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**Sacred Aspects and Assets of Taebaek-san**

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**ABSTRACT**

Taebaek-san or the Grand White Mountain is a medium-sized provincial park on the southern border of the Republic of Korea’s Gangwon Province. By any considered standards, it is one of the handful of most sacred mountains in all of Korea. It is a great national treasure, holding a vast cultural wealth that has until the present time been noticeably under-utilized for inbound international tourism attraction.

China and Japan both have internationally well-known “sacred mountains” (such as Tai-shan and Fuji-san) that are featured in their international tourism-promotions. Korea has quite a few “sacred mountains” yet makes little use of their sacred reputations and aspects for this purpose. This paper is intended to serve as an example of how increasingly doing so could be of widespread benefit to both Korea’s national reputation ana its tourism industry.

Therefore, this paper will discuss the aspects and factors of Taebaek-san which make it one of Korea’s most sacred mountains, and provide details on its physical religious assets, including its Buddhist temples and many mountain-spirit folk-shamanism shrines, which I have found to be of unique variety and vivid colorful interest. It will conclude with suggestions for making better use of Taebaek-san’s potential value for inbound tourism promotion.

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**NOTES ON USAGES**

This paper will consistently use the term “sacred” to refer to places or things that have an extraordinary value to one or more traditional Korean religions, spiritual traditions and/or ideologies (including, for the present case, Korea’s native folk-beliefs, shamanism, Buddhism, Daoism, Neo-Confucianism and Nationalism), avoiding possible synonyms such as “holy,” “blessed,” “divine,” “consecrated” “godly,” “hallowed” or “sanctified,” which to some readers might imply Christian meanings. Useful synonyms for “sacred” could be “spiritual,” “venerable,” “cherished” and “revered,” but I will repeatedly use only “sacred,” at the risk of repetitive-ness, for the sake of consistency and clarity.

This paper refers to the particular set of mountains constituting the provincial park and its immediately surrounding areas under discussion simply as “Taebaek-san” (태백산 in han-geul) following general Korean usage, rather than using “Mt. Taebaek”, “the Taebaek Mountains”, “Taebaek Mountain” or other possible legitimate alternatives in English.

The scope and length of this paper does not permit a discussion of what “sacred” has meant and still means to the various cultures and religions of the world throughout human history; that is an entire academic field of its own. I use the concept of a “sacred” site, area or mountain in this paper in its general and commonly understood sense of a place that is believed to be intimately connected with the supernatural or divine, regarded as having a special exalted character and possibly supernatural powers, and thus consecrated and revered with respect and veneration, often expressed with ritual ceremonies (public or private).1

**INTRODUCTION**

Korea’s folk-shamanist shrines and Buddhist temples, and the practices and artworks they house are very interesting to foreign tourists, especially to Westerners in my experience, but they are as yet vastly underutilized as draws for Korea’s inbound cultural tourism. South Korea has an ancient tradition of considering some of its mountains to be especially sacred or holy, believed to be inhabited by especially powerful san-shin (mountain spirits), which are depicted in strikingly original and colorful icons in characteristic shrines.2 It also has many Buddhist monasteries whose presence, architecture and practices add to the sacred character of [page 113] the mountains that host them. If the character and meaning of these places is properly explained, they can be very useful factors to attract foreign tourists. The culture of these “holy mountain” shrines and temples is ancient but yet still quite contemporary, still noticeably evolving and growing in a way that is fascinating to observers of religious cultures.

Taebaek-san is a great treasure of the Korean nation, holding a vast cultural wealth which is so far virtually un-utilized for inbound international tourism attraction. By any criteria that is commonly used, it ranks as one of the very most sacred mountains in all of Korea. However, details of its being regarded as sacred since ancient times, and its contemporary religious assets such as temples and shrines, are not very well-known, particularly outside of Korea itself; information about them in English has been scarce.3

China and Japan both have well-known “sacred mountains” (such as Tai-shan and Fuji-san) that are featured in their international tourism promotions. Korea has quite a few “sacred mountains” yet under-utilizes their reputations and aspects for this purpose.4 I would like to advocate that increasingly doing so would be of widespread benefit to both Korea’s national reputation and its tourism industry, and present this case study as a relevant example.

Therefore, this paper will discuss the aspects and factors of Taebaek- san which make it one of Korea’s most sacred mountains, and provide details on its physical religious assets, especially its many Buddhist temples and mountain-spirit folk-shamanism shrines. They have been found by this author to be of unique variety and vivid colorful interest. This paper will conclude with suggestions of their potential value and utilization for inbound international tourism promotion.

Even within South Korea itself, and in the publications concerning it, this topic has received little attention in either popular publications or in scholarly publications. I have extensively searched for books or papers in the English language written by academic scholars (both Korean and non-Korean) on this subject, but have not found any at all. There are a few written in Korean or Japanese, but I could not find any that offered useful detailed listings. Nothing can even be found on the Internet beyond the few statements that I reference in this paper. In South Korea’s tourism-promotion literature, both national and local, including both[page 114] printed materials and Internet web pages, there are only passing references to the sacred character and religious assets of the Taebaek-san Provincial Park and the areas close around it.

