanic Music in the Context of Postmodernism: A Comparison between China and South Korea

## Diferenças Estéticas Étnicas na Ontologia da Música Xamânica no Contexto do Pós-Modernismo: Uma Comparaçāo entre a China e a Coreia do Sul

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**Abstract:** The exploration of the ethnic differences in the ontological aesthetics of shamanic music within the context of postmodernism is focused on in this thesis, which will be achieved through an analysis of the musical object forms and their corresponding associated elements and symbolic contexts. Although the concepts of shamanic music in Korea and China are both categorized as religious, it is observed that a dramatic aesthetic expression in music has developed in Korea due to the dynamic construction of its differing historical and cultural backgrounds, which are tied to shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and other cultural influences. In contrast, an emphasis is put on the direct, non-reflective sensory aesthetic religious expression in China. However, it is recognized that an "overall beauty" in their aesthetic spirit is embodied in both of

them, where a fascination and reverence for natural objects and the interconnectedness and balance of all things in the cyclical process of nature are reflected.

**Keywords:** ontology. shamanic. music. aesthetic. comparison.

**Resumo:** A exploração das diferenças étnicas na estética ontológica da música xamânica no contexto do pós-modernismo é o foco desta tese, que será alcançada por meio de uma análise das formas dos objetos musicais e seus respectivos elementos associados e contextos simbólicos. Embora os conceitos de música xamânica na Coreia e na China sejam ambos categorizados como religiosos, observa-se que uma expressão estética dramática na música foi desenvolvida na Coreia devido à construção dinâmica de seus diferentes contextos históricos e culturais, que estão ligados ao xamанизmo, budismo, confucionismo e outras influências culturais. Em contraste, na China, coloca-se ênfase na expressão religiosa estética sensorial direta e não reflexiva. No entanto, reconhece-se que uma “beleza geral” em seu espírito estético é incorporada em ambos, onde uma fascinação e reverência pelos objetos naturais e a interconexão e equilíbrio de todas as coisas no processo cíclico da natureza são refletidos.

**Palavras-chave:** ontologia. xamânico. música. estético. comparação.

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## Introduction

With the globalization and modernization of music culture, shamanic music from different countries and regions has been imbued with national characteristics, reflecting the modernization of nationalism. It not only reflects the development and evolution of national cultures but also serves as a symbol of national identity within global shamanic music culture. Current academic research on shamanism mainly focuses on fields such as religious studies, literature, folklore, and psychology: anthropologists, folklorists, historians, and a small number of ethnomusicologists primarily research shamanic music. The research focuses mainly on the religious nature and specific rituals of shamanism, without in-depth exploration of its musical content. Currently, cross-regional comparative studies of shamanic music are relatively limited, and comparative studies of the national aesthetic aspects of shamanic music in China and South Korea are lacking.

This study primarily employs ethnomusicological analytical methods, integrating relevant theories from aesthetics and history. Using shamanic music as the core research object and analytical medium, it aims to explore the underlying ethnic aesthetic differences systematically. Analysis of shamanic music data obtained through field research in both countries reveals that both maintain music serving religious characteristics. However, within their historical and cultural frameworks, their aesthetic expression paradigms exhibit significant differences. Compared to the uncertain, ambiguous natural beauty and mysterious religious beauty of Chinese shamanic music, Korean shamanic music has developed an aesthetic form profoundly shaped by Confucian and Buddhist thought, its sensual qualities prominently manifested in its high degree of musicality and drama.

The proposition of mystical shamanic music is an abstract entity with objective concepts. Under the background of postmodernism, this proposition conducts a structural analysis. Through such analysis, it reveals the structure and relationship

of the inherent cognitive elements within the musical ontology. It does not deny the harmonious, unified aesthetic of mystical shamanic music. Although the Enlightenment relegated the experience of beauty to the subjective realm, the beauty of nature, as a source of religious insight, essentially becomes a holistic salvation for humanity and the natural ecosystem (Alexander, 2014). Unlike traditional religious and natural aesthetics, the aesthetic perception of shamanic music is not merely the stock of qualities present in the object, but also includes the other, the play of appearances that simultaneously come to light within the object. Through the medium of music, it achieves a transcendental perception and interpretation of “ethhos [...] of the community” (Dewey, 2005, p. 6), encompassing freedom, mystery, and the divine side of life that transcends reason.

## 1. Methods

This study employs fieldwork and music analysis methods from ethnomusicological analysis, conducting relevant field research on Korean shamanic rituals such as Ggotmaji-gut (꽃맞이굿) and Jincheng Hall Sacrifice (금성당제), Gangneung Dano Munhwagwan, and the Korean Shaman Museum; as well as Mongolian shamanism, Manchu shamanism, and the Chinese Shaman Museum, to obtain the musical object material required for this research. Due to the use of technical terms and special terms in this study, they are explained and defined in Table 1.

Table 1 - Definition of technical and special terms

Core concepts	Definition
Ontology	Investigating the metaphysical philosophical research into the constituent entities of reality and the fundamental elements of the world.
Musical ontology	It is grounded in our best understanding of this entire cultural sphere, encompassing both the production and the reception of music, and aims to explore its fundamental questions.

