

## 26. THE ROLE OF SHAMANIS AND FORTUNE-TELLING IN KOREAN CULTURE

**GRADE LEVEL:** 9-10

**AUTHOR:** David A. G. Johnson, Jr.

**SUBJECT:** Global Studies

**TIME REQUIRED:** 1-2 class periods

### **OBJECTIVES:**

1. Examine the influence of Shamanism and fortune-telling upon Korean history and culture.
2. Describe the diversity of opinions held by contemporary Korean students.
3. Explain why Shamanism and fortune-telling comprise a popular practice in contemporary Korean society.
4. Compare and contrast Korean cultural beliefs and practices with those in the United States.

### **MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

These documents, which are attached:

- An introduction to Korean Shamanism
- Interview of Korea University students on their opinions of fortune-telling and Shamanism (recorded in Seoul, Korea, July 11, 2000)
- "An Encounter with the Future: A Personal Experience with a Korean Fortune-teller" (Seoul, Korea, June 30, 2000)
- Maxims and Proverbs of Old Korea: Role of the Sorceress
- "The Fortune-teller and the Demons" (Korean folktale)
- *Kut* Rituals (drawings including musical instruments)

### **PROCEDURE:**

#### Class period 1

1. Write the word *fortune-teller* on the blackboard. Brainstorm and create a semantic map. List student responses.
2. Based upon student responses, discuss the reasons why individuals visit fortune-tellers, how fortune-tellers influence people's lives, and why people believe or disbelieve fortune-tellers.
3. Have the students write down their astrological sign. Ask the students whether or not they consult the daily newspaper horoscopes. Discuss the accuracy or inaccuracy of the information provided. What purpose do horoscopes serve?
4. Introduce Korean Shamanism and fortune-telling tradition using background information in Document 1. The teacher may choose and hand out excerpts; students can text render reading (underlining any word or idea they consider important); the teacher can then ask the students to share the text rendering. Inform the students that repeating a classmate's response is acceptable.
5. As a culminating writing assignment, students can complete a speculative (expressive) writing sentence to respond to the reading while making personal connections to the reading. Students can demonstrate how they process new information.

Any of the following suggested sentence starters may be used to motivate student responses:

- I'm surprised that...
- I noticed...
- I'm not sure...

- If I were...
- I wonder...
- I was reminded of...
- One consequence of \_\_\_\_\_ could be...
- I'd like to know...

### Class period 2

1. Distribute Documents 1-6 and inform the class that they relate to fortune-telling and Shamanism.
2. Divide the class into learning groups of five. Assign the following suggested group tasks. Groups will present their findings to the rest of the class.

#### Group 1

- A. Read Document 1, An Introduction to Shamanism.
- B. Define *mudang*, ritual, shaman, *kut*.
- C. How has Shamanism influenced Korea? List three ways.
- D. Describe the role of a *mudang* or shaman in the *kut* ceremony. Why are *mudang* mainly women?
- E. Why are music and dance an important part of Shamanism's rituals?
- F. Why would members of an organized religion (Buddhists, Catholics, and Protestants) use a shaman? Why do shamans still exist in modern Korea?

#### Group 2

- A. Read Document 2, an excerpt from the interview of Korea University students on fortune-telling and Shamanism.
- B. Why are fortune-telling and Shamanism still practiced in Korea?
- C. Describe the attitudes of the Korea University students about fortune-telling and Shamanism.
- D. What was your group's reaction to their points of view?
- E. List three questions your group could ask the students.
- F. What else do you need to know?

#### Group 3

- A. Read Document 3, An Encounter with the Future—A Personal Experience with a Korean Fortune-teller.
- B. Define *SAJU*
- C. Describe your group's reaction to the teacher's visit to the Korean fortune-teller.
- D. Why did the Korean University professor arrange the visit?
- E. List three questions you would ask the teacher to ask the fortune-teller.

#### Group 4

- A. Read Document 4, Maxims and Proverbs of Old Korea—Role of the Sorceress.
- B. Define the terms *maxim*, *proverb*, and *sorceress*.
- C. Explain the meaning of each Korean proverb.
- D. What do the proverbs/maxims teach you about Korean culture?
- E. List three U.S. maxims or proverbs. How are they similar or dissimilar to the Korean maxims and proverbs?
- F. Why do all cultures use maxims and proverbs?