In both the cases of China and Japan, the idea that certain mountains are highly sacred, and these designations of sets of nine or three most sacred mountains, are extensively used for international tourism promotion and attracting inbound tourists, particularly from Western nations. Sacred mountains of this kind are a unique type of attraction, offering combinations of beautiful natural scenery, adventurous and health- promoting hiking and profound cultural interest (at the temples in shrines on the slopes and peaks). Adding the cultural atmosphere and assets of such a place to its natural assets raises it far above ordinary beautiful mountains in its potential interest to sophisticated travelers, who may already have some interest in the Asian religions represented. A general survey of tourist-attracting brochures and websites (those available in English) from these nations shows widespread usage of these mountains and their sacred character as factors in drawing tourists, whether in the spirit of viewing exotica or of sincere pilgrimage.

The English tourist-attracting brochures and websites of South Korea, however, make very little mention of the sacred character of Korea’s many sacred mountains as reasons or enticements for foreign tourists to visit. In promoting visits to the great mountains, or to the nation in general, the concept of sacred mountains with fascinating religious sites on them is generally absent. There is no mention at all of a systematic set of “Korea’s Most Sacred Mountains” or so on, which might spark or heighten the curiosity or interest of international travelers. This is a good promotional opportunity that is simply being missed in Korean tourism.

**CRITERIA AND TERMINOLOGY FOR SACREDNESS OF KOREAN MOUNTAINS**

Factors that I have discovered in the course of my research that lead to Korean mountains being considered sacred can be divided into two categories, factors that are more physical and others that are more cultural.5 These are interrelated and cumulative. To be considered “highly sacred” a mountain must be seen to have at least several of them; having only one will not be considered sufficient. Every mountain in question[page 115] has its own unique and characteristic set and balance of these factors, which combine to establish and maintain its reputation. The overall list is:

**PHYSICAL FACTORS**

* unusually high peak(s) or great size / outstanding prominence;
* significant geographical position;
  + unusual, strange or outstanding topographical features;
  + serving as the origin of a major river;
  + being a member of the Baekdu-daegan range,6 one of its major branches;
  + serving or having served as the geographical “guardian” mountain of a city or region, perhaps with a military fortress on it.

**CULTURAL FACTORS**

* + the mountain’s name has a profound / auspicious religious meaning;
  + people are recorded to have, and/or said to have spiritual experiences or visions,or attain enlightenment and wisdom, on that mountain;
  + social heroes having been born, trained or educated there, gaining special powers;
  + old folk or religious myths or legends being cited there, including myths of that mountain’s ‘spirit’ appearing, manifesting or causing some phenomena;
  + the mountain has served as the spiritual “guardian” mountain of a city, thought to have powers to generate or ensure abundant fecundity, or simply to protect against disaster;
  + presence of one or more important Buddhist temples;
  + presence of one or more major shamanic shrines;
  + presence of significant historical / archaeological remains;
  + previous governments established shrines there for worship of its spirit;
  + previous governments including it in a numeric-based system of sacred mountains.

Contemporary Koreans themselves rarely speak in reference to any such criteria when mentioning that a certain mountain is sacred That it meets one or more of these criteria is usually only implied, and usually[page 116] assumed to be generally known by everyone, not requiring detailed explanation. Myeongsan is the most common term used to designate a sacred mountain—the Hanja character myeong employed here was apparently originally the one meaning “bright” with shamanic-Daoist religious overtones, but is now its synonym meaning “famous.” Other Korean terms used in this way, although less commonly, are yeongsan (spirit[ual] mountain), shinseong-hansan (spirit-holy big-mountain) and shinryeongsan (mountain with a [strong] spirit).

**BASIC FEATURES OF TAEBAEK-SAN**

Taebaek-san (태백산) or the Grand White Mountain is a medium-sized provincial park on the southern border of the Republic of Korea’s Gang-won Province, located at about 37° 07’ N latitude and 128° 57’ E longitude. On May 13,1989 roughly one third of the mountain’s total area was designated as a provincial park of Gangwon-do. The designated area includes most of its primary religious and cultural assets, most of which are in valleys and on ridges which are accessed from its northern side, along National Highway 31.

The entire valley on the western side of the mountain is occupied by a South Korean army base, and remains inaccessible to the general public. The southern and the far-eastern slopes outside of the park boundaries are a combination of private and public landholdings mostly used for the forestry industry. They contain a few significant cultural assets.

What I will refer to as the greater Taebaek-san region, the large area (approximately 1600 km2) under the influence of the reputation of this mountain, is comprised by all of Taebaek City, Gohan District in the southeast corner of jeongseon County, the eastern side of Yeongwol County and the western side of Samcheok City (all in Gangwon-do), and the northern half of Bonghwa County in North Gyeongsang Province (Gyeongsang-bukdo).

Taebaek-san proper features four main peaks above 1500 meters in altitude insiae the park boundaries, each with religious character and significance, related with specific myths, deities and shrines. They are listed below as “sacred assets.” It also contains a dozen other peaks above 900 meters in altitude, mostly outside of the park boundaries. Its[page 117] highest peak (Janggun-bong, 1566. 7 meters) is the seventh highest main summit in the Republic of Korea.

Alpine springs of very high-quality water flow down into ten gorges and valleys around it, the most famous being the Dang-gol streams that form the origin of the Nakdong River. Two small but important “traditional” (founded before the 20th century) Buddhist temples,7 a dozen other Buddhist temples and hermitages (founded in the 20th century) and several dozen significant shamanic and/or Korean-Daoist shrines and historic folk-culture sites are found around the slopes and up on the ridges and peaks.