Syllabic	One syllable per note.
Dynamical sublime	The experience of boundlessness arises from extreme forces such as wildness, chaos, disorder, and desolation.
Semi-aesthetic	The aesthetic experience generated by the performer within a fixed range of complete freedom in tempo and prosody.

*Note: The definitions of core concepts are synthesized from relevant theories, including ontology (Hofweber, 2005), musical ontology (Uidhir, 2013), syllabic (Lee, 1968), dynamical sublime (Beardsley, 1975), and semi-aesthetic (Cooper & Meyer, 1963).*

This study is based on a total of seven months of fieldwork, conducted in three phases: The first phase, in March 2024, lasted two weeks, primarily involving on-site visits to the Korean Shaman Museum and establishing contact with staff to obtain information on the “Chancheng Hall Sacrifice” performance and permission for video recording. Simultaneously, communication with museum staff yielded relevant details on the Ggotmaji-gut performance. The second phase, in April 2024, involved three weeks of filming, recording audio, photographing Korean shamanic rituals, and collecting relevant data through on-site observation and audio and visual recordings. The third phase involved on-site interviews in September 2024 with Mr. Lang, an inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage of Manchu shamanic chanting, and Ulaa, a Mongolian shaman, as well as a visit to the Shamanic Culture Museum in Hulunbuir, China, to gather relevant research materials. With the development of digital media, “conventional fieldwork may no longer be a hallmark of ethnomusicology” (Nettl, 2015, p. 13). Therefore, the research on the Korean portion primarily employed participant observation, using an internal cultural perspective to understand the meaning of musical performances. Video and audio recordings documented the details of musical performances, aiming to provide a detailed and objective data foundation for subsequent musical analysis. The research on the Chinese portion mainly combined “participant observation” with “semi-structured interviews”, focusing on three core questions: “the specific instruments used in shamanic music rituals and their reasons”, “the production process and religious connotations of the single-sided drum”, and “the reasons for shamanic musicians

accompanying the shaman or the shaman himself accompanying the shaman". Based on the examples of Min Hye-kyung, a non-material cultural heritage inheritor of Huanghaidao Shamanism. Mr. Lang, a non-material cultural heritage inheritor of Manchu Shendiao, and Ulaa, a Mongolian shaman with 14 years of experience in shamanic rituals, were purposively sampled. Given the universality of shamanic culture and the specificity of the research questions, a combination of Western notation and "descriptive notations" was used to transcribe the audio recordings (Nettl, 2015, p. 78). The native-language form of the shamanic performances was preserved, with a focus on musical parameters such as rhythm, lyrics, melody, and single-drum rhythms.

From the Yin Dynasty to the Zhou Dynasty, along with the formation of ritual music and the concept of ruler and subject, musical modes were based on the "three-part subtraction and addition method", forming the early Chinese national pentatonic scale: Gong, Shang, Jiao, Zhi, and Yu modes. Korean mode organization is based on the "trichord", forming a "lower trichord" and an "upper trichord" above and below the tonic, namely the two major categories or regional descriptions of modes: "p'yöngjo" and "kyemyöngjo".

Shamanic music, rooted in shamanic culture and realized through specific ritual scenarios, is a musical form performed by the shaman alone or in collaboration with assistants and musicians. Based on the stylistic characteristics of "Form, Inhalt, and Gehalt" (Manning, 2009, p. 157), shamanic music worships nature, totems, and ancestors, exhibiting dynamic, sublime, sacred, mysterious, natural, and supernatural features. The representation of the objects in shamanic music is not a single, immediate sensory experience, but rather a "randomly complex sequence and constellations of sensuously perceptible processes and states" (Seel, 2004, p. 56). Lyrics, rhythm, melody, and instruments form the emotional foundation, creating an overall aesthetic form within a symbolic context of corresponding related elements and relationships.

## 2. Ethnic Differences in the Ontological Aesthetics of Shamanic Music

### 2.1 An Overview of the Aesthetics of Shamanic Music

Shamanic music lyrics begin with unprocessed myths or collective fairy tales, incorporating a wealth of diffuse experience into graphic and picturesque ideas. Through specific ritual experiences, participants gain a cognitive and reconstructive understanding of their experiences. The lyrics consist of incantations and everyday language: incantations, a unique shamanic form, vary depending on the deity invoked, thus highlighting the shaman's authority and reinforcing the mystical nature of the invocation and spirit-summoning rituals. Everyday language, as a universally used communication tool, facilitates communication between the ritual participants and the invoked deity through the shaman's body. The shaman utilizes a dialectical approach of "music near, language far" and "language near, music far" to dynamically transform musical chanting and singing, facilitating the transition between human and divine roles. The rhythm of shamanic music, acting as a bond between language and music, maintains a regular, dynamic, intermittent pattern. This dynamic intermittent pause does not alternate between more and less, but between yes and no; not between stronger and weaker, or lighter and darker, but between a push and a pause, or presence and absence, varying the tempo through stylized rhythms. The melodic progression continues the narrow-interval characteristics derived from early individual instincts and representational life, serving alongside rhythmic combinations within a religious system of linguistic symbols. Through the signifier and signified of the lyrical text, it achieves an aesthetic perception and cognitive process that transcends reason and logic, embodying the "beginning of taste and the proof of sincerity" (Santayana, 1955, p. 81).