#### Group 5

- A. Read the folktale in Document 5. Summarize the main idea.
- B. How did the folktale enable your group to understand Korean culture?
- C. List three things that surprised your group in reading the Korean folktale.
- D. Compare and contrast the Korean folk tale to one in the United States.
- E. What role do folktales play in all cultures?

#### Group 6

- A. Examine the drawings in Document 6. List all the items found and explain their significance.
- B. Describe your group's feelings in viewing the drawings.
- C. How do the drawings express Korean religious beliefs and practices?
- D. Write a short story based upon the drawings.

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## Document 1

### AN INTRODUCTION TO KOREAN SHAMANISM AND FORTUNE-TELLING

Through the mists of Korea's five millennia, the traditional folk practices of Shamanism have endured. The ancient devotion to Buddhism, five hundred years of Confucianism, and a century of Christianity have not eradicated Shamanism's impact upon Korean culture. In Korea, Shamanism is defined as a "traditional natural religious phenomenon in which the shaman possessing the special skill of trance-possession communicates with the supernatural world and by means of this supernatural power is able to fulfill the needs in human life including the telling of fortunes" (Chang Soo-Kyung). Shamans serve "to invoke the gods and ancestors, speak with their voice, and claim their power to interpret dreams and visions" (Laurel Kendall).

Shamanism among world civilizations is not unique. In the United States, Native Americans have called upon their medicine men, and in West Africa priests summon the spirits of ancestors. Korean shamans are predominantly female, although a few males known as *paksu* also practice. Korea's turbulent history explains why Shamanism remained a powerful influence. The Korean peninsula has experienced wars, natural disasters, and authoritarian rule producing a sense of insecurity. The folk religion of Shamanism became a reliable guide for interpreting daily life. Shaman beliefs enable Koreans to cure diseases, obtain good fortune, avoid calamities, and perhaps gain financial success.

Shamanism or Muism also incorporated "the legends, folktales, and myths of Korea's historical heroes and transmitted [them] through oral tradition" (Chang Soo-Kyung). God status was conferred upon natural objects and individuals. Among these were Tan'gun, the legendary father of Korea in 2333 BCE, and monarchs of the Three Kingdoms Period (Silla, Koguryo, and Paekche kingdoms, 57 BCE-688 CE). Noted generals—Kim Yoo Shin, Ch'oe Yong, Lim Kyung-Up, and Nam Yee—became immortal. Koreans developed a strong sense of unity and community as a result. During one period (Silla) shaman kings existed and exercised powerful roles.

An individual becomes a *mudang* by receiving a spirit, then presiding at a religious ceremony—a *kut*—while singing and dancing to a special rhythm and beat. Performing a *kut* requires a master *mudang*, dressed in a brightly colored costume, and her musician assistants. One musician plays the *changgo* (drums), and others may perform on the *chengum* (cymbals) or *ching* (small brass gong). The *mudang* may conduct several different types of private and public rituals:

1. *Family Ritual*. An individual celebration is held at a person's home. Prayers/ceremonies for the family are conducted concerning, for example, child rearing, healthy birth, and protection against an evil spirit.
2. *Village Ritual*. The entire village participates in seeking protection against evil or for a bountiful harvest. In addition to such a ritual, *jangseun* (totem poles) constructed from timber protect villages from ghosts and evil spirits. Usually two carved figures—male and female—stand at entrances to the villages.

*Mudang* who have entered a trance first invoke the god(s), who is then entertained. A prayer is made for the specific purpose of the ritual, and the god is given a farewell.

Today in industrialized modern Korea, Shamanism persists even among skeptical intellectuals, university students, and physicians. It coexists among Koreans who proclaim themselves to be practicing Buddhists and

Christians (Catholics and Protestants—mainly Presbyterians). It has been argued that both Buddhism and Christianity have absorbed many Shamanistic folk ideas, thus ensuring the continuance of Korea's indigenous religion.

## Document 2

### AN INTERVIEW: KOREA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' OPINION OF THE ROLE OF SHAMANISM AND FORTUNE-TELLING IN KOREA

Recorded at Korea University Graduate School of International Studies, 11 July 2000

Interviewed by: David A.G. Johnson, Jr.