There are now modern tourist facilities such as motels, minbak home-stays and restaurants all along the northern edge of the mountain, and to a lesser extent on the eastern and southern sides. The Gangwon-do provincial government established a Coal-Mining Museum in the main Dang-gol valley (opened 2000), and holds several tourism festivals in and above that valley every year, the most famous being the Cheonje Festival held on Gaecheon-jeol (explained below) and the Taebaek-san Snow Festival in mid-winter.

**SACRED ASPECTS OF TAEBAEK-SAN**

Taebaek-san certainly meets all the physical criteria for a sacred Korean mountain. It is relatively large, and dominates the surrounding countryside. As the intersection of the Taebaek-sanmaek mountain range (that runs along the Korean peninsula’s east coast) and the Sobaek-sanmaek mountain range (that runs through the middle of the southern portion of the peninsula, forming the northern and western borders of the Gyeongsang Provinces or Yeongdong region), it is in a key geographical position that divides territories around it. Together with its surrounding mountains it has always served as the northern military (and spiritual) “guardian” mountain of the Shilla Kingdom (3rd to 9th centuries CE) and the Gyeongsang Province region (after that). Its topographical features are dramatic and impressive, famous among hikers. Although one of South Korea’s highest sets of peaks, they are relatively quite easily accessible, as hiking from the Dan-gol, Baekdan-sa or Yuil-sa trailheads takes only two hours to reach the summits.

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Taebaek-san has an unusual biological-flora asset, which has always added to its prominence and mystical character and is a favorite of modern photographers: Jumok-namu trees,8 ancient evergreen survivors found only on Korea’s highest alpine ridges, are unusually abundant on Taebaek-san’s peak areas. Traditional Koreans have regarded them as symbols of immortality, markers of sacred spots and powerful charms against bad fortune and malign spirits, and Korean shamans consider them to be enlightened ancestral beings.

The Nakdong River (South Korea’s longest river, of crucial importance to the entire Cholla/Gyeongsang area as it flows southward) originates deep within Taebaek-san itself, while the South Han River (the second longest, of crucial importance to the southern Gangwon-do, northern North Chungcheong-do, Gyeonggi-do and Seoul areas as it flows north and westward) originates at the northern edge of the greater Taebaek-san region. This aspect of being the source of two of Korea’s greatest rivers is equaled by only one other mountain, the highly sacred Baekdu-san on the border between North Korea and China. It may have been the origin of this mountain’s high level of sacredness at the dawn of Korean civilization.

Taebaek-san holds a primary position in what we might call the “sacred geography of Korea” (according to Pungsu-jiriseol theories established long ago by national master-monk Doseon-guksa and others, still widely referenced and utilized today),9 serving as a key point in the Baekdu-daegan earth-energy and water-source range (the southern end of its middle section, where it turns off west from the Taebaek-sanmaek mountain range and begins to follow the Sobaek-sanmaek mountain range).

In most instances that can be found in contemporary writings, when Koreans list the three or five most sacred mountains of their nation, Taebaek-san is included as one of them. For example, it is called one of the four “national yeong-san (spiritual mountains) of Korea” along with Jiri-san, Halla-san and Baekdu-san on a prominent Korean travel website,10 and as “one of Korea’s three sacred mountains” on the official public parks site.11 The Taebaek City website says that it “serves as the nation’s spiritual mountain, and a root for all of the mountains located in the southern part of the Korean peninsula.... All in all, Mt. Taebaek is re-[page 119] garded as the nation’s mother mountain, a place of beauty and tolerance.”12

The name of this mountain itself expresses its highly sacred character. “Taebaek” can be translated as “Grand White,” with meaning rooted in Korea’s ancient pre-Buddhist culture in which primitive sun-worship had led to shamanic invocation of light and brightness, lending sacred meaning to all words now written/pronounced as gwang (light, shining, radiance), myeong (bright), baek (white), etc. A mountain from which people prayed to heaven was called a baekpan or baeksan, meaning “bright (white) mountain, and the largest and brightest was called a taebaeksan (grandly bright [white] mountain). This particular place is said to have been originally called hangbakmo-e or hanbaedal, terms meaning “excessive brightness” and the name Taebaek-san and its characters was applied to honor it in the early Shilla Kingdom period.13

Other place names on this mountain add to its sacred character, such as Munsu-bong whose origin was already discussed, the summit Jang-gun-bong (Guardian General Peak), the largest valley Dang-gol (Shrine Valley), Baekdan-sa (White Altar Temple) and so on. Its oldest monastery Manggyeong-sa certainly lives up to its name “All-encompassing-view Temple,” offering a stunning scenic view over the upper Dan-gol valley toward Munsu-bong. The name also is a term from the Buddhist sutras, referring to the all-encompassing view of reality (enlightenment) that a Buddhist meditation practitioner can attain from the wisdom of Munsu-bosal, wisdom that is extraordinary, refined, precious and rare. The fact that Manggyeong-sa is Korea’s highest-altitude Buddhist temple (at 1500 meters) strongly adds to its sacred character and that of its hosting mountain, as higher altitude has long been associated with sacredness in Korean culture, due to the strong function of mountain-spirits in its spiritual traditions.14

Taebaek-san has been one of the most sacred peaks in the southern Korean peninsula since at least the 6th-century Shilla Kingdom. Master Jajang-yulsa (590-658), one of the great early progenitors of Korean Buddhism,is said to have climbed it near the end of his life while he was living at Hambaek-san’s Jeongam-sa (which he had foundea, just a day’s walk from this site). He found a stone statue of Munsu-bosal (Manjusri [Sanskrit] the Bodhisattva of Wisdom)’ that he had been told had ap- [page 120] peared at the Yong-jeong spring where the Nakdong River originates, just below Taebaek-san’s summit. He then founded Manggyeong Temple, constructing a building to enshrine that statue (which is no longer extant; believers say its buried under the Main Hall).