Understanding the noumenal aesthetics of shamanic music encompasses not only the sensory perception of the musical object but also the imaginative experience evoked by the fusion of

various elements such as "sense quality, emotion, and meaning" (Dewey, 2005, p. 279). This process fosters concentrated and selective interactions between the subject and the musical object, establishing a deep connection between finite observation and boundless imagination. The cognitive approach embodied by shamanism differs fundamentally from the concept of scientific truth; its internal logical structure differs from our usual understanding of truth based on experience or scientific induction. It presents unnatural or supernatural schemata. These schemata originate from the intuitive transformation and reconstruction of "natural phenomena". This transformation and reconstruction are achieved through inner emotions and abundant imagination. This process happens when one perceives natural appearances. The experiential content formed in this process often lacks a completely corresponding entity in the real world.

The contemporary image of shamanic music retains a primordial state in which abstract concepts and concrete forms are not fully differentiated. Its aesthetic perception process fosters an almost sacred experience, in which the boundaries between self and other tend to dissolve, allowing the subject to perceive the wholeness and unity of existence in a trans-temporal dimension—a kind of "cosmic wholeness-experience" (Becker, 2004, p. 54). This experience is not, in essence, a purely illusory spiritual state, but rather a schematic cognitive construction achieved through the symbolic power of divine narratives. This cognitive approach ultimately serves the practical needs of adapting to the natural and social environment, reflecting the functional connotation of shamanic music at the practical level. Through contact and inner transformation with a sacred being that transcends the natural realm, shamanic music transcends the established ritual context. In this process, the musical object is endowed with artistic and meaningful expression, thereby achieving the transmission of beauty and the cognitive transformation of a purposeful conscious landscape. Through the persuasive power of music, participants are awakened to construct their experiential concepts, stimulating an

aesthetic perception of the “causal connection” between sublime and mysterious emotions (Meyer, 1956, p. 6).

## 2.2 The specific forms of expression of Chinese shamanic music

The origin of art lies in the origin of culture (Grosse, 1898), and in early China, shamanism existed in the form of a primitive religion called “wu” (巫). The earliest record of the term “shaman” appears among the Jurchen people as “shanman” (跚蛮), and historical records define shamans as cunning yet resourceful individuals with divine abilities. Currently, Chinese shamanism is primarily practiced by Altaic-speaking peoples in Northeast China, specifically including Mongolian, Turkic, and Manchu-Tungusic language families. Due to the unique natural environment of Northeast China—its mountains, rivers, and forests—a unique ethnic culture and aesthetic sensibility have developed in harmony with a hunting and fishing lifestyle. Throughout its development from early times to modern society, the region has experienced invasions by at least three ethnic groups: ancient Asian, Tungusic, and Mongolian. Shamanic music, from its ideological framework to its specific musical performances, exhibits a similarity and overall unity resulting from the fusion of diverse ethnicities. Contemporary Chinese shamanic music culture retains early Siberian forms, including nature worship, animal worship, totem worship, and ancestor worship. It views the heavenly gods as the rulers of the universe, praying to the deities who govern animal souls for protection during hunts and for abundant prey. Totem worship is a result of the development of clan systems. As patriarchal society was established and lineage concepts were strengthened, totem worship gradually evolved and solidified. Eventually, it became the more prevalent form of ancestor worship in contemporary society. The former manifests as a stage of collective unconsciousness in which subject and object are not yet distinct, reflecting early humans' inherent need to seek supernatural experiences in the face of a survival environment and unknown fears. The latter

represents a confident trust in one's own power, evolving from emotional identification through blood ties into awe and reverence for ancestors. Based on the diachronic evolution of human cognition of natural objects and subjective thinking, shamanic music also exhibits a phased evolutionary trajectory in its object representation and perceptual forms: concrete representational thinking in the Paleolithic era; conceptual thinking in the Neolithic era; the unity of intuition and cognition in the Bronze and Iron Ages; and the systematized and rationalized cognitive framework of modern society (Liu, 1996).

The material forms of concrete shamanic music objects have shifted. In the early days, these forms included stone carvings and pendants used to frighten wild animals. Now, they have switched to louder, more durable items. These items are bronze or iron noisemakers, bronze (silver) mirrors, and bells. Based on where they are worn, bells are categorized into clothing bells, neck bells, hat bells, waist bells, wrist bells, belt bells, whip bells, drum bells, and pole bells. Shamans use body movements to cause the "noisemakers, bells, and mirrors" to collide or vibrate, producing sounds without a fixed rhythm, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Arrhythmic sounds



Source: Shaman Ulaa (2020). The author obtained this photo during an interview with Ulaa.

Figure 2 – Invocation deities song

The musical transcription consists of four staves of music. The top staff is for the mouth harp, showing a melody with lyrics in Chinese. The bottom staff is for the single-sided drum, with a 'drum loop' indicated. The music is in 3/4 time, with various key changes. The lyrics are: 走上了近前 要请安 (Walked up close, to pay respects); 先施礼 后问安 不知各位师傅 吃没吃饭 抽没抽烟 eng (First show respect, then ask about health. Don't know if all teachers have eaten, or if they smoke); 各位师傅一旁 落下来坐 (Teachers on the side, sit down); 别给老郎头子 立了大规矩 (Don't give the old master's son a big rule). Measure numbers 10, 13, and 15 are marked on the staves.

