

New Goddesses at Paektu Mountain: Two Contemporary Korean Myths

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Abstract

Mountain worship and *sanshin* (mountain gods) legends are intrinsic to Korean culture. Central for narratives of anti-colonial struggle and contemporary policy of North Korea, Mt. Paektu also became a symbol of Korean national identity in South Korean popular culture. This paper engages two legends sited there, suggesting that their main protagonists represent contemporary *sanshin*. Firstly we consider the image of Kim Chŏng-suk of North Korea, and those narratives addressing her husband, Kim Il-sŏng's guerrilla resistance in terrains surrounding Paektu. As a bodyguard of Kim Il-sŏng and a champion of revolutionary struggle, Kim Chŏng-suk transcends her human nature, and embodies female presence on Mt. Paektu. Secondly the paper investigates narrative from contemporary South Korean practice GiCheon (氣天 Kich'ŏn), intended for physical and moral cultivation of a person, reinvented in modernity on the basis of ancient East-Asian traditions. It recounts a mythic meeting of Bodhidharma with the Immortal Woman of Heaven (天仙女 Ch'ŏnsŏnyŏ) dwelling at Mt. Paektu. The Woman of Heaven overpowers Bodhidharma in battle, challenging patriarchal gender conceptions and contesting Chinese cultural superiority. Examined together, these two narratives demonstrate common cultural background. Ancient tradition, passed down from past to present, continuously accumulates and transforms, acquiring new forms in South and North Korean contexts.

Keywords: Korean mythology, GiCheon, Kim Chŏng-suk, Mt Paektu, Sanshin and mountain and worship

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“Until the day when the waters of the East Sea run dry and Mt. Paektu is worn away, May God protect and preserve our country!”

(National anthem of South Korea)

“In order to successfully carry out the enormous tasks for this year all the officials, Party members, service personnel and other working people should live and work in the revolutionary spirit of Paektu, the spirit of the blizzards of Paektu”.

(2015 New Years Address from Kim Jōng-ūn, the leader of North Korea, 01.01.2015 Rodong Sinmun)

1. Introduction

Mt. Paektu, the highest mountain of the Korean Peninsula and North Eastern China and the Paektu Taegan – a chain of mountains ranges running most of the length of Korean Peninsula – have been key elements of Korean historiography and geographical literature since ancient times (Mason 1999, 134-135; Chesnokova 2013). The exceptional role of Mt. Paektu can be traced not only in Korean mythos and Buddhist lore. As a symbol of Korean national identity it became important in narratives of anti-colonial struggle, contemporary policy of North Korea and South Korean popular culture.

Considered an ancestral mountain during the Koryō and Chosōn dynasties, Paektu began to gain further cultural and political currency in the Korea of the late 18th century (Kang, Sōk-hwa 2011). In 1908, Korean nationalist historiographer and independence activist Sin Ch’ae-ho asserted that mount T’aebaek, depicted in *Samguk Yusa* (三國遺事 Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) as a birthplace of Tan’gun, legendary founder of Kojosōn, the first Korean kingdom, was not Mt. Myohyang, but Mt. Paektu. This theory was very quickly spread by a religious movement Tan’gunkyo (檀君教 Tan’gun religion), which one year later changed its name to Taejongkyo (大倂教)¹). In the 1920s and 1930s Korean newspapers

1) Tan’gunkyo (literally ‘the religion of Tan’gun’) is one of the new religions of Korea, originating in the beginning of 20th century and connected to independence struggle. Under the conditions of occupation of

started referring to Mt. Paektu as *yǒngsan* (靈山 sacred mountain), reflecting and confirming its soaring significance in popular consciousness. However, following Korea's division in 1948, access for southerners to the mountain was blocked. Since the opening up of China in the mid-1980s, South Korean citizens were again able to visit the Chinese side of Paektu, and numbers of visitors from the south steadily increased. Paektu is situated on the border between North Korea and China and is reachable now only through China. Therefore it became represented in popular imagination as a symbol of the contemporary division of Korea giving at the same time a hope for unification (Pak, Ch'an-sŭng 2013).