It was probably on this same trip that he is said to have discovered “the mother of Munsu-bosar living as san-shin (mountain spirit) of the third-highest peak a few kilometers’ hike away, which to this day is called Munsu-bong and is considered a holy place by Korean Buddhists.15 Master Jajang had previously found Munsu-bosal himself to be resident at the mountains he named Odae-san (further north up the Tae- baek range, now a national park) and was associating this highly important Buddhist deity with the spirits of several of the mountains along the Baekdu-daegan line (including also Jiri-san and Geumgang-san), designating them all as excellent potential sites for gaining enlightenment.

The Shilla kings regarded Taebaek-san as the “northern guardian peak” of the outer O-ak (Five Peaks) or five great mountains protecting the unified kingdom,16 and built shrines to worship its san-shin (mountain spirit) and the gods of heaven on its Cheonje-dan (Heavenly-Altar) Peak,a.k.a. Yeong-bong (Spirit Peak), holding rituals there for the well-being of the nation and its citizens despite the constant potential for severe weather. There were both Buddhist-style and royally sponsored Neo-Confucian ceremonies honoring its spirit(s) and beseeching protection and good fortune during the remainder of Korea’s pre-modern history.

Taebaek-san was left out of the Goryeo and Joseon royal O-ak systems, probably because it was not officially Buddhist or Daoist, remaining as a primarily shamanic mountain and thus outside of the “new” official ruling ideologies. To this day it is one of the few great sacred mountains in Korea that are not especially sacred to Buddhism and host to large Buddhist temples. Rather, there is a continuing shamanic emphasis of its character, supplemented by various geographical and national- historical factors. Despite this, the relatively small Buddhist temples that are on it and in all the region surrounding it have continued to proudly use its name.

Koreans have long believed that their mountains are inhabited by san-shin, a divine grandfatherly or grandmotherly figure accompanied by a tiger, personification of the character and energies experienced by those[page 121] who live on or visit that mountain. He or she serves as a tutelary guardian of the slopes and the forests, animals, religious structures and villages upon them. Shamans gain their magical and mystical powers from san-shin, Buddhist monks draw strength for meditation from them, Confucians regard them as community or national ancestral figures, and local residents in general pray to them for protection against misfortunes. Rituals are recorded being held for them since Korea’s earliest times.17

The san-shin of Taebaek-san has long enjoyed fame as one of Korea’s most important and powerful spirits. According to the Samguk-yusa (Legends of the Three Kingdoms),18 in 765 CJE. the Shilla king Gyeong- dok saw the spirit dancing in a courtyard of his palace (in Gyeongju, far to the south), a powerful omen.19 Local villagers in the Taebaek area still perform special biannual ceremonies for what they call the Cheonsan-shin (Heavenly Mountain Spirit).

Taebaek-san also has the ghost of a historical figure as a kind of supplementary san-shin, which is fairly rare in Korea: King Danjong (r. 1452—1455), usually counted as the Joseon Dynasty’s sixth ruler. This youthful king was deposed by his uncle King Sejo (r. 1455-1468) and exiled up the South Han River to the remote Taebaek region. He stopped at the town of Yongwol and was a few months later executed by poison from Sejo’s agents. Later that same year, a local magistrate on his way back from a business trip met (the ghost of) Danjong riding a white horse and asked him where he was heading. Danjong answered that he was going to Mount Taebaek to become its san-shin. Since then his portrait riding a horse has been enshrined next to san-shin icons in many temples throughout Yongwol County, southern Jeongseon County and the Taebaek city region.

Just a few decades ago a special shrine was built for Danjong-as-san-shin along the main trail just fifty meters below Taebaek-san’s Cheon-jae-dan peak (fifty meters above Manggyong Temple), resulting from the visionary dream of a local village woman. Mrs. Kim dreamed of King Danjong complaining to her that he had long been living at Taebaek-san, but there was no monument for him. She ignored the dream, but it was repeated. She protested that it was a “great burden for a simple woman, but was told “once you start, it will be accomplished.” Indeed, financing was mysteriously offered by anonymous donors, and a truck laden with[page 122] the heavy materials made it most of the way up the mountain despite the lack of a real road. It took 32 men 15 days to haul the large stone biseok monument up there, and the Danjong-bigak shrine was constructed, and has become a well-known feature.20

Taebaek-san has come to play a significant role in modern national identity due to its sharing the same name with Korea’s primary foundation-myth, that of Hwan-in, Hwan-eung, and King Dan-gun Wanggeon’s foundation of what is now called Gojoseon-guk (Old Joseon Kingdom), recorded at the beginning of the Samguk-yusa and in a few other sources. This coincidental identification with what has become a major symbol of Korea’s theoretical political and cultural unity, long history and ra-cial/national identity has resulted in the refurbishment of the large ancient stone shrine for praying to heaven on Cheonjae-dan. This round-walled square altar is made of uncemented local stones,and is said to date from the early Shilla Kingdom (although taken apart and re-built many times). There is no historical record of its first construction,and no evidence that I know of that establishes its true age. It features at its center a two-foot-tall biseok stone which reads han-bae-geom (single abdomen king), a reference to Dan-gun as the symbolic ancestor of all Korean people (who thus issued from a “single womb,” that of Ung-nyo). There is another similar shrine about 15 minute’s walk to the north of this main one, on Janggun-bong peak. Many Manshin (Korean shamans) hold worship ceremonies there. There is also a lower stone altar, more like a platform, five minutes to the south below the main one. Ceremonies seem to be rarely held there.