Source: Author (2024). Musical transcription of "Invocation Deities Song" as performed by Mr. Lang.

In invocation rituals, shamans typically use the mouth harp (a sibilant instrument) and the single-sided drum (a membranophone). According to interviews with Mongolian shamans, the single-sided drum, as a core instrument, has strict sacred rules for its production: the drum frame must be made from wood struck by lightning, and a special person riding a white horse must retrieve this "divinely chosen wood" for its construction; the drumhead is usually made from the raw hide of an unmated deer or sheep. Therefore, in specific shamanic rituals, the musical elements mainly consist of four types of sounds: the arrhythmic collision sounds of the noisemakers, the melody of the mouth harp, the rhythm of the single-sided drum, and the

sacred songs sung by the shaman. Shamans express themselves musically through a combination of striking a single-sided drum, singing sacred songs, and swaying their bodies, and, as a whole, they still maintain the aesthetic form shaped by early Siberian nature worship and hunting and fishing culture.

Figure 2 is the invocation song performed by Mr. Lang, a Manchu Shaman. The lyrics are sung with repeated '♪' drumbeats as the basic unit. The lyricsless sections use other drumbeats combined with the single rhythmic '♪' drum ring sound to create the overall sound. Through varied and improvisational polyrhythms, the song simulates the upper, middle, and lower realms of the shamanic cosmology, inducing the shaman into a trance-like state to summon a specific deity. The melody is composed of the notes F, B<sub>b</sub>, C, and E<sub>b</sub>, arranged in ascending order to form intervals p1, p4, p5, and m7. The absence of the M3 interval indicates that the music follows a tetra tonic scale based on the third generation of fifths, rather than an ethnic pentatonic mode with omitted notes. The generation rule is: a fifth above E<sub>b</sub> produces B<sub>b</sub>, a fifth above B<sub>b</sub> produces F, and a fifth above F produces C. According to Figure 2, the melody primarily employs steady progressions such as repeated notes, stepwise motion, and intervals of thirds, which, along with the syllabic arrangement of the lyrics, serve the religious expression of the language. Based on on-site recordings and comparisons with standard pitch, the music does not exhibit microtones. By switching between time signatures such as 3/4, 4/4, 7/4, and 8/4, one can achieve greater musical freedom. In some large-scale sacrificial ceremonies, shamans may simulate natural sounds such as human shouts, animal calls, and thunderstorms.

The authentic, natural, and highly sensual primitive aesthetic experience inherent in Chinese shamanic music is often expressed through metaphorical musical objects, using irregular, rough-textured sound forms. The metal ornaments used in shamanic rituals are made of copper, iron, and silver. Shamanic rituals also use natural instruments such as single-sided drums and mouth

harps. These metal ornaments and natural instruments are not just representations of the surface appearance of things. They are aesthetic expressions that carry supernatural meanings. Their form and function jointly serve the ritual's purpose and vision. The ontological aesthetic perception of Chinese shamanic music is rooted in the "collective unconscious" of early clan society, using mythology as the framework for its spiritual life and soul. It presents itself as a sensual collective form that integrates primitive experiences, illusions, primitive images, and archetypes, belonging to a deep, unconscious ontological category of life. Specifically, this cognition can be understood as a psychological construction process of Sense → Imagination → Reason → Intellect → Intelligence → Illumination, achieving a complete mental sublimation from sensory reception to spiritual transcendence.

The ritual setting, as the emotional foundation and intuitive representation of shamanic music's aesthetic perception, differs from the intermittent shoulder tremors and continued music during Korean shamanic initiations. Chinese shamans achieve a mystical initiation expression that transcends the secular and temporal boundaries through a sudden collapse and cessation of music. This achieves a multi-layered unity of ideal and reality, divinity and the mundane, consciousness and subconsciousness, which creates a special sensation "extending beyond time and space" (Jung, 1969, p. 142). Through structured ritual settings, a connection is established between the beauty of nature and knowledge and experience of the sacred realm, helping participants temporarily escape the pressures of daily life and gain happiness, fulfillment, and insightful transcendence (Alexander, 2014). Simultaneously, through repeated interaction with the group, individual consciousness merges into collective consciousness. This experiential quality allows people to recognize the unfathomable nature of the unborn and the future, embodying a "socially, visibly embodied, and profoundly cognitive" process (Becker, 2004).

Musical sounds, as the representational basis of ontological perception, are conceptually rooted in the connection and mixture of various cognitive elements such as impressions, feelings, and memories. Based on this cognition, perception, and understanding, carried by sensory experience, are integrated into the vortex of "amalgamating imagination" (Santayana, 1955, p. 48). These merges opposing categories such as the vulgar and the sublime, cruelty and benevolence, ultimately coalescing into a holistic, "harmonious natural beauty" (Berleant, 1992, p. 9), and a mystical religious beauty embodying the interaction between humanity and divinity.

