

The Background and Contemporary Spiritual-Nationalist Significance of Mt. Baekdu-san and the Baekdu-daegan Range, in All of Korea

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We begin by viewing the extraordinary photograph of September 20, 2018, taken by official North Korean media and published in news reports around the world, showing Republic of Korea President Moon Jae-in and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's "supreme leader" Kim Jong-un standing together clasping raised hands, their wives beside them. This reasonably dramatic and colorful photo was taken by most of the world to signify that some progress had been made in the political negotiations about economic assistance, military stances and nuclear weapons program during President Moon's third summit meeting with Kim. However, the photo was widely reported to have a very deep emotional impact on ethnic Korean people, in Korea itself and among those of the global diaspora community who still remain knowledgeable about their cultural roots. The photo was displayed as super-enlarged posters in downtown Seoul and around South Korea, proclaiming a strong positive political influence by making it seem as if Moon's policies towards the north were bearing fruit, and inspire and hope that a peaceful national reunification was moving closer. Much of the deep cultural resonance and political meaning encoded in this image remained unknown to most of the non-Korean global observers, as they do not know the background information that made it so significant. The purpose of this essay and the lecture that accompanied it is to fully explain all that complicated context of cultural and political history.

What made this particular photograph so significant to Koreans and those who know deeply about Korea is the location of which the four leadership figures are standing, the physical background behind them. They were on the rim of one of the world's largest volcano craters, with the largest crater-lake behind them, surrounded by beautiful mountain-peaks of the rim. They were standing in the main viewing area of the North Korean section of Mt. *Baekdu-san* [spelled "Paektusan" by the north, 白頭山 / 백두산 in Korean characters, meaning "White-Head Mountain"] and its crater-lake known as *Cheonji* [天池 / 천지 to, meaning "Heavenly Lake]. In the past century this has become the most culturally important mountain of Korea, of extreme importance to both north and south in-itself, and also because it is the beginning of the *Baekdu-daegan* [白頭大幹 / 백두대간, meaning "White-Head Great-Ridgeline"] Cordillera or Mountain-System that stretches from it throughout the entire Korean peninsula, ending at Mt. Jiri-san; defining the nation's regions and conducting its unique energy according to Korean geomancy. Both the single volcanic mountain and the grand range that stems from it play a strong role in the various Korean national ideologies, which are still undergoing continuous evolution – we will explore the various depths of what they mean to the Korean people.

Baekdu-san is geographically unique, prominent and important, with the highest peak of Northeast Asia at 2,744 meters and the world's deepest crater-lake continuously fed by snowmelt and drained by two huge waterfalls on its east and west sides that create the Yalu and Amrok Rivers, Korea's traditional and modern borders for most of the past millennium. It has always been surrounded by vast wilderness populated by large Siberian tigers, and so remained very little known or visited for all the earliest eras of Korean history, not playing any role in the cultural development.

There are no archaeological sites of shrines or any human habitation on its slopes, no buildings created until the end of the 19th century.

However, within the past century it has risen from this ancient obscurity to become one of the most important and powerful symbols that the North Korean regime utilizes in its domestic and external political propaganda to support its ideology of national legitimacy, making it the site of its key historical narratives of its leadership. This mountain has also become very prominent in South Korean cultural ideology, having become identified with the official myths of the origin of the nation, and taken as a symbol of the aspirations for national re-unification. Meanwhile, the Baekdu-daegan Trail has opened and become popular in South Korea in the last 30 years, and by now has gotten some serious international recognition as a tourism attraction, and has become an issue of relations with North Korea and particularly their attempts at building tourism.

At the summit event, newspapers reported that President Moon's spokesman told journalists, "As the highest mountain on the Korean peninsula, Mount Baekdu is the mythical origin-site of the Korean people, featuring in South Korea's national anthem, thousands of artworks and various North Korean propaganda themes. The peaks are considered sacred to all Koreans as the birthplace of Dangun, the legendary founder of the first Korean kingdom. Mount Baekdu is the spiritual mountain for the Korean people and it's the most symbolic mountain."