Participants:

Lee Jin Woo; Lee Byul; Ryu Hojin; Kim Jin-Young; Yang In-Ho; Kim Susan

DJ: My name is David Johnson. I have been here as part of an International Delegation of Educators working on a project to help American high school students understand more about your culture, in Korea. One of the issues I am interested in is Shamanism and fortune-telling, and its impact on Korea.

Susan: My name is Susan. I am 21 years old. My major is English. In Korea there are some people who changed their name because the shaman told their mother to change their name. If you're a girl, she will achieve success.

DJ: Did that happen in your family?

Susan: No.

DJ: Has your family ever used a shaman?

Susan: I go to Catholic Church, so our family doesn't go to shamans.

DJ: Have you ever heard any relative speak about shamans?

Susan: No.

DJ: What about friends? Have any friends ever spoken about shamans?

Susan: There is a Junior who changed her name.

DJ: Because of the shaman?

Susan: Yeah.

Lee Jin Woo: My name is Lee Jin Woo, and I am 21 years old. I study engineering. I am Christian, so my family and other Christians in our country don't believe in shamans.

DJ: What kind of Christian are you? Are you Catholic, Presbyterian?

Lee Jin Woo: I am Presbyterian.

DJ: I am Presbyterian. What do you know about Shamanism?

Lee Jin Woo: My grandma is Buddhist, but my mother converted to Presbyterianism, so I don't know much about Shamanism.

DJ: Did your grandmother go to a shaman?

Lee Jin Woo: Yes, my grandma honored the ancestors – forefathers.

DJ: Did they ever talk about shamans? Any friends or neighbors who visited the shaman?

Lee Jin Woo: No.

Ryu Hojin: My name is Ryu Hojin, and I am 21 years old. I have no religion. My mother and my grandmother have religion. They are very good Buddhists, and they believe in Buddha very deeply. They go to fortune-teller when they want to know about the future or they think there is something wrong in my family or my country. And fortune-teller sometimes give them the solutions to the situation. The solution is some kind of paper, to protect them.

Byul: The paper is placed on the door to protect the family from bad spirits or evil.

DJ: You have that in your house?

Ryu Hojin: Yes, several sheets.

DJ: How much did it cost?

Ryu Hojin: It varies because in Korea there are many shamans, and they have their own price because people believe in the power of the shaman differs.

DJ: If you are a very good shaman it costs very much. If you are no good it costs very little?

Ryu Hojin: Yes.

DJ: How can you tell if a shaman is very good?

Ryu Hojin: That can be proved by the frequency of clientele—numbers or percentage.

DJ: You said your mother and grandmother visited the fortune-teller about problems. Have they visited the shaman to pray for you to get into the University? Did they do that?

Ryu Hojin: Of course they did that. The shaman said I will get a very good result. (Laughter). But that was not true. Most Korean mothers and grandmothers used to go to fortune-tellers to hear about their son or daughter's future, especially the school problems.

DJ: Do men ever visit the shaman?

Ryu Hojin: No, no.

DJ: Why don't men, fathers, grandfathers visit the shaman?

Ryu Hojin: Most fathers or grandfathers have their own power in the family, so they don't want to show to their family that they are nervous or weak. If they told us they wanted to go to shaman, it means something is wrong with our family.

DJ: So it's alright for women to be weak in Korean society?

Ryu Hojin: Yeah, maybe.

DJ: What about when someone is having a baby, do women go to the shaman to consult?

Ryu Hojin: Sometimes that may be because to know about the gender of their new baby. If the infant is born – they want to know about the baby's future, social class, and life. People used to go to shaman for many reasons, but now they don't believe as much, they go just for fun, maybe. Like going to fortune-teller.

DJ: I went to a fortune-teller while in Seoul, and the fortune-teller told me some things. Most of it was not correct. But it was a lot of fun.

DJ: How many of you have had difficult times at University, tests, professors, stress? Would you go to a shaman to help you with difficult school problems?

Ryu Hojin: Students - yes, Korean students have much pressure, but we wouldn't visit shamans.

DJ: Why would you not go to a shaman even though you have so much pressure?

Byul: The fortune-teller doesn't like to visit the young people. They believe young people are too young to hear the future.

DJ: Now is this the fortune-teller or the shaman?

Byul: Fortune-teller.