This and other social changes prompted the re-emergence of Paektu's image in South Korean culture. Today, photos and paintings of the mountain are frequently seen in governmental offices, in the lobbies of universities and business buildings, in meeting rooms and reception halls, and in all sorts of restaurants and cafes. They are found in offices of some Buddhist temples, and in shrines dedicated to mountain gods. Mountain Paektu is often discussed in contemporary South Korean scholarship (Cho, Hyun-soul 2010, 35-37), the discussion which sets forth the significance of the mountain in modern era.

In contemporary times Paektu connotes the independence and rebellion motifs in both Southern and Northern Korea (Yi, Yǒng-hun 2006, 31). Since ancient times until today the legends on Mt. Paektu depict it as a place of struggle and of divine presence. In the Paektu mythology, the divine presence is often feminine, manifested as adventures of the Goddess of Mt. Paektu, or recounting the descent of heavenly maidens to the mountain's lake to play (Zhang 2012, 10-12; Cho, Hyun-soul 2010).

In spite of the cultural or political importance of these stories of Paektu, the current study does not aspire to provide a comprehensive review of Paektu-related culture in North and South Korea. Instead of a 'horizontal' coverage of 'Paektu culture' in different areas of life, such as literature, film, art, history etc, our research is 'vertical'. Narrowing our scope to Paektu-related contemporary mythology only, we focus on two particular legends. We thus take two particular

Korea by Imperial Japan, the name was later changed into Taejongkyo, in order to obscure the nationalistic character of the religion.

points on the broad ‘terrain’ of Paektu culture, and perform an exercise of analytical narrative archaeology at these two points. We focus on two female heroes depicted in contemporary Paektu ethos, one from Northern and one from Southern Korea, considering their significance in political, social and personal terrains.

Firstly this paper encounters the revolutionary North Korean Kim Chŏng-suk, first wife of Kim Il-sŏng, founder of North Korea and its eternal Great Leader, analysing the construction of her mythic figure in connection with the landscape and terrain of revolution, namely Mt. Paektu and the wilderness spaces surrounding it. Kim Chŏng-suk and Mt. Paektu are seen in moments of transformative violence in the North Korean narrative to work together against Imperial Japan’s forces. Such processes serve to transform not only Kim Chŏng-suk’s position and personhood, but the landscape, creating what might be considered authentically Korean space.

Violence, embodiment and transcendence appear equal, if different, partners in our second case study, one which exists deeper in mythic, legendary time. Bodhidharma, the key figure of Chan Buddhism and the founder of the Shaolin temple emerges in this legendary narrative possibly personifying the undercurrent bonds between Korean ancient mountain cults and Chinese Buddhism²⁾, connections visible today within mountainous Buddhist temples, housing Korean Mountain Gods, alongside golden Buddhas. As addressed later in this paper, interaction with the key iconic figure of Bodhidharma has been constructed within the narrative of a contemporary South Korean mind-body movement of GiCheon (氣天), grounding his presence within the Korean space of Paektu. Since the 1970s GiCheon practitioners have generated a set of legends, parts of which have been codified in written texts (Kim, Hui-sang and Kich’ŏnmun Ponmun 1998, 2000). In the legend analysed in the present paper, Bodhidharma is recounted as having encountered Ch’ŏnsŏnnyŏ (天仙女 Immortal Woman of Heaven), representing ‘Korean’ wisdom and power. His engagement with Ch’ŏnsŏnnyŏ in battle and

2) Legendary Bodhidharma has supposedly come from India to China around 480 AD. Bodhidharma is a popular hero of Chinese Buddhist lore (Shahar 2008, 13) and is equally important for Korean Buddhism.

subsequent defeat asserts the moment as an imagined symbolic victory of Korea over China. According to its oral mythology, GiCheon originates at Mt. Paektu, and has been “secretly transmitted by nameless sages in the mountains of Korea for thousands of years” (SangMuWon 2014). In the legend, Bodhidharma seek Ch’önsönnnyö at Mt. Paektu, and asks her to spar with him. She wins, and Bodhidharma begs her to take him as a student. His wish is granted, but only after he willingly cuts away his own arm.