This refers to the ancient myth of "Gojoseon" (Ancient Joseon) as the first ethnic-Korean kingdom, and divine Founding-King *Dan-gun*, as recorded in the very first section of the *Samguk Yusa* (a 13th Century collection of myths, legends and historical records that were not included in the *Samguk Sagi* history compilation of almost a century earlier, written and compiled by Buddhist Seon Master Iryeon; these two books together form our best written sources on ancient Korean history and cultural development). The story goes that *Hwan-in* the King of Heaven was asked by one of his younger sons *Hwan-ung* to send him down to earth to govern his own land. Hwanin surveyed the mountains of the earth and chose Mount *Taebaek-san* [太白山 / 태백산, Grand White Mountain] as the best site, and then 'Opened the Gate of Heaven' (*gaecheon*) and sent down his son 'To Benefit Humanity' (*hongik-ingan*). Hwanung descended to with three heavenly seals or treasures and 3000 followers, to a sacred sandalwood tree on the summit of Taebaek-san. Here he established a sacred spiritual capital city and marshaled the noble spirits of Wind, Rain and Clouds as his Ministers. A primitive government was established with 360 departments to rule with laws and moral codes about agriculture, grain-storage, hunting, fishing, sickness and medicine, education, the arts, family-life, determination of good and evil, and etc. Then a bear and a tiger both came to Holy Hwanung and prayed (begged) to become human beings; the Heavenly Prince decided to give them a chance, and gave them a bundle of mugwort and twenty bulbs of garlic (bitter medicinal herbs; if pickled, then the first kimchi?) and told them that if they ate only these sacred food and stayed in a cave for one hundred days then they would become human. The tiger shortly gave up in impatient hunger and left the cave. The bear remained and after 21 days was transformed into a young woman. This bear-woman (called Ungnyeo) was very grateful and made offerings to Hwanung at the stone altar by the sacred tree on the peak. She had no husband, however, and prayed for a son. Hwanung was moved by her prayers to transform himself as a human man, and mated with her. Nine months later she gave birth to a son, who was named or at least is now known to us as *Dan-gun Wanggeom* [檀君王儉 / 단군 왕검, Bronze-Age "Altar-King"]. Dan-gun came down south from Taebaek-san and founded the first Korean kingdom, with its capital nearby what is now Pyongyang City and then moved to Asadal, which was probably at the foot of Mt. Guwol-san in Hwanghae Province, and named it "Joseon" in the

50th year of the reign of the Emperor Yao (China's mythical sage-emperor). Dan-gun reigned over Joseon (Gojoseon) for 1,500 years, until 1122 BCE, when Founding-King Wu of the Zhou Dynasty enfeoffed Prince Jizi to Joseon. King Dangun moved his capital again, but then returned to Asadal and abdicated his throne, hiding himself in the mountains, becoming an immortal *Sanshin* [山神 / 산신, Mountain-spirit] at the age of 1,908.

That's quite a tale! It became the main 'Story of Korean National Origin' in the Joseon Dynasty, and the foundation of Korea's modern cultural nationalism at the beginning of the 20th century, in reaction against Japanese Colonialization. Its "Taebaek-san" is a mythical mountain, and which earthly mountain that this title refers to remains unknown and widely debated for centuries. Iryeon wrote in his notes that it is probably what is now called Myohyang-san, and this remains the strongest actual candidate – Taebaek is known by scholars to have been an alternate name for it, and a site named "Dan-gun Cave" is indicated on it on 20th- & 21st-century maps. Guwol-san in the North and the actual Taebaek-san of the South are legitimate but weaker contenders -- the latter is not taken very seriously by scholars but is taken seriously by groups of local nationalists, and is probably only heavily-used for worship of Dan-gun and his forefathers because of the identical name and the tragedy of national division that has made North Korea inaccessible. Baekdu-san may indeed have been the intended site of the myth when it was told in Manchurian lands more than 2000 years ago. However, it was under the control of the Jurchens (sacred to them, and later their descendants the Manchu), and seemed remote from the Goryeo Kingdom with no special significance at the time Iryeon wrote; he wanted a closer 'sacred origin' mountain, and Myohyang-san was already by then highly-sacred to Korean Buddhism; he only mentioned Baekdu-san once in all of his *Samguk-yusa*, and that was unrelated to Dan-gun.