DJ: So you see the fortune-teller and the shaman as the same?

Byul: Yeah, shamans say they are fortune-tellers. Many fortune-tellers live in the cities, but the shamans live around the countryside. But they actually do the same job.

DJ: So you would never think about going to a shaman?

Byul: If I do some business, some big business if there's some trouble, I'd visit some shaman. One of my relatives did some business; he had his own job. He visited the fortune-teller and the fortune-teller said the problem is you need some woman. She was the woman, and they married. They divorced, but my relatives and I think the fortune-teller used my relative, she just used her business to trick my relative. She used some chanting song, tapes.

DJ: Ryu, did your family think the shaman had done a good job in terms of the prediction?

Ryu Hojin: My mother and my grandmother believed, my father did not believe.

DJ: Did they ever have a *kut* at your house or at the shaman's house?

Ryu Hojin: My family did not have a *kut* but my neighbor did.  
 DJ: Can you describe what happened?  
 Ryu Hojin: It was a very uncanny thing.  
 DJ: What do you mean uncanny?  
 Ryu Hojin: Strange and weird.  
 DJ: How old were you?  
 Ryu Hojin: I was nine years old, maybe ten.  
 DJ: Did it scare you?  
 Ryu Hojin: Maybe at first. After some time I didn't think so.  
 DJ: You said she started dancing when the *kut* started. Did she just start dancing? How did the *kut* begin?  
 Ryu Hojin: I can't tell. When I entered the house the *kut* had already begun. But there was a ceremony table with many foods and tools the shaman needed. There was some kind of bell or wood colors. Twenty minutes after her dancing and speaking of the shaman, they stopped the ceremony and talked about something I could not understand. The shaman talked with my neighbor.  
 DJ: You don't know what the problem was?  
 Ryu Hojin: I heard the reason after the *kut*. My mother and grandmother talked about it. The *kut* was for the neighbor's son who had some problem – some illness. His illness wasn't cured.  
 DJ: What did the shaman say would happen to the son?  
 Ryu Hojin:- (Laughter) Evil spirits had entered the neighbor's son for many reasons. In Shamanism some evil spirits can be all around. We believe our forefathers can help.

DJ: Do all of you believe your ancestors can help you today?  
 Students: I don't believe.  
 Susan: No.  
 Byul: Knife on the Tomb. Pu?  
 DJ: You believe?  
 Byul: I don't believe. She said, I would enter Korea University even though I had poor score. Sometimes I depend on her, but I don't believe shamans.

DJ: Do you think shamans are weird people as Ryu Hojin does?  
 Byul: Oh, I don't think so. This week some program will show some Shamanism; she is actually Catholic and has believed for ten years. She became sick, finally, she changed religion. As a shaman, she thought heaven cured her. Nowadays, she works as a shaman or fortune-teller.

DJ: Let me ask you this, if young people don't believe in Shamanism or religion, what do young people believe in?  
 Ryu Hojin: Money and their girlfriend or boyfriend or in school. They believe their parents—Koreans believe only in real things.

Lee Woo Jin: I read my Bible and am not sure about shamans.  
 DJ: What do you believe?  
 Susan: I go to Catholic Church, not for five years. I can't understand God and Jesus or Bible. But last month I experienced God's power. My grandmother went to heaven last month; she had lung cancer. She was in hospital for five months, but I prayed for her, my family prayed for her so I think God helped her go to heaven comfortably.

DJ: How old was your grandmother?  
 Susan: My grandmother was eighty.  
 DJ: Describe what you mean by a powerful experience.  
 Susan: When my grandmother died—at that moment she had a smile. Our family prayed and sang a hymn.

In Ho Yang: My name is In Ho Yang, and I am twenty and Catholic. My family, grandmother often visits the



shaman because many troubles happened. My grandmother explored many things, for example—what happened? Why did it happen? She visited shaman—I wondered why did she go. In Korea there is ancient shamanism tradition.

Ryu Hojin: In Korea there are many Web sites, too, for fortune-telling. Did you know that?

DJ: No, I didn't.

Ryu Hojin: Because young people don't believe it entirely, but they believe a little and have fun. There are hundreds of fortune-telling sites, and they give the people's fortune. There is a type of Korean fortune-telling – *gunhap*. It means love life – it forecasts about love life; it depends on their own birth date. Several kinds of fortune-telling services online; it's very popular, and one thing young people are relying more on fortune telling than shamans in Korea. When they were young they didn't believe in Shamanism; as they grow old they start to believe the shaman.