Focusing on an exegetical approach to Kim Chöng-suk’s narrative in combination with the examination of GiCheon (氣天), its legends of Paektu and its mythic, non-human residents, the paper seeks to engage in a more holistic investigation of the gendering of landscape in the Korean context. We structure our discussion around the three themes of violence, embodiment and transcendence, showing how they manifest in various aspects of the legends. In comparing and contrasting these modern yet categorically different accounts, it seeks to extract greater empirical and analytic value from their analysis and their connection to topographic gendering and its political and social impact. In particular, we wish to emphasize that these two feminine figures, one of Kim Chöng-suk and the other of the Woman of Heaven, embody Mt. Paektu as contemporary avatars of age-old Korean mountain worship.

2. Kim Chöng-suk

Firstly this paper examines those narratives and mythologies cited north of the 38th parallel. These vital North Korean histories located upon the slopes of the Mt. Paektu massif connect with the root narratives on which the projected and perceived authority of the current North Korean regime rests (Kwon and Chung 2012). Political authority in North Korea since its founding in 1948 has laid with the male members of the Kim family, namely Kim Il-söng, Kim Chöng-il and Kim Jöng-ün and the guerrilla progenitors in a struggle against Imperial Japan. Collectively the family Kim and the current North Korean regime claims ownership of the process of the peninsula’s liberation from Imperial Japan. North Korea sites

the terrain of its victory as the wilderness of the forests and mountains of the historical Chosen-Manchukuo borderland. While Kim Il-sŏng's later appearance as leader of North Korea in 1945 is difficult to place temporally, Pyongyang's historiography places the pre-history of his political authority firmly in these border spaces. Kim Il-sung is presented as the leader, or important member of the United North East Anti-Japanese Army, a small guerrilla nationalist group which harassed Japanese forces in the mid-1930s, later settling in the Russian Far Eastern Province near Khabarovsk. There were a number of semi-mythical violent incidents undertaken by them on and around Mt. Paektu. All, however, have become vital political and ideological benchmarks underpinning North Korea's narrative and its regime's claim to legitimacy.

Today the first two generations of the Kim dynasty are known in North Korean literature and culture as the 'Paektusan Generals' (Berthelieir 2013). According to North Korea's mythology, Kim Chŏng-il was born to Kim Il-sŏng and Kim Chŏng-suk, his first wife in a secret camp at the base of Mt. Paektu. Kim Chŏng-suk's struggles on and around the mountain have generated a memorial architecture on the mountain reflective of this mythology (Chi, Hŭng-kil 2004) as well as informing North Korea's wider cultural production (Pak, Kye-ri 2011). North Koreans are expected to visit the mountain and its sacred sites as part of a process of deep ideological education with a school group, Young Vanguard brigade, work or army unit. Like their ideological education, this seeks to re-temporalize the struggles of the past into their present lives.

This distinct gendering of sovereign headship through the line of the three male Kims reflects both historical Confucian patriarchal social structures as well as the more international quasi-traditions of avowedly male dictatorial presidential governance. However such patriarchal institutions seem in Pyongyang's case to be interesting due to the diffusion of this maleness by strong feminine presence. The key example which this paper utilises is that of Kim Chŏng-suk, feminine lightning rod for North Korean historical legitimacy.

Like much of North Korea's pre-Liberation history, Kim Chŏng-suk herself is a character difficult to place definitively within linear political narrative. Even

within North Korean historiography Kim Chŏng-suk takes some time to rise to the top of the revolutionary pantheon. Initially Kim Il-sŏng's mother Kang Pan-sŏk was portrayed as the key female actor within the revolutionary period. However Kim Il-sŏng's authority and legitimacy established, Pyongyang's narrative moved away from his mother, childhood and the spaces of colonial Chosŏn focusing on his later revolutionary activities in Manchukuo and on the later Sino-Korean border. In the 1970s the importance of Kim Il-sŏng's son and eventual successor, Kim Chŏng-il, started to rise. In the light of this, a feminine figure had to be found to underpin the filial and revolutionary legitimacy of this younger Kim. This legitimacy also had to be closer to the geography present in the Kim Il-sŏng narratives. The North Korean historiography seeks to offer both a site for Kim Chŏng-il's birth, and to present Kim Chŏng-suk as the perfect physical manifestation of that revolution in accordance with those narratives.