Since the beginning of the 20th century the cultural-nationalist leaders recreating Korean history and sense of ethnic identity, such as "Danje" Shin Chae-ho, have been declaring that this "Taebaek-san" was Baekdu-san, for geomantic, locational, political and topographical reasons, more on popular-nationalist-consciousness grounds than on evidence. By the 21st century, this notion has been promoted by both governments and he is generally accepted by almost all Koreans; due to this it has become one of Korea's holiest mountains, and is usually depicted as the site in 20th- & 21st-Century artworks and retellings of this myth.

Baekdu-san has certainly become of extreme importance to the North Korean regime's narrative of its own origins and legitimacy. According to Pyongyang's mythical narrative, it is said to be where Kim Il-sung, the country's founder and Kim Jong-un's grandfather, led an anti-Japanese guerrilla campaign during the 1910-45 colonial rule; this includes the myth that Kim Jong-il was born in a log-cabin 'secret camp' on the southern slope. They do not make a direct connection from Dan-gun to Kim Il-sung in any genetic or spiritual sense, but the implication of a connection is clearly there. Depictions of Baekdu-san and its crater-lake form the background of thousands of items of north Korean regime propaganda referring to Kim Il-sung's history and personal glory, including at the 33-meter bronze statue of himself in Pyongyang and the associated sculptures showing his communist army proceeding from that mountain to drive the Japanese colonialists and later the American invaders out of the country. There are hundreds of large scale paintings that show him and often also his son Kim Jong-il (the second dictator) standing on the crater rim, looking like inspirational leaders and pointing or gazing to the future. There are also many artworks depicting the birth of Kim Jong-il in a log-cabin 'secret camp' on the southern slope, and therefore in some way inheriting the spiritual energy of that mountain; although this is known to be completely mythical

(Jong-il was born in a Siberian camp of the Soviet Army, according to released Russian military records), the regime still insists that it is true. After he took over the leadership of the regime eight years ago, some regime propaganda started claiming that Kim Jong-un (third and current dictator) had inherited the “Baekdu Bloodline” from his father and grandfather, staking that claim on their legitimacy to rule without being questioned quite blatantly, as a vague spiritual thing.

North Korea also devoted quite a lot of capital and labor in constructing a giant white granite pyramid just to the east of Pyongyang in the 1990s, claiming that they have discovered the actual Tomb of Dan-gun (and his wife), with both oversized skeletons remarkably intact (due to their divine origin, one supposes), and that this construction was just rebuilding and refurbishing the original tomb structure. It has become a popular tourist site for the North Korean public, and a very few foreign visitors; the regime will not allowing any outside archaeologists to inspect the site or the skeletons. It is clearly an openly claiming that the old myth depiction real historical events, and they also locate the site of the first half of the myth as Baekdu-san, therefore linking it to their own founders exploits, and therefore to the legitimacy of the regime and all three of its supreme leaders.

Meanwhile in South Korea, when the Republic of Korea government at first established its schedule of national holidays, it included *Gaechon-jeol* [Opening Heaven Day] as one of them, based upon the entire myth and set by the modern solar calendar on October 3rd, although by the traditional Lunar Calendar it is the 3rd Day of the Tenth Moon (usually occurring in November) – most southern Koreans who do celebrate this holiday do so on that day, including the small Taejonggyo religious organization that regards Dan-gun as a primary national deity and maintains shrines for him in a dozen locations around the nation, although a few hardcore believers hold their rituals on the traditional date. However, in the earlier decades of South Korea there was not much attention paid to this myth and its meanings, something that I observed with curiosity during my first years here in the 1980s. That started to change with the advent of populous democracy in the 1990s, and the national government took various steps to upgrade belief in the historicity of the myth and the significance of it for national unification, ranging from issuing postage stamps showing the story without using the term “myth”, right out to inserting a new room in the National Museum of Korea exhibiting bronze age relics from anywhere on the northern peninsula or southern Manchuria and claiming that they are from “Gojoseon.” We can say that the status of the myth is steadily rising in the south, although not nearly get to the extent that it has done so in the north, and that the location of the sites can explain the difference in the political moods.