## 2.3 The specific forms of expression of Korean shamanic music

Korea is a nation composed of a relatively homogeneous ethnic group, whose development transitioned from a hunting-and-fishing society to an agrarian society. Throughout its historical formation, border exchanges between these groups shaped its diverse belief system. In the Three Kingdoms period and earlier, Shamanic beliefs involving spirit worship were prevalent. Shamans conducted rituals among the populace, and the court regularly invited them to perform state rituals. Driven by political necessity, the rulers of Silla and Goryeo, who unified the Korean Peninsula, adopted Buddhism as the state religion, promoting it nationwide and establishing a Buddhist-dominated belief system. Towards the end of the Goryeo Dynasty, with the decline of Buddhist monks and the rise of Confucianism, Confucianism, guided by rationalism, became the state religion during the Joseon Dynasty. As a native Korean religion, shamanism evolved through the Three Kingdoms, Silla, Goryeo, and Joseon Dynasties, transforming its musical concepts from an early animistic nature worship into a diverse belief system incorporating elements of Buddhism and Confucianism.

"In music [...] from bodily sensation to aesthetic ideas, and then from these back again, but with gathered strength, to the body" (Kant, 2008, p. 160), the aesthetic experience is completed through the combined effect of internal reasons and imagination. The perceptual representation of Korean shamanic music is manifested explicitly in five dimensions: lyrics, rhythm, melody, mode, and instruments. At the lyrical level, its textual structure consistently aligns with a specific cognitive framework. Building upon early worship of natural deities such as mountain gods, tree gods, river gods, moon gods, and star gods, it gradually incorporated Confucian-characteristic heroic gods, ancestral gods, and shamanic gods, as well as diverse deities from the Buddhist system, such as Guanyin and Ksitigarbha, collectively forming its current lyrical content system. Rhythm primarily comprises two main aspects: tempo and meter. The specific rhythm in Korean music is closely related to the language (Jang & Han, 1975): because there are no articles or prepositions in Korean, the rhythm begins with a strong beat and ends with a weak beat. Musical rhythm usually emphasizes sequential beats leading to the next beat, often employing variations in meter and the formation of "small beats forming large beats". Like language, musical characteristics are fixed by customs. Influenced by Confucian culture, Korean shamanic music generally exhibits a linear melodic form. During its historical development, unique modal techniques such as Yeoseong and Toeseong have emerged, resulting in microtone phenomena similar to those found in Suyá and Indian folk music. The drum is an indispensable core instrument in shamanic music. Unlike the Siberian practice, in which shamans personally strike a single-sided drum for invocation, Korean shamanic music is typically accompanied by a professional shamanic musician playing the changgo. Through the organization of accented and unaccented notes, the music achieves a transformation between certainty and uncertainty. Because Korean shamanic music includes microtones, a transcription method combining Western and descriptive notations was adopted.

Figure 3 – Mansebadi song

1 모 십 니 다 - 모 십 니 다 온산 - 신령님을 모 십 - 니 다  
3 아 - 아 해 해 - 아 - 모 십 - 니 다  
5 달 보 는 다 면 은 갑 진 년 에 밝 아 올 삭 은 사 월 입 니 다  
7 아 아 해 해 - 01 - 사 월 입 니 다

Source: Author (2024). Musical transcription of Mansebadi as performed by Min Hye-kyung.

Figure 3 is the shamanic Mansebadi (만세받이) song collected through fieldwork in this study. This song is typically sung at the beginning of the Ggotmaji-gut ceremony, aiming to invoke the descent of the “Onsan” spirit. At the ceremony held in April 2024, this song invoked the spirit, restored its divine power, and reaffirmed the bond between the spirit and the believer. The song consists of five notes: G#, A#, C#, D#, and E#, with G# being the lowest and E# the highest. Based on the melodic scale p4 (G#—C#) + M3 (C#—E#), and the ending notes C# and G#, the song belongs to the Jin-Gyeongtori melodic mode (Lee, 2012). The melody primarily employs steady progressions such as repeated

notes, stepwise motion, and thirds, along with the syllabic arrangement of the lyrics, to serve the religious expression of the language. Based on the melody mode of Jin-Gyeongtori, and a comparison of recordings from on-site research with standard pitch, analysis shows that D# and A# are below the average pitch, E# is above the average pitch, and the D# note, between C# and E#, has a Yeoseong characteristic. Analysis based on the basic accompaniment rhythmic pattern, changgo, and the accented rhythm jing in the score reveals that the overall rhythm consists of 10 beats in a 3+2+3+2 meter. In addition to the aforementioned instruments, Buddhist instruments such as kkwaenggwari, hojok, barra, and kyungsoe/ryeong, as well as traditional folk instruments such as ajaeng, pipe, daegeum, and haegeum, are used in shamanic rituals.