Since this main stone altar was reconstructed in the 1950s, there has been a strong revival of holding Cheonje (Heavenly Ceremony, or Ceremony for Heaven) on the solar-calendar Gaecheon-jeol (Opening of Heaven Day) national holiday on October 3rd,21 and increasingly on the more traditional lunar-calendar Gaecheon-jeol (third day of the Tenth Moon) as well. Participants and visiting spectators find unique aspects of Korean culture there, wrapped up in myths and legendary spiritual powers, amidst magnificent natural scenery. These ceremonies are sponsored and conducted by locally based cultural-nationalist groups with the support of the Taebaek City government, and also the national Taejong-gyo. Since 1993 this has been done as part of the official “Taebaek[page 123] Cheonje Festival,” and the mayor of Taebaek City and other prominent locals sometimes officiate or at least attend. The abbots of major nearby Buddhist temples and other cultural luminaries also attend with evident sincerity, demonstrating the importance they believe this ceremony has for their community and the nation. Holding the festival with its ceremonies has apparently come to mean a lot for the pride of the local residents in their own ancient cultural forms and values. This follows along with ancient precedents of royal sponsorship of and representation at such rituals. The evident current efforts made and money spent demonstrate how the old traditions of Taebaek-san as one of Korea’s most sacred mountains continues to the present day.

The ceremonies are held in the morning, lasting for well over an hour. They display Neo-Confucian, Daoist and shamanic forms and elements in turn. Up to five hundred Koreans might be there, depending on the weather, some in traditional clothing. Very few foreigners have ever been seen attending; the events are not publicized in English for tourists, although the rituals are colorful and the setting is quite dramatic. The mood up there inspires awe, as the participants appear to be profoundly aware of the symbolic importance of what they are sincerely performing. National and ethnic unity is re-affirmed, traditional culture is renewed, and good fortune is beseeched from the highest deities. On the printed program, the leaders proclaim the purpose and spirit of the ritual to be:

Now, we continue our traditional culture,

and this will be the center-point of the reunification

of North and South Korea,

and the beginning stage of recovering our lost land,

and we will become the leading nation of the world.

Few if any people think that this “Taebaek-san” is actually the mountain mentioned in the myth. Most Koreans now believe that Baekdu-san on North Korea’s border with China is the site of Hwan-eung’s descent and Dan-gun’s birth. The Samguk-yusa’s author identified what is now known as Myohyang-san23 as the one, and some scholars hold that the myth refers to a now-unknown peak in Manchuria. However, Taebaek-san’s having the same name, and its great, ancient reputation (along with the current relative inaccessibility of Baekdu-san and Myohyang-san)[page 124] has caused many Korean nationalists to revere it as, symbolically, the holy site.24

At the top of Dan-gol valley, just above the new Museum of Korean Coal Mining, is a large shrine for King Dan-gun, named the Dan-gun Seong-jeon (Altar-King Sage-Hall) built in the late 1980s by a private association of cultural nationalists.25 A gleaming bronze statue sits out front, and a large painting resides within. Visitors and pilgrims come all year round to pray for national prosperity and reunification. The shrine also holds a large public ceremony on the solar-calendar Gaecheon-jeol holiday, and just in 2006 began also holding one on the lunar-calendar Gaecheon-jeol as well.26 More than a dozen other shamanic-oriented shrine-temples have been constructed around the slopes in the past two decades, along with the general neo-traditionalist revival of Korean folk culture and shamanism.

**SACRED ASSETS OF TAEBAEK-SAN**

From my fieldwork visits and study of maps, I have made this summary listing of the “sacred assets” (features that contribute to character and status as a sacred site) of the entire greater Taebaek-san region. They are listed from north to south (an asterisk indicates one of the important “traditional” pre-20th-century temples or shrines):

\* Geumryongso (Golden Dragon Source), original source of the South Han River on the northern slopes of Geumtae-bong (Golden Platform Peak) of Hambaek-san (below).

\* Jeongam-sa temple on Hambaek-san’s northwest, one of Korea’s most venerable ancient temples, founded by master monk Jajang- yulsa in 643 CE, in accordance with a revelation he received from Munsu-bosal. He is said to have found a ring on a high cliff above the temple site that could expel a huge serpent living there, and on that spot he built the Jeokmyeol-bogung pagoda and enshrined some relics of Sakyamuni Buddha he had brought from China. An ancient yew tree standing next to that pagoda is known as the Seonjangdan-namu (Immortal Guardian-of-Altar Tree), held by believers to have magically sprouted from a master’s staff that Jajang thrust into the ground. Although this famous temple is clearly on Hambaek-san,[page 125] which is larger and taller than Taebaek-san, the main signboard on its front gate reads “Taebaek-san Jeongam-sa,” showing that the reputation of Taebaek-san completely overshadows its neighbors.27 Several other temples are named as if they were located on Taebaek-san, as far away as Bulseong-sa in the Deokgu valley near the east coast about 30 kilometers away, clearly demonstrating the continuing strong sacred status of this mountain.