Baekdu-san emerged as a general symbol of National Unity in South Korea by the 1980s, and there are many artistic depictions of its peaks to be seen in public, including large paintings and photos in the lobbies or principle offices of government and religious institutional buildings, universities and so-forth. These images of that lake surrounded by a circle of peaks are frequently used as symbols of Korea's national aspirations – especially re-unification, but also national independence, prosperity, unique identity, strength and power. In my presentation I showed how it is the backdrop of the main statue of the “Spirit of Korean Independence” at Independence Hall (the main national museum and shrine for this theme) in Cheonan City; in its museum a photo of the peaks is also the background for the display of the 400 CE King Gwanggaeto Stele, another very important monument of Korean nationalism, even though that ancient stele's location in Manchuria is quite far from Baekdu-san. It was used as a symbol of both national unity and the origin-energy of national rage by the student leftist movement that was part of the democracy movement of the 1980s and early 90s.

Associated with as in the south is the significance of the Baekdu-daegan Mountain-System as an extension of Baekdu-san and symbol in-itself of organic geographic and ethnic national unity. The ‘great white-head ridgeline’ finishes near the south coast at the 1915-meter Heavenly King Summit peak of Jiri-san (highest peak of mainland South Korea; Mt. Jiri is the oldest and still largest national park, and most sacred mountain of the south). In the grand traditional Neo-Confucian theory of the Baekdu-daegan Range, where all the mountains of Korea are one great family, Baekdu-san is regarded as the grand ancestral patriarch, while Jiri-san is regarded as the corresponding grand ancestral matriarch. There are many artworks showing the *Sanshin* spirit of Jiri-san in this role, but I have never seen one depicting the northern end of this concept. Sometimes in modern South Korea activists have made an alternative parallel between Baekdu-san and Mt. Halla on far-south Jeju Island as symbol of National Unity in the South, because Halla-san is also a volcano with a pond in its crater (both much smaller than the northern).

The term *Baekdu-daegan* designates the entire concept of the mountain-system of connected ranges, and specifically the traditionally-designated continuous range main-line and watershed-source that runs most of the length of the Korean Peninsula, with its *Jeongmaek* branch-ranges channeling all rivers from it to the sea – therefore it literally defines the nation in the physical sense. However, its traditional conception does not simply refer to a topographic feature, but includes the idea that this mountain-system is a vast conductor of *ji-gi* [地氣, telluric earth-energy] through the entire nation, producing heroes and unique energies. This concept continued to evolve in the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties and throughout the 20th century, becoming symbolic of fundamental national unity and the spiritual vitality of the ethnic-based nation, including motifs in religious shrines and in modern mountain-trekking.

This concept is traditionally attributed to the works of National Buddhist adept, philosopher and teacher *Doseon Guksa* [道誥國師 / 도선국사, Dao-Abundance National-Master, his posthumous monastic title], who is credited with the launch of *Pungsu-jiriseol* (風水地理說 / 풍수지리설, Korean Feng-shui) in general. This systematic understanding of geography has remained prominent in Korean thinking about the definition, characteristics and spiritual character of their nation for more than a thousand years, and is still widely employed today with renewed interest. Doseon Guksa was a great genius enlightened in the two most important and yet contrasting schools of Korean Buddhism, and also the one who formally imported Chinese Daoist Feng-shui [Geomancy] theories and adapted them to Korea's differing conditions and his own concerns for the welfare of the nation. He remains one of the most fascinating but yet underappreciated characters of Korean history, and everyone interested in the Baekdu-daegan must consider his contributions in its cultural development.

Doseon lived during the collapsing end of the Shilla Dynasty, presaging the foundation of the subsequent Goryeo Dynasty. His family name was Kim and he was born in South Jeolla Province, on the western slopes of Wolchul-san, the highly-sacred mountain that dominates that region. It is said that his mother had a conception-dream that she swallowed a beautiful pearl (a symbol of pure wisdom), and for her first month of pregnancy chanted Buddhist scriptures while abstaining from meat, onions and garlic, continuing these auspicious practices until he was born in 826 CE. Her son was a Buddhist prodigy from infancy onwards, learning to chant basic Sutras soon after he could talk. One local myth tells that he was accidentally abandoned soon after birth, but was protected by birds at a gigantic boulder now called *Guksa-am* [National Master Rock], found behind Gukam-sa Hermitage.