The lyrics, rhythms, melodies, modes, and instruments of Korean shamanic music collectively constitute a focal point for meaning generation, with a transformative function that evokes non-causal, polysemous experiences. To understand the aesthetic connotations of Korean shamanic music, it is necessary not only to focus on the phenomenological characteristics of its sounds and the effectiveness of religious imagination, but also to examine in depth the structural shaping of the tonal system and auditory expectation system by Korean cultural memory. This kind of cultural memory, as an invisible behavior and language stored in memory or cognitive thinking habits (Moore, 2004), profoundly influences how shamanic music objects are expressed and also shapes the subject's deep understanding of their perceived appearance. The formation of Korean national aesthetic characteristics stems from the continuation of chance in its historical process, such as boundary integration and internal evolution. On the one hand, it is shaped by external forces such as politics, the economy, and the military; on the other hand, it has also undergone selective absorption and rejection by the collective unconscious of the nation, presenting a Gestalt construction intertwined with necessity and chance. Under this dual influence, the aesthetic category of contemporary Korean shamanic music has evolved into a unified whole of multiple

integrations. Its beauty is no longer limited to transcendent sublimity, awe, or sacred experience, but is presented as a more inclusive and complex comprehensive expression.

The participants continuously integrate into the existence of music, forming a fusion of subject and object (Stone-Davis, 2011). This fusion is manifested as a cognitive expansion between rationality and experience. It is not a simple acceptance or reductionist harmony, but an integrative process of aesthetic perception. Korean shamanic music, as a unique form of existence heterogeneous to the external world, achieves its own transformation and reconstruction by absorbing foreign elements and placing them in entirely different contexts. Beyond the perception of the musical object's appearance, this process also includes the overarching historical principle of natural dialectics and profound intellectual reflection on sensory representations. The composition of various interrelated elements and their relational structures ultimately forms the unique ontological aesthetic expression of Korean shamanic music. For example, the correspondence between its syllable-based lyrics and melody embodies the Confucian ideal of "great music is simple, tranquility is straightforward"; the call-and-response singing style between the shaman and the assistant shaman implicitly contains the philosophical concept of "harmony between heaven and man"; the lyrics promote the ethical orientation of "unity of beauty and goodness"; the symmetrical and harmonious stylized structure in the music reflects the aesthetic ideal of "moderation and peace"; and the Buddhist aesthetic thought of transcending the self and the world, and the tendency of subjective and objective values towards the "ontology of mind". Rhythmic structure or regular intervals serve as the basis for participants' perception of musical time, providing a spatiotemporal structure for imagination. Based on analyses of different beat transitions and the "small beats forming large beats" form in Korean shamanic music, the composition of the beat space cannot be regularly divided by an integer rate of motion  $\geq 1$ , thereby forming an inherent dissonant

rhythm. However, extending the scope to the level of musical phrases or sections, its rhythm exhibits a harmonious, unified temporal and spatial organization. The overall rhythmic structure embodies a spatial organizational form of the binary opposition and unity of "contradiction" and "harmony". In terms of mode, the microtone phenomenon derived from the techniques of Yeoseong and Toeseong gives the melodic scale a substantial variation in light and dark colors. These melodic features, combined with rhythmic structure and the use of multiple instruments by professional musicians, together constitute the intense, dramatic aesthetic expression of shamanic music. Unlike the tripartite structure of sound, tone, and music, and the binary division between subject and object (Yang & He, 2013), Korean shamanic music as a whole maintains the expression of supernatural consciousness in communication with the gods. In the process of historical and cultural construction, it shows the shaping influence of Confucianism and Buddhism, a deviation from the traditional Shamanic orientation, and an emphasis on the aesthetic presentation of musicality and drama.

## 2.4 Differences in national aesthetic characteristics between Korean and Chinese shamanic music

"If culture as a whole is the expression of humanity's totality of creative self-interpretation, it is in art that the character of this self-interpretive activity becomes most clearly visible" (Manning, 2009, p. 156). Contemporary shamanic music, in its content and form, is entangled by historical and conceptual shifts on the one hand. On the other hand, it reflects the historical construction process of culture and society through its specific practices. This is manifested in the mythological and symbolic lyrics used in its music, the instruments with sacred or religious attributes, and the ritual implements with metaphorical and symbolic meanings, all of which together constitute a representational system that resonates with the national aesthetic perception. Based on this, the perception of shamanic music is not merely the reception of individual musical stimuli or isolated sounds, but rather the organization of these

stimuli into interconnected perceptual patterns, forming a holistic Gestalt. The anticipation and tension constructed through thought, memory, and imagination further outline the curve of emotional development, generating meaning in the process. Simultaneously, this perceptual process relies on the aesthetic pre-framework formed by the accumulation of long-term perceptual experience. Through the combined effects of sensuous sensing, imaginative projection, and reflective contemplation, the unique aesthetic experience of shamanic music is ultimately achieved.

Based on field research on Mongolian and Manchu shamans, Chinese shamanic rituals have strict regulations regarding the use of single-sided drums and the wearing of shamanic attire. Shamans invoke specific deities through a combination of actions, including striking the single-sided drum, singing specific sacred songs, and shaking bronze or iron ritual implements worn on their clothing. During the invocation phase, as the drumbeats gradually quicken, the shaman feels a heaviness in their shoulders. The possession is ultimately completed by suddenly collapsing, the music stopping, and losing consciousness. There is no specific ritual for sending off the spirits; it is usually marked by the shaman regaining personal consciousness. It is noteworthy that the words conveyed through the shaman's mouth during possession are often not consciously recognized by the shaman upon regaining consciousness. Compared to China, Korean shamanic rituals have a more formalized structure, strictly following the phased progression of "invocation of spirits—descent of spirits—entertainment of spirits—farewell to spirits". During this process, the shaman usually sings specific songs, accompanied by multiple musicians, and the overall performance exhibits a strong, musically organized quality. By imitating social and divine behavior and delaying the fulfillment of anticipated norms, rituals acquire social value and emotional power. This creates a "three-cornered reinforcement of feed-back" interaction mechanism between performers and audience, and among audience members themselves (Esslin, 1977, p. 27), making the entire ritual more akin to a dramatic musical performance (Park, 2013).