While Kim Chŏng-suk's personhood appears coherent in this era, she still plays only a fleeting role in the wider North Korean political development. Accordingly, just as when and where exactly Kim Il-sŏng and his guerrilla band operated during the colonial period is contested, so is Kim Chŏng-suk's role, position and personhood transient and liminal in historiographical terms. Having died early in North Korean national narrative, Kim Chŏng-suk now plays a mythic role. When it comes, however, to her activities in and around Mt. Paektu, the existent North Korean rhetoric is determined to place Kim Chŏng-suk in the decidedly real space of the conflict.

"...Kim Chŏng-il was born at the Paektusan Secret Camp in the Sobaeksu Valley, Samjiyon County, Ryanggang Province, on February 16, 1942." (Biography 2005, 1). Thus begins Kim Chŏng-il's official biography written some thirty years after his birth, and even further in temporality from the events which mark out the Paektu Camp as a mythologically important. To serve and support the Kim Dynasty's authority, the biography still feels the 'fact' of Kim's birth at the foot of Paektu as vital to mention.

The terrain encountered within this biography serves the masculine gendering

of the landscape of Paektu. The narrative projects the perceived strength, commitment and endurance of the Kim dynasty onto its topographical features, coupled with historical recantations of the activities of Kim Il-sŏng and his guerrilla band. However, if readers were to visit the primary memorial site commemorating the pre-Liberation guerrillas' contribution to North Korean historiography in Pyongyang, the Revolutionary Martyrs Memorial, they might be surprised to note that the individual most important to the memory at this site is neither Kim Il-sŏng nor any male member of his band, but instead Kim Chŏng-suk.

Within the political historiography remembered in Pyongyang, the terrain of Mt. Paektu was not reached by guerrillas including Kim Chŏng-suk until summer 1936. After crossing "boundless primeval forest" and the Amnok River, an important episode in the narrative of Kim Il-sŏng's ascent to power (Kim, Il-sŏng 1992), the text announces "...the grand spectacle of the snow-capped ancestral mountain, the symbol of the long history of Korea...". Kim Il-sŏng himself even lays out the narrative terrain to follow in his conversation with Kim Chŏng-suk: "...This wonderful natural fortress stretching from the summit of Mt. Paektu...will provide us with a theatre of our sacred future struggle..."

This connectivity between biography and topography is iterated by a key moment within Kim Chŏng-suk's hagiographies as the moment of "Becoming a Human Fortress and a Shield", echoing Paektu's own role within the guerrilla narrative as the "natural fortress" (Kim, Il-sŏng 1992). Through this articulation Kim Chŏng-suk becomes more than simply a woman, both embodied in the narrative as one and the same with the mountain itself, and transcendent of her own, fleshly body. In this event, counter to conventional military strategy, having attacked uphill, and engaged Japanese forces high up in the mountains, the guerrilla band was subject to a counter attack. The narrative describes the events as following: "Kim Il-sŏng commanded the battle from a rock on the ridge of the mountain. Mindful of his safety, Kim Chŏng-suk kept a close watch on the surroundings. Noticing reeds swaying strangely, she turned her eyes and saw half a dozen enemy soldiers hiding in a reed field, taking aim at Kim Il-sŏng on the ridge...at the hair-raising moment, Kim Chŏng-suk raced to Kim Il-sŏng, shouting

“Comrade Commander!” and shielding him with her body. Then she pulled the trigger of her Mauser. The enemy soldier in the front fell down, dropping his gun. A gunshot followed. Kim Il-sŏng had shot over her shoulder. In this way they both shot all the enemy soldiers in the reed field dead...” (Biography 2002, 165).