Yeongam County claims that Doseon became a novice-monk at *Wolnam-sa* [Moon-South Temple] on the southeast side of Wolchul-san. They say that when Doseon returned from his early studies in China he reconstructed that now-ruined temple on the same site, renaming it Dogap-sa, which we know for sure was famous and prosperous during the Goryeo Dynasty, a monument for Doseon was erected there during the Joseon Dynasty, and its official history claims Doseon as its Founder. It's a well-known temple today, within the national park.

Doseon left Yeong-am to become a monk in 841 at 15 years old, and was accepted to study in Jiri-san's great Hwaom-sa Temple. It is recorded that he attained "the ineffable wisdom of Munsu-bosal [Bodhisattva of Wisdom] and the mystic gate of Bohyeon-bosal [Bodhisattva of Benevolent Action] (both key deities for that type of scriptural-based Buddhism), penetrating the Great Meaning (of the *Hwaom-gyeong* Sutra)" in only one month. He was then granted the name "*Yeon-gi*" which was a great honor, as that was the name of the missionary/sect-founder master-monk who first built Hwaom-sa in 544; he is presently often formally called "*Yeon-gi Doseon*".

By 20 he was already highly respected as a very wise adept with unusual spiritual powers of the sort usually attributed to Daoist masters, and he began to study Seon [Chan or Zen, meditation-based Buddhism] under the great Master and Sect-Founder Hyecheol Jeogin-seonsa (d. 861) at Dongni-san Taean-sa Monastery (one of the "Nine Mountains" Meditational Order Temples, just SW of Jiri-san). He achieved full enlightenment there, receiving the *mubeob-beob* [the Dharma without dharma] transmission from Hyecheol and becoming his leading successor. This is extremely unusual and might even be unique in Korea's religious history, that one monk was certified as fully-enlightened in both scriptural and meditational Buddhism (generally seen as bitter rivals until their unification around 1200).

Such amazing credentials were only enhanced by his subsequent mastery of esoteric Daoist principles. He travelled to Tang Dynasty China for further studies around 850, focusing on esoteric Daoist and Buddhist astronomical, astrological, mathematical, geomantic (feng shui), cosmological and I Ching [Juyeok-gyeong in Korean, the Classic of Changes] teachings, especially geomantic ideas of Master I-hsing (673-727).

After his return he trekked widely around the Korean Peninsula, observing its geography and searching for the source of its unique energies, without basing himself at any particular temple. After his extensive travels he built a hut to rest and meditate in on "Bowl Hill" of western Jiri-san. There, legend says, a *Sanshin* appeared to him offering the deepest secrets of Pungsu-jiri as "another (besides Seon) method by which great Bodhisattvas grant salvation to humankind." The site in Gurye-gun County where that Mountain-spirit drew diagrams of auspicious topographic configurations in the sand for him is still called "Sand Chart Village." This story can be viewed as a nationalistic claim that his Pungsu-jiri system/wisdom came from a sacred/ancient indigenous-Korean source, not (entirely) from study of Chinese Feng-shui.

He then founded, constructed and settled at Okryong-sa [Jade-Dragon Temple], of what is now Gwangyang City, just south of Baekun-san [White-Clouds Mountain], a prominent early member of the Naknam Jeongmaek Range, after determining that it had an ideal geomantic location, safe from natural troubles. He taught there for 35 years, with occasional travels around Korea, reportedly assisting hundreds of monks and laymen to achieve enlightenment. He is said to have not spoken very much at all, teaching the *mubeob-beob* by *museol-seol* [the explanation without explanation], able to

spark realization with only a piercing gaze. His reputation for wisdom and insight-powers eventually got him proclaimed Shilla's leading Master-monk by King Heon-gang, who invited him to the palace in Gyeongju to give lectures several times.

Doseon had particularly studied the various Chinese Daoist schools of Feng-shui, and adapted their ideas & practices to the Korean landscape and cultural situation. The system that he developed took as its main focus the principle "harmony with nature". It places greater emphasis on the spiritual and material energies of mountains and their ranges, and their effect on communities and the nation as a whole, than on personal fortunes and interior furniture-placement. Chinese Feng-shui was first introduced to Korea along with Buddhism and other elements of Sinic civilization in the earliest few centuries CE and we have strong evidence that it was strongly believed-in and widely practiced throughout the Three Kingdoms Era and the Unified Shilla Dynasty until and after Doseon's time. What he is credited for is his genius in adapting these Feng-shui theories to Korea's very different (from Yellow-River-basin Chinese) land and climate situations, and putting the main emphasis on larger-scale values as said, turning them into Korea's own unique Pungsu-jiri-seol, and that is why he is remembered with such honor. (Japan and Vietnam also adapted Feng-shui ideas to their own very different geographical situations). Doseon's system is often called "Bibo-pungsu-jiri", *bi-bo* being read as the Chinese characters for "National Prosperity" and meaning adjustments towards that.