Therefore, Chinese shamanic music is typically governed by the religious and magical concepts of shamanism, and its aesthetic experience relies less on the organizational forms of external musical objects such as instruments, rhythms, and ornaments. In rituals, the signifier and signified of symbolic symbols interact, assimilating external sensory experiences beyond the realm of cognition into internal spiritual events. Through the fictional method of free intuitive imagination, it resolves the dilemmas faced when reflecting on experiences of the material world, achieving a free and harmonious subjective purpose of intentional assumptions or imaginative directionality in sensory judgment. The overall musical form is closer to the free and direct expression of innate human interests, emphasizing the directness and non-reflective sensory aesthetics of the original process and possessing "semi-aesthetic" elements (Meyer, 1956, p. 214). It manifests as purely representational sensory intuition, presenting a non-conceptual and free aesthetic quality, similar to the "ambiguity of natural beauty" in early Siberian traditions (Adorno, 2003, p. 66). In contrast to China, Korean shamanic music is usually accompanied by specialized musicians who use multiple instruments, dissonant rhythms, and intense light-and-dark microtones, among other musical object forms. The overall perception process is characterized by an attachment to Buddhist and Confucian cultures, a deviation from the religious and magical aspects of shamanism, and an emphasis on musical and dramatic aesthetic expression.

Marxism posits that the social conditions of different eras shape their unique emotional structures and modes of consciousness. The emotional responses, aesthetic experiences, and symbolic representations evoked by music relate to its cultural connotations and exhibit distinct characteristics due to the subject's experiential and perceptual framework. Shamanism, as the source of supernatural cognitive concepts in shamanic music, manifests in its specific forms through the construction of different social, historical, and cultural contexts, exhibiting national, regional, and ethnic aesthetic differences.

However, shamanic music as a whole still maintains its syllabic characteristics, with melody and rhythm following the principle of underlining and intensifying the emotional tone of the lyrical language. It transcends actual sensory perception and specific aesthetic surfaces, preserving the overall beauty of its religious attributes.

### 3. Discussion

The strong conceptions of reason and of the autonomous rational subject have developed from Descartes to Kant. In the later period, there was an emphasis on the intrinsic connection between the unconscious, reason, and irrationality. This emphasis opened the modern prelude to the critique of reason's "logocentrism".

Compared to the guidance of reason for theoretical and practical will, shamanic music's religious and mystical attributes represent a perception. Concepts possess a characteristic of ambiguity. Based on specific cultural categories and subconscious thought structures, they are expanded through the grammatical framework of sensuous imagination, enabling the subject to establish a direct connection with those abstract, ineffable yet perceptible fundamental facts of existence. In specific ritual contexts, the intuitive subject encounters the musical object's appearance, thereby realizing the impressionistic and metaphorical symbolic cognitive process. Observed from the most fundamental and practical perspective, shamanic music is not simply about listening and appreciating. Its essence and form are a personal experience for the participants, encountering aesthetics and forming humanity's most ingressive and transformative summons. It achieves expanded cognition—a "felt harmony"—through the participation of imagination (Dewey, 2005, p. 45), bringing together unconscious and unspoken conscious and subconscious content from life, rather than the overwhelming presence of the audience as seen in modernism (Waters, 1999). For example, Figure 4, taken during the field research of the Jincheng Hall Sacrifice ritual, shows

participants engaging in the shamanic ceremony with musical accompaniment.

As a branch of aesthetics, shamanic music aesthetics focuses on how music shapes participants' perceptions, consciousness, and cognitive patterns during shamanic rituals. Its true vision of interaction with the world is not merely aesthetic perception, but rather manifested in shamanic social practice—the dynamic reshaping of language, existing perceptions, and understanding patterns within the ritual context. Unlike the so-called "modern oracles" of postmodern thought, shamanic practice does not aim to transcend the subject, nor does it directly reflect social structural metaphors such as patriarchy, sexism, or racism. Instead, in numerous female-dominated shamanic rituals, musical performance is used to regulate the emotions evoked in participants and to guide them toward a communication-based self-awareness. Transcending the inherent self-logic of the Descartes and Kantian traditions, shamanic music becomes a cultural pathway for expanding cognitive abilities and achieving moral education (Gablik, 1995, p. 114).

Figure 4- Jincheng Hall Sacrifice ritual



Source: Photo taken by the author during fieldwork in Jincheng Hall Sacrifice ritual, 2024.