DJ: When you say old, what ages are you talking about?

Ryu Hojin: It varies from individual to individual. For women it starts at twenty-five or thirty. In case of men it starts at forty.

DJ: When you say a person is old. What age do you call a person old?

Ryu Hojin: Fifty.

DJ: So if a person is fifty they're old in Korea.

Ryu Hojin: Of course.

DJ: Thank you all for sharing your ideas about Shamanism and fortune-telling. My students will be very interested in this window to understanding Korean culture.

**Document 3**  
**“AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE FUTURE: A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**  
**WITH A KOREAN FORTUNETELLER”**

by David A.G. Johnson, Jr., 2000 Korea Studies Fellowship

Forty-eight hours had passed since arriving in South Korea, affectionately called The Land of Morning Calm. Mongols had referred to *solongo* or rainbow. Seoul, South Korea's modern capital, surrounded by towering mountains, reflects the country's intoxicating exuberance. Its young peoples' blonde-, red-, platinum-, and turquoise-tinted hair became a familiar sight although a deceptive image. One needed to look deeper for the soul of Korea.

During my visit to South Korea as a recipient of a 2000 Korean Studies Fellowship at Korea University awarded by the Korea Society, numerous experiences would enable me to lift the veil of Korean culture. One memorable occasion involved a surprising episode that occurred after a delightful evening's visit with a Korean student's family in North Seoul. Earlier I'd taught a lesson on the Negro Spirituals at the student's school, Daeil Foreign Language High School. Both of his parents were educated in the United States; the father was head of the engineering department at Hanyang University. Hanyang is the former name for Seoul. A very thoughtful individual, he possessed a well-developed sense of humor. My host, his youngest son, aged ten, and I jumped into a taxi and headed into Seoul's multicolored lit night. Our destination, a mystery, until my host announced we would visit a fortune-teller. Rather I was scheduled to experience an important aspect of traditional Korea.

I was led to one of Seoul's celebrated parks and introduced to the searching fortune-teller who sat in an Asian-style squatting position. Dressed completely in white *hanbok* (Korean clothes), he held a flickering and dim oil lantern as I sat on a low folding stool. Visiting a fortune-teller was completely novel—something never contemplated in bustling New York—full of its own colorful predictors of the future.

The veteran male fortune-teller consulted his *SAJU* Book—*SA* meaning four, *JU* meaning pillars, thus the major columns of one's birth: year, month, day, and hour. All Korean fortune-tellers use the *SAJU* Book; their interpretations distinguish their craft. I was amused when the curious fortune-teller inquired about the time differences between Korea and New York to calculate information based upon the ancient/lunar calendar. He appeared surprised to learn I was a native of the Garden State, New Jersey. In addition, I received a palm reading. He peered intently into my left palm, examined the lines, reviewed past events, and delivered solemn predictions. One cannot vouch for the fortune-teller's accuracy as he discussed my health, past, economics and longevity. His imprecision was more than compensated for by an authentic glimpse into Korean society.

What fascinated me was the professor's disbelief in fortune-tellers even as he was eager for me to meet one. My own skepticism was validated, but the encounter had been considered amusing. As I was to learn further during my odyssey in Korea, many Koreans especially the young possess a similar attitude. Fortune-tellers are increasingly visited as entertainment. Upon reflection, there is perhaps a part of every Korean that may in fact want to believe the fortune-teller. And who—whether residing in the United States or on the Korean peninsula—hasn't wondered about the future? Consider the individuals who faithfully pour over daily newspaper horoscopes. And of course, they don't believe either. It's simply for fun!

I received a magnificent gift from my Korean host family and am considerably more aware of a special aspect of Korea. The Mongols were correct in describing Korea as a rainbow: :a pot of gold awaits imaginative open-minded visitors. For me, it was an unmistakable transcultural encounter with the present and future.