Doseon draws much of his fame and significance as the most influential advisor to Wang Geon (born 877), destined to become King Taejo (r. 918-43) in founding the Goryeo Dynasty -- although they never met each other. The advice and ideas Doseon left behind him, especially in the *Doseon-bigi* document, were important in choosing the site of the capital and other important cities and fortresses, and in constructing many new grand Buddhist temples at geomantically-auspicious sites around the nation. Just before the King's death he issued the *Hunyo-shipjo*, a famous list of Ten Injunctions for his successors, the second of which states that Doseon's advice on temple-locations should always be followed, lest Korea's Earth-energies be wasted and diminished. Around 70 monasteries both large and small are claimed to have been founded either under Doseon's supervision and direction, or by the orders of Taejo Wang Geon (following Doseon's recommendations), and most of them still thrive. Temples that are claimed to have been established either by Doseon or Wang Geon at the places where Doseon decided would be most auspicious are called *bibo-sacheol*.

In addition, there are dozens of pre-existing temples that are thought to have been reconstructed, renovated or added-to (usually with a pagoda), including some of Korea's greatest, such as Jiri-san's Hwaom-sa, Shilsang-sa, Daewon-sa and Yeongok-sa and Jogye-san's Seonam-sa. A dozen important stone-carved Buddha statues and pagodas are said to have been carved or built by his own hands, and there are half a dozen caves and crags around Korea that claim to be sites where he practiced his mystical arts. Pagodas that were built at the places where Doseon decided would be most auspicious are called *bibo-satap*.

Doseon's is said to have made many accurate predictions of the future changes in the courses of events for individuals and for the Kingdom, and is therefore regarded as a kind of founder-patron-spirit by modern Korean fortune-tellers. He is credited with developing the concept of the Baekdu-daegan as the earth-energy "spine" of the Korean Peninsula, but he probably did not originate or use that exact term. He wrote in one of his surviving documents "Our nation begins at Baekdu-san and ends at Jiri-san" which designates the path of the Baekdu-daegan and ties it to national identity. Quotations in other documents written in the many subsequent centuries claimed that the term

“Baekdu-daegan” was written by Doseon in a scripture entitled “*Okryong-gi*” (clearly named after the temple that he built and spent his later life at), but as that essay did not survive to us in itself we cannot believe this with any scholarly certainty.

Doseon's doctrines remained highly influential in Korea for over a millennium, and it is said that there are 3,800 sites in all of Korea that are associated with his relics, artworks, temples, doctrines and legends. The concept of the Baekdu-daegan, “the spine of Korea,” has particularly emerged in modern times as one of the most important aspects of his legacy, both as an increasingly popular hiking route and symbol of national unity.

The Baekdu-daegan Crestline was never trekked until the late 20th century as far as we know, and that was certainly due to the fact of the large Siberian tigers making all those mountains and their residences and hunting grounds; travel across the mountains was very dangerous for traditional Koreans, they had to carry weapons and be very careful, and there was no tradition of recreational mountain-hiking at-all. Today it offers trekkers spectacular natural scenery featuring sweeping views and dramatic gorges, including a wide variety of flora and fauna. Within South Korea in the past three decades the emerging foot-trail running along its crest has become a viable adventure-hiking, nature-tourism and cultural/religious-tourism route.