* + Jeokjo-am, a modern-built Buddhist hermitage, seventh highest temple in South Korea, on western Hambaek-san above Jeongam-sa.
  + \* Jeol-gol (Temple Valley), running 6 km. long on northeastern Hambaek-san from the edge of Taebaek City up to the main ridge. It got that name due to the many Buddhist temples that have been located in it over the centuries, including Bonjeok-sa, Simjeok-sa, Gwaneum-sa, Myojeok-sa and Unjeok-sa. It is said that the great Shilla monks Jajang-yulsa and Wonhyo-daesa practiced asceticism at Unjeok-sa during the seventh century. They were all subsequently destroyed in the Joseon Dynasty or during the Korean War; the three-story stone pagoda (Provincial Cultural Material #126) on the site of Bonjeok Temple is the only ancient relic that remains today. Simjeok-sa has been reconstructed and a new temple named Gwaneum-sa has been built in the valley.
  + The peak of Hambaek-san (Completely White Mountain), 1,572 meters above sea level, is the sixth highest summit in the Republic of Korea, dividing Taebaek City and Jeongseon County, offering a breathtaking view of the surrounding mountains. According to the Samguk-yusa it was once known as Myogo-san, meaning a grandiose, spiritual mountain, and thus came to be home to many temples. However. it became overshadowed by the reputation of its southern neighbor Taebaek-san, as said. This peak and its main ridge extending south, then north, is a major sector of the Baekdu-daegan line.
  + Bogyeong-am (Treasure-Shining Hermitage) and several other shamanic temple-shrines on the southern slopes of Hambaek-san (facing Taebaek-san).
  + Taesan-sa (Grand Mountain Temple), Samcheong-sa and Seongwang-sa are three modern-built Buddhist temples on raebaek-san’s northeast slope, along National Highway 31.

[page 127] • Dang-gol (Shrine Valley) is a sacred site in itself, running from Tae-baek-san’s northeast corner to its main peaks. It contains its own village san-shin-gak (mountain spirit shrine) surrounded by shamanic jangseung (guardian-spirit poles).28 It features famous boulder out-croppings such as Shinseon-am, Byeongpung-am and Janggun-bawi, and Taebaek City’s new Coal Mining Museum and various tourist facilities are located there. San-shin-je (Neo-Conflician-style but really shamanic mountain-spirit rituals) are frequently held in forest clearings there.29 About 800 meters altitude in its lower reaches, it is considered to be an especially holy area in general.

* + \* Cheong-won-sa (Azure-Source Temple) is a small Buddhist nunnery near Dang-gol’s entrance, with a square spring-fed pond in its front courtyard featuring a small, charming shrine for the Yong-wang (Dragon King of the Waters) and several related granite statues. This pond is claimed to be the origin of the Nakdong-gang, Korea’s longest river that pours into the sea two hundred kilometers to the south. However, the Yong-jeong spring (below) should be considered the actual source. There is an interesting myth associated with this site, of a child-dragon who swims all the way up here from the sea searching for its mother, which can be interpreted as a shaman searching for the source of the river.30
  + Mandeok-sa, a large modern-built Buddhist monastery farther up Dang-gol valley.
  + Buljeong-Sandang-am31 (sandang means mountain [worshipping] shrine, a new legal building-registration designation), Daejinju-am (Great Pearl [of Wisdom] Hermitage), Bae-ssi-Sandang (Mr. Bae’s Shamanic Shrine) and several other shamanic shrines in upper Dang-gol’s eastern and western branches.
  + The Dan-gun Seongjeon shrine for the national founder king, described above.
  + \* Manggyeong-sa temple, described above, is at the origin of the western branch of Dang-gol, and the site of the Yong-jeong (Dragon Well) spring, the actual source of the Nakdong River.
  + The Danjong-bigak shrine for King Danjong as Taebaek’s san-shin, described above.

[page 127] • \* Cheonje-dan peak (1561m) and shrine, described above; on the Baekdu-daegan line.