Shamanic music, as a force capable of extending consciousness and directly expressing emotions, directly appeals to senses and to sensuous imagination, thus endowing experiential emotions with a purity and completeness unattainable in daily life. Through the aesthetic activity of shamanic music, the musical object appears

momentarily and opens to the subject; the subject then continues and expands upon it through imagination, participating in reflective strategies and constructions (Seel, 2004); ultimately achieving an intuitive grasp of the profound elements of nature, religion, and culture inherent in the music. As a ritualistic sound practice with supernatural efficacy, the overall aesthetic form of shamanic music produces a “redeeming character of the catharsis” (Marcuse, 1978, p. 10). It manifests as a continuous unity between the aesthetic cognitive world and the external world in experience, rather than a Cartesian dualistic metaphysics.

The aesthetic perception of shamanic music is not merely a practical argument; it views the world as a purely aesthetic object. The integration of nature spirits into its lyrics reflects a love for nature and an ecological consciousness of harmonious coexistence. This aesthetic form embodies a fuzzy, irregular, and non-conceptual construction of beauty, thereby expanding the experience of the dynamical sublime and non-conceptual and non-cognitive feeling. Compared to the rational logic accepted by mainstream culture, the aesthetic perception of shamanic music aligns more closely with “fauve and savage aesthetic spirituality” (Adorno, 2003, p. 196). It manifests as a fascination and reverence for natural objects, emphasizing the holistic connection of all things in the natural cycle of interdependence and balance. In this process, participants undergo emotional experiences of musical form. They rely on a super-musical framework. This framework includes concepts like animism, mystery, sacredness, and the dynamical sublime. Their purpose is to stimulate a deep ontological perception. As a result, they achieve an elevation of consciousness and an expansion of their experience. This process not only enhances the participants’ inner strength in facing the world, but also fosters experiences akin to religious exchange and dramatic emotional catharsis, pointing to a profound revelation of individual existence and the essence of the world. It enables participants to transcend an anthropocentric perspective, fostering a deep awareness of the intrinsic nature of non-human

life and providing a potential philosophical and experiential foundation for reconstructing the unbalanced relationship between humanity and nature (Gablik, 1995).

## 4. Conclusions

Unlike rational principles that guide the search for coherent experience, shamanic music cognition achieves its unique *a priori* understanding process through the sequential perception and expression of the experiential world. As a practice originating in early social life, it gives rise to a specific aesthetic expression on this basis.

Korean shamanic music is typically presented as a structured ritual performance, following a complete formula of “invocation of spirits—descent of spirits—entertainment of spirits—farewell to spirits”, accompanied by specialized musicians. It utilizes religious instruments such as the kkwaenggwari, hojok, barra, kyungsoe/ryeong, and jing, as well as traditional instruments such as the pipe, daegeum, haegeum, and janggo. It combines harmonious and dissonant rhythms with melodies featuring strong contrasts of light and dark tones, creating a unified sound with the shamanic chanting. In contrast, Chinese shamanic music is presented as an integrated practice centered on the shaman, including the invocation of spirits and descent of spirits, but lacking the stylized stages of “entertainment of spirits” and “farewell to spirits” found in Korean rituals; the musical performance is performed independently by the shaman. Traditional shamanic instruments include the single-sided drum and the mouth harp. These instruments are used in shamanic rituals. Alongside them, arrhythmic sounds are also part of the ritual. These sounds result from friction and self-ringing of instruments such as noisemakers, bells, and mirrors. Together with shamanic chanting, all these components form a complete sonic complex.

Both Chinese and Korean shamanic music employ escalated rhythms and intervals of a third or less to create

an auditory sensuous envelope, serving as the signifier and the indicated sensuous content of the lyrics. Through steady melodic fluctuations resembling natural vocalizations such as sighs, groans, sobs, and chanting, it integrates experiential elements from nature, religion, and culture, along with their interrelationships, into a unified expressive form. Based on synaesthetic sensing, it achieves an imaginative inductive perception, manifesting stylistic characteristics such as the dynamical sublime, sacredness, mystery, and a connection between the natural and the supernatural. However, due to differences in social structure and cultural history, the shamanic music of the two countries exhibits national aesthetic differences in the organization of specific elements and the unified aesthetic expression. Korean shamanic music has developed an aesthetic form profoundly shaped by Confucian and Buddhist thought, characterized by musical and dramatic aesthetic expressions that are close to the musical object and distant from the shamanic subject. Chinese shamanic music, with its free and direct improvisation, is characterized by an ambiguity of natural beauty and a mysterious religious aesthetic expression that is close to the shamanic subject and distant from the musical object.

Based on the Shamanic belief in animism, the deep perception of shamanic music is grounded in the auditory representation of musical objects. Through ineffable imaginative intuition, it transcends the boundaries of rational cognition and the subjective limitations of individual experience, achieving a unified experiential grasp and coherent perspective on higher-level phenomena. This allows for a transcendental participation in the infinite whole of time, rather than confining oneself to the realm of experiential knowledge in speculative discussions of the human subject and nature. The main limitation of this study is the limited sample size of Chinese and Korean musical works analyzed, necessitating further supplementation of musical object materials. As an essential symbolic carrier of national culture, shamanic music, through its participation in the construction and reinforcement

of national identity, has gradually formed specific musical object forms and corresponding national aesthetic characteristics. Future research can continue in the following areas: further expanding the comparative perspective across national and regional borders, focusing on the musical object forms themselves, and systematically exploring the deep mechanisms of interaction among music, culture, and aesthetics, thereby more fully revealing the ontological value of musical forms.

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