When the slopes emanating ten kilometers or so from its crest-line are taken into account, the Baekdu-daegan is also a cultural region in itself, a living repository of traditional Korean culture distinctly different from the surrounding densely-populated and heavily-urbanized lowland regions. It was in all previous times not very accessible for hiking or exploring, with many areas starkly isolated from civilization, but development has changed that dramatically, with many access-points and trailheads provided by the modern train and roads systems. Within the past thirty years a long-distance hiking trail about 735 kilometers long that runs along the crest of its southern half has been explored, developed and designated by a combination of local governments, National Forest Service authorities and civilian mountain hiking associations. It is becoming comparable to internationally-known long-distance trekking routes such as the Appalachian Trail, California Coastal Trail and Sierra Crest Trail of the United States of America, the Inca Trail of Peru, the Great Wall Trail of China, the Milford Track of New Zealand's South Island and others.

However, there is something unique about the Baekdu-daegan compared to those others. Besides spectacular views and beautiful natural scenery in long stretches of unspoiled forests and crags, it features many dozens of religious, cultural and historic sites which add dimensions of cultural-tourism potential to its fundamental base of adventure-tourism value. These sites along the way signify historic elements of or are sacred sites of Korean Buddhism, Shamanism, Nationalism, Daoism and Neo-Confucianism. It can be seen as a kind of a pilgrimage trail, like other traditional ones that have been popularly revived for modern religious tourism in Europe, the Middle East, India and elsewhere. However, out of all the religious-pilgrimage trails in the world, only Korea's Baekdu-daegan offers such a variety of sites holy to such multiple and diverse religions, coexisting in harmony as part of the nation's cultural history. It contains a dozen famous, important and historic Buddhist monasteries and at least 100 smaller Buddhist temples, Neo-Confucian shrines, Daoist-Nationalist shrines and Shamanic mountain-worship shrines – and a few Christian Churches. In this variety of different religions available to view and experience along the way, its trails may be unique among the “pilgrimage routes” of the world.

There are now dozens of monuments (usually stone monoliths inscribed with Chinese characters and Korean text) along the way, mostly erected by local governments within the past decade, proclaiming the identity and significance of these sites and the most significant natural features such as peaks and passes. Many of these monuments are valuable sources of historical and cultural information, as well as being amplifications of the natural scenery for the benefit of travelers. These have been supplemented by a series of trail-signs identifying the main Baekdu-daegan Trail routes, put up by both the Korea Forest Service and the various local governments, to guide hikers along the correct pathways. The ancient concepts of telluric energy can be observed among the intelligentsia leading public opinion in Korea to be transforming from ancient pseudo-scientific beliefs to a modern conceptions of the theoretical unity of the peninsula and nation, and the ecology of the wildest remaining areas of them.

Many Koreans now can be seen to regard the Baekdu-daegan as a symbol of national unity, and hiking along it to be a personal gesture of basic patriotism and wishing for reunification. Unfortunately, North Korea has not yet developed good hiking trails along most of its part of the great range, and is not yet allowing southern hikers to cross the DNZ along existing trails that would bring them to the fabled Diamond Mountains. There is some discussion of including this in future openings of North Korean tourism that would be possible when the nuclear crisis is over and sanctions are lifted.

However, proper identification and definition of the Baekdu-daegan in this sense was sorely lacking in scholarship, especially in English in which there was absolutely nothing, until a 2007 research project conducted by this author and his two partners from New Zealand resulted in a trekking guidebook for the main trail, two dedicated websites and a flurry of academic papers by 2010-11. This activity resulted in the naming of this author as National Honorary Ambassador of the Baekdu-daegan Range, and thousands of international residents of South Korea and tourist visitors learning about these mountains, and getting a chance to hike the entire trail or parts of it. This has been a very successful promotional effort for Korea's tourism and general reputation; and I would say that it has only increased the Korean public's recognition of and respect for this mountain-system.

Baekdu-san, its counterpart Jiri-san / Halla-san and the Baekdu-daegan mountains in-between them have become concrete symbol of the aspirations of the entire Korean people for national re-unification. This manifests in an increasing proliferation of artworks, public declarations, hiking activities and conceptualizations. And now in 2018, form the background of a significant political event. We come back to that photo of President Moon and Leader Kim standing on the rim of Baekdu-san's peaks with that beautiful lake behind them, and I hope that the readers and audience now understand why that particular photo was so significant in the hearts of Korean people, what it means for their sense of their traditional culture, the origins of their ethnic nation and their aspirations for its peaceful re-unification.

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Online resources to follow up on these topics:

www.san-shin.org

www.baekdu-daegan.com

www.hikekorea.com