* + \* Janggun-bong peak (the summit, 1567m) and shrine, described above; on the Baekdu-daegan line.
  + Musoi-bong peak (1546m), westward turning point of the Baekdu- daegan line.
  + \* Munsu-bong peak (1552m) with five gigantic stone towers built on it with several shamanic shrines, described above.
  + Four shamanic shrines on the northern slopes of Taebaek-san, along National Highway 31 and directly off it.
  + Baekdan-sa (White Altar Temple) deep in Baekdan-gol (White Altar Gorge) on the northern slopes of Taebaek-san, accessed from National Highway 31. This claims to be an ancient temple, but evidence is lacking and it is not officially listed as such.
  + Six major shamanic shrines in the lower Baekdan Valley,including another (recently established) significant Dan-gun Seongjeon shrine.
  + Yu-il-sa, a nun’s temple up on Taebaek-san’s northwest, on the trail to Janggun-bong peak, one of Korea’s least accessible temples, right on the Baekdu-daegan line.
  + Wolam-bong (Moon Crags Peak in Hanja), a.k.a. Dalbawi-bong (Moon Crags Peak in Han-geul), a visually impressive rocky peak on Taebaek-san’s east side,with Wolam-sa shamanic temple and Munsu-sa Buddhist temple.32
  + Geumcheon-gyegok (Golden Stream Scenic Valley) and Baekcheon- gyegok (White Stream Scenic Valley) of eastern Taebaek-san (leading to Munsu-bong peak from that side) are both deep and remote, famed for breathtaking natural beauty, with many strangely shaped boulders, pristine forests and crystal-clear waters. Haifa dozen small Buddhist temples are found in or around them, including Hyeonbul-sa, Donggwang-sa, Jangmyeong-sa, Seokjong-sa and Yong-am-sa.
  + Gakhwa-sa (Pavilion-Flower Temple) is an important ancient Buddhist monastery on Taebaek-san’s remote southern slopes (in Bonghwa County), 9 km. south-southeast of the main peaks. It was founded by Great Master Wonhyo-daesa in 676 GE, serving as a distant but significant meditation retreat for the Shilla Kingdom. It really gained importance in the Joseon Dynasty, however, when the [page 128] royal court decided to make it one of the four sites of the royal library archives, where copies of the dynastic records were kept at remote-from-the-capital “guardian” mountains in order to keep them safe from foreign invasions, such as the Imjin War of 1592-98. Only the foundation stones of the Sago-ji (History-archive site) still remain following complete devastation during the Korean War, but the temple itself has been reconstructed and is thriving. Three subsidiary hermitages are found on the slopes of Wangdu-bong (King’s Head Peak) east of the temple: Geumbong-am, Dong-am and Yaksu-am. Two more, Baekun-am and Boyang-am, are found further south along local Highway 88.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Taebaek-san meets all the considered criteria for being considered a sacred mountain, and has an extraordinary wealth of sacred assets that could individually and collectively be promoted to attract higher levels of inbound foreign tourism. The combination of these assets along with its scenic beauty and excellent hiking already make it a fairly well- known domestic tourist destination for Koreans. It is less-visited by domestic tourists and rarely ever visited by international residents and tourists, due to the following factors:

• lack of reputation, information and promotion (especially in English);

• remoteness from major population centers, requiring around five hours or more of transport from Seoul by trains, public buses or private cars; no airport is anywhere nearby;

• relatively poor level of tourism infrastructure (accommodation, restaurants, transportation access, sale of local products, etc.); virtually no English or other international languages are employed or available at any of them.

With greater knowledge and promotion of its sacred aspects and assets as outlined in this paper, I believe that it could attract many more international tourists to Korea.

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My research suggests that national and local tourism authorities, as well as private tour companies, ought to make greatly increased efforts toward:

1. Further assessment and systematized categorization of Taebaek-san’s sacred aspects and assets, as have been listed in a preliminary way here.

2. International promotion of the results, particularly to Western nations, Japan and China, in order to inform potential visitors of the unique things Taebaek-san has to offer,particularly from the “spiritual and pilgrimage tourism” point of view.

3. International promotion of the more general idea that Korea has a number of highly sacred mountains, comparable in tourism value to those of China and Japan, and that Taebaek-san is a leader among them (comparable to China’s and Japan’s best).

4. Implementing measures to ensure that Taebaek-san’s sacred aspects and assets are more accessible to international visitors, in particular:

• the upgraded use of English and other non-Korean languages to clearly explain them on websites and in brochures, attracting ‘pilgrimage’ tourists;

• the upgraded use of English and other non-Korean languages to clearly indicate and describe them on-site, enhancing the visitor’s experience with historical and spiritual depth of understanding;

• improving transportation connections to its northern and southern entrances, by upgrading the national highways and improving train and public bus services;

• improving its physical tourism infrastructure, with better accommodation, restaurants and sale of local products;

• implementing a program to introduce and expand the use of English and other international languages at its accommodations, restaurants and shops—perhaps at first simply making available English signs and menus.

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I would further propose that since the greater Taebaek-san region hosts a dozen ancient sacred places, a long-term project should be undertaken to create a pilgrimage trail between most of them, linking them in a single, sign-posted hiking trail. Places to rest and stay overnight at temples and villages and places to eat local cuisine should be established with proper foreign-language support at the appropriate intervals along the way. This Taebaek-san pilgrimage trail, although not having ancient roots, could itself become a significant attraction for spiritually minded international tourists—as well as those merely interested in long healthy walks through beautiful natural scenery. More research should be conducted on this idea by tourism geographers and concerned local officials.

**NOTES**

1. This definition has been adapted from material found on the web page http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred, on Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, as a reasonably universal standard source.

2. David A. Mason, Spirit of the Mountains: Korea’s San-shin and Traditions of Mountain-Worship (Seoul: Hollym, 1999), 14-80; Alan Carter Covell, Folk Art and Magic: Shamanism In Korea (Seoul: Hollym,1986), 42-55.

3. Well-known works on sacred mountains include Edwin Bernbaum, Sacred Mountains of the World (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1990); Adrian Cooper, Sacred Mountains: Ancient Wisdom and Modern Meanings (London: Floris Books, 1997); and Chris Park, Sacred Worlds: An Introduction to Geography and Religion (London: Routledge, 1994). None of these works, however, discuss or even mentions the mountains of Korea and their strong (historical and contemporary) traditions of sacredness and spirit worship. Bernbaum and Cooper both have separate chapters on China and Japan (and sometimes entire other continents are grouped in a single chapter), but no coverage of Korea at all.

4. Refer to the websites and brochures published by the Korea National Tourism Organization and those published by the relevant provinces, cities and counties of the Republic of Korea. Little mention of the “sacred” character or religious-pilgrimage value of their respective mountains can be found.