**Document 4**  
**MAXIMS AND PROVERBS OF OLD KOREA: ROLE OF THE SORCERESS**

1. Beat the drum of a sorceress after her dance is over.
2. A sorceress invited to dance out the devil, a monk to chant for the dead.
3. Waiting for mother who has gone to a sorceress' dance.
4. Rather watch the sorceress' dance and eat the cakes.
5. Although the mother-in-law wants the sorceress to come and dance, she does not like to see her eldest daughter-in-law dance.
6. It is like a house in which the sorceress's dance is just over.
7. A sorceress cannot dance out her own devils nor can a blind fortune-teller tell the day of his own death.

## The Fortuneteller and the Demons

Long, long ago in Hanyang\* there lived an unusually gifted fortuneteller who was blind. Although he could not see the world around him, he had the power to see evil spirits.

One day as he was walking down a street he saw a crowd of colorfully dressed demons following several errand boys who were carrying fruit, rice cakes and wine. Thinking that the demons would cause trouble for the household to which the errand boys were bound, the fortuneteller followed at a safe distance. Shortly they went into a nobleman's house.

The fortuneteller waited anxiously outside the gate, trying to fathom what kind of havoc the demons would cause. After a while he heard a scream, followed by loud wailing, coming from the house.

"What's wrong? What's happened?" he asked an errand boy who came out the gate.

"The master's daughter suddenly died," replied the boy, hurrying off down the road.

The fortuneteller called to the gate guard, "Please take me to your master. I'm a fortuneteller. I know what happened to his daughter and I think I can save her. Please, I implore you. Take me to your master. We must hurry

\* Hanyang: today's Seoul, it was the capital of the Chosŏn Kingdom (1392-1910).

## Document 5 THE FORTUNETELLER AND THE DEMONS

if she is to return to life." The guard hesitated at first but the fortuneteller was so excited and seemed so sure of himself that he finally told him that he would speak to his master.

The nobleman came out to the gate and the fortuneteller explained what he had observed.

"So what you're saying is that you can revive my daughter?" said the nobleman.

"Yes, but we must hurry. Time is of the essence." The nobleman eyed the fortuneteller and then led him into the house.

The fortuneteller asked that the body of the girl be placed in a small room. Then he closed all the doors and windows tightly and pasted paper over every crack and crevice so that not even smoke could pass through. He sat down beside the body and began to chant.

Presently loud groaning sounds filled the room. But the



fortuneteller continued to chant. The groaning became louder and louder as the demons struggled to get out. Just when it seemed the room would explode with the noise, a curious servant girl made a small hole in the papered window so that she could peep inside. The demons immediately rushed out through the tiny hole.

The dead girl opened her eyes and looked around in a daze. The fortuneteller called in her parents who were overcome with joy.

The fortuneteller refused all the gifts the nobleman offered him. "I don't have long to live. I could have destroyed those demons if someone hadn't made a hole in the window. Now they will surely destroy me."

News of the fortuneteller's uncanny vision which enabled him to bring the nobleman's daughter back to life soon spread throughout the city, even to the King.

The King was very skeptical by nature. He thought that the fortuneteller might be a trickster who could easily take advantage of others, especially ignorant commoners. He decided to summon him to his Court so that he could judge him himself.

The King talked to the fortuneteller for a while and then decided to give him a test. He had a dead rat placed in front of him. "What is on the floor in front of you?" asked the King.

"A rat, Your Majesty," replied the fortuneteller.

The King was surprised. "Can you tell me how many?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. There are three rats," replied the fortuneteller very confidently.

"Three? Did you say three?" laughed the King.

"Yes, Your Majesty. I clearly discern three."

"You fool! There is only one!" stormed the King. "You have no special powers. You're nothing but a charlatan who preys on ignorant, innocent people. And you'll pay with

your life...."

"But, Your Majesty, I can see them. Three..."

"You will be publicly beheaded to show the people what becomes of people who practice deceit," said the King sternly and he motioned to some guards to take the fortuneteller out.

Some curious courtiers examined the rat and found two perfectly formed fetuses inside it. They showed them to the King.

"I've made a grave mistake," said the King. "Hurry to the tower and signal that the execution is cancelled," he ordered a guard.

The guard rushed to the tower. He tried to wave the flag to the right to signal the executioners that the man was to be spared. But a strong wind blew it to the left every time he tried.

The fortuneteller was thus beheaded. As his head dropped, evil laughter broke the silence at the execution site and the wind immediately ceased.

Document 6  
DRAWINGS