This linguistic formula is repeated again in October 1940 at another battle in the forest at Huanggouling. Attacked by surprise within similarly heavy topography, the narrative describes how “[...] Kim Chŏng-suk shot the enemy machine-gunner to death, covering Kim Il-sŏng with her body as she did so. ‘Comrade Commander! It is dangerous here. You must leave here.’” (Biography 2002, 132). Analysis of these particular instances of weakness on Kim Il-sŏng’s part and the apparent willingness of Kim Chŏng-suk, to sacrifice herself set within the backdrop of Mt Paektu’s rugged topography, suggests not simply a transformation of the field of battle and ‘miraculous turn’ when it comes to Kim Il-sŏng’s continued survival. Kim Chŏng-suk, already a figure of considerable acclaim is herself transformed by these events and their violence or potential violence, becomes transcendent, moving toward a charismatic, saintly status, marked by selfless deployment of her agency and concern for both Kim Il-sŏng and the revolution.

Such moments of interaction with topography and terrain allow the embedding and embodying of Kim Chŏng-suk’s revolutionary femininity and political commitment within the narratives political and mythological superstructure through performative acts of theatrics. The ‘constructed remains’ of such acts and activity have become important not only to Pyongyang’s historical sensibilities but key to the contemporary North Korean touristic experience of revolutionary space at Mt. Paektu (Rodong Sinmun 2014)³) providing further evidence for the Kwon/Chung charismatic/theatric thesis (Kwon and Chung 2012). “When the construction [of

3) The “revolutionary” battlefield sites on and around Mt. Paektu have spawned a considerable North Korean tourist industry and accompanying tourist architecture. These sites are discussed at length by scholars such as Christopher Richardson (2014) and in particular by Benoit Berthelier (2014). Berthelier addresses current historical scholarship which views much of the guerilla campaigns undertaken by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-suk, as real historical events located elsewhere, in the border regions of colonial Manchukuo and Chosŏn.

the camp] was complete, Kim Chŏng-suk peeled bark from trees in the surrounding area and wrote meaningful slogans on them: “A General Star has risen on Mt. Paektu”, “Oppose the predominance of men over women. Long live the emancipation of women! Humiliated Korean women, wise up in the struggle against the Japanese!” (Biography 2002, 62). Such feminist slogans portray Kim as a defender and a representative of all Korean women, and maybe of all women in general. The bark of the trees thus permanently embodies these slogans and the will of Kim Chŏng-suk, formulated of course in the terms of revolution and anti-Japanese struggle.

Coupled with these demonstrative proto-feminist theatrics Kim Chŏng-suk’s behaviour in the “natural fortress” exhibits both feminine and pedagogical qualities. A key example of this element is her maternal and educative support of the guerrilla Ma Tong-hŭi. Described in semi-comic tone, Ma apparently “...had flat feet...this made it difficult for him to act in concert with the other guerrillas...he was too exhausted to notice that his trousers were falling down...” (Biography 2002, 65). In spite of his obvious lack of utility to an active band of revolutionary guerrillas, Kim Chŏng-suk seems determined to nurse and educate the inept soldier to usefulness: “Kim Chŏng-suk walked together with him on marches, to encourage him, and helped improve his marksmanship...” (Biography 2002, 65); she also mended his clothes (Biography 2002, 66). Such pedagogical activities are fundamental to the narrative of Paektu and key to the transformations and transcendence of both Kim Chŏng-suk and the mountain’s landscape.

North Korean landscapes in which revolutionary commitments, moral obligations, education and political ideology are put into practice by Kim Chŏng-suk are now functionally marked by them, her femininity incorporated within them. The ridge on which Kim Il-sŏng was nearly killed on Mt. Paektu now forms part of an educational programme for civil servants at Mt. Paektu; a visit to a revolutionary topography is meant to underpin their own ideological commitment (Rodong Sinmun 2014). The birch trees at Lake Samji under which the female guerrillas led by Kim Chŏng-suk rested, and under which the Kims’ relationship was abstractly confirmed, are now a key sight of revolutionary pilgrimage (Rodong

Sinmun 2014), a place at which the revolutionary couples' physical togetherness has become embodied

“Leaning on a birch tree on which spring tints were emerging, he [Kim Il-sŏng] posed with the commanding officers...One of them suggested to him that he should have his photo taken with Kim Chŏng-suk. Hearing this, Kim Chŏng-suk grew shy and hid behind the backs of the women guerrillas. They pushed her forward to his side. In order not to miss the moment, the “cameraman” clicked the shutter. For Kim Chŏng-suk, it was as good as a wedding photo...” (Biography 2002, 132).