5. I don’t know to what extent these criteria might apply for evaluating the sacredness of mountains outside Korea. Certainly, most of them are partially derived from and have shared with traditional Chinese culture and the ancient shamanic cultures of Siberia, Mongolia and Manchuria. They probably have a strong similarity with such criteria in Japanese traditional and contemporary cultures, as these have been heavily influenced by Korea[page 131] throughout history. Their similarities and differences with concepts of sacred mountains in the wider world outside Northeast Asia might best be discovered in Bernbaum’s Sacred Mountains.

6. Refer to my web page http://www.san-shin.net/Baekdudaegan-1.html for a full explanation, which may be the best one available in English.

7. The criteria for these differentiated listings is taken from Bulgyo-shidaesa, Dictionary of Korean Buddhist Temples (Seoul: Bulgyo-shidaesa, 1991).

8. Taxus cuspidata, native to Japan,Korea, northeast China and the extreme southeast of Russia (only in very high-altitude areas); related to the yew trees common to northern Europe, held sacred by the Celts and other pagan peoples in ways similar to Korea’s folk-shamanic beliefs. See http://www.san-shin.net/ Taebaeksan-03.html

9. Refer to my webpage http://www.san-shin.net/Pungsu-jiri.htm for a full explanation,and also to Yoon Hong-key, The Culture of Feng-shui in Korea: An Exploration of East Asian Geomancy (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 33-53.

10. www.webtour.com/jirisan.html; www.e-jirisan.co.kr

11. http://park.org/Korea/Pavilions/PublicPavilions/KoreaImage/exit/emun8.htm

12. http://tour.teabeak.go.kr/english/sub3/sub3\_1.asp

13. Ibid.; Bulgyo-shidaesa, Dictionary.

14. Refer to my webpage http://www.san-shin.net/Highest-Temples.html for listing and discussion.

15. Story is from Bulgyo-shidaesa, Dictionary. See also my webpage http:// www.san-shin.net/Taebaeksan-04.html

16. “The five middle sacred peaks were, in the east Mount Toham, in the south Mount Chiri, in the west Mount Kyeryong, in the north Mount T’aebaek, and in the central region Buak, also called Mount Kong.” (Daniel Kane, “Samguk Sagi: Rites and Music,” [Honolulu: University of Hawaii monograph, 2004], online at: http://www2.hawaii.edu/~dkane/Monographs. htmKane 2004.) Also, Tikhonov names Taebaek-san as the northernmost of Shilla’s Five Holy Mountains, and discusses how this ideology was employed to bolster support for Korean royalty in concert with identical theories held in Tang China. (Vladimir Tikhonov, Epigraphical Sources on the Official Ideology of Unified Silla—on the inscription on King Munmu’s tomb stele [Seoul: Kyunghee University Monograph, 2001, online at: www.geocities.com/volodyatikhonov/ munmuwang.htm.)

17. Mason,Spirit of the Mountains; Covell, Folk Art and Magic.

18. This chronicle-collection, a sort of ‘Old Testament’ of Korean culture, was written by the Buddhist master monk Iryon (1206-1289) as a compilation of myth and history, intended to support Korea’s growing sense of national identity. The standard English translation is by Ha Tae-hung, published by Yonsei University Press in 1972. Parts have been translated by others, including James Grayson in his monumental 2001 work Myths and Legends from Korea.

[page 132] 19. “Gyeongdeok-wang,” volume 2, section 2.7.

20. Story is from Bulgyo-shidaesa, a folklore collection of Taebaek City, and the web page tour.taebaek.go.kr.

21. See photos on http://www.san-shin.net/Taebaeksan-02.html and http://www. san-shin.net/Taebaeksan-25.html

22. An indigenous nationalistic religion which regards Dan-gun as a deity.

23. “Mysterious Fragrance Mountain,” a highly sacred mountain north of Pyongyang in North Korea.

24. The identity and mythic importance of “Taebaek-san” and other interpretations of this myth are discussed in Mason, 132-38.

25. See photos and further explanation on http://www.san-shin.net/Taebaek-san-08.html

26. See photos and further explanation on http://www.san-shin.net/Taebaek-san-09.html

27. Photos of this phenomenon and others of that temple are on http://www. san-shin.net/Taebaeksan-21.html

28. See photos on http://www.san-shin.net/Taebaeksan-01.html

29. See photos on http://www.san-shin.net/Taebaeksan-07.html

30. See photos on http://www.san-shin.net/Taebaeksan-10.html

31. See photos on http://www.san-shin.net/Taebaeksan-11 .html

32. See photos on http://www.san-shin.net/Taebaeksan-20.html

\* \* \*

Most of the data and ideas about Taebaek-san presented in this paper were obtained through my own repeated travels to and hikes on that mountain, and analysis of the information and photos obtained on these trips. For details and photographs of all the sacred places and aspects of Taebaek-san discussed in tnis paper, please see the dozen web pages on my own web site devoted to Korea’s sacred mountains, starting at http://www.san-shin.net/Taebaeksan-01.html.

Other web sites devoted to this topic on the global or local scales which I found useful in developing the perspectives and arguments of this paper are:

• http://witcombe.sbc.edu/sacredplaces/sacredplac

• http://www.sacred-destinations.com

• http://sacredsites.com/index.html

• http://tour.taebaek.go.kr/english/sub3/sub3\_1.asp