The role of these other female guerrillas pushing forward shy Kim Chŏng-suk echoes a number of other moments of the Paektu and guerrilla mythologies. While other female protagonists are less frequently mentioned, they play a narrative role as Kim's ‘ladies in waiting’ and serve to create a background upon which Kim Chŏng-suk shines her revolutionary glory. Nevertheless, they are also important for themselves. Kim's female companions personify the mass participation of Korean women in the struggle against Japanese colonialism. The primary vehicle of female participation in the guerrilla struggle was the Anti-Japanese Women's Association, who served as logistics and operational support corps for the main guerrilla group. While not directly involved in fighting, they crossed front lines and engaged in dangerous activities. Their capture and harassment by Japanese forces is a common feature of these narratives. Just as with Kim Chŏng-suk the violence of such moments surely will be a vital element in the narrative, serving to allow both embodiment within the landscape and transcendence through future mythic incorporation. However in spite of the urgency and drama of the threat, the mythologies find it difficult to connect such violence to the physical body of Kim Chŏng-suk. The aggression and destructive impact upon the bodies of others involved are certainly recounted by the narrative in very distinct terms: “The Japanese aggressors ran amuck in an attempt to hamper the people's support to the guerrilla army. The bestial aggressors recklessly arrested and slaughtered those people who purveyed provisions and commodities to the guerrilla army...” (Women of Korea 1981, 40).

The previous passage describes a general slaughtering of such participants, their torture and sometimes death. Similar instances are key elements in the stories of particular female guerrillas. Kim Myōng-hwa, a fellow woman fighter recounts Kim Chōng-suk's own moment of torture: "...the enemy locked her up in the house of a peasant there and put her to severe torture, threatening to kill her..." (Women of Korea 1974, 17). While Kim Chōng-suk survived and the narrative avoids graphic detail, this was not so with Chang Gil-bu, mother to a number of revolutionaries. Not only was her son, the once incapable Ma Tong-hŭi tortured so severely he "bit off his own tongue" rather than reveal anything before being killed "viciously in a police station", but her daughter and daughter in law, Ma Guk-hwa and Kim Yong-kŭm both are described as "dying a heroic death in battle". Chang herself is portrayed as undergoing torture: "...clubs and leather whips struck her until she was badly smeared with blood..." (Women of Korea 1974, 29). Thus we see that the actions on the field of battle and violent deaths of women guerrillas are important for the story. A narrative element in its own, they are not just a supplement added to bolster the fame of Kim Chōng-suk.

Putting aside these manifestations of violence and death, it is perhaps Kim Chōng-suk's pregnancy amongst the mountainous terrain in 1942 and Kim Chōng-il's birth at the 'secret camp' on Mt. Paektu which established the terrain's importance to North Korean dynastic charisma and its contemporary politics. In this moment North Korea's future politics are both embodied through the physicality of Kim Chōng-suk, but in the terrain in which this event occurred. However, the more urgent, more dangerous guerrilla campaigns and the violence occurring amongst this topography are what guarantees Kim Chōng-suk's embedding within wider national narratives as more than just the mother of the nations' future leader. Beyond Kim Chōng-suk's selfless actions and intentions, in cahoots with the topography itself, she genders the landscape in moments of battle by her militaristic femininity. Within this narrative scope, Kim Chōng-suk emerges transcendent, seemingly a super-human, the text of her biography explicitly mentioning that she almost does not sleep or eat: "many times she only had water for her meal" (Biography 2002, 51). With her actions, purification through fasting, torture, self-sacrifice and heroism Kim Chōng-suk depersonalizes

herself into the realm of the esoteric, the mythic and the immortal. These are traditional stages of transformation from a human into a divine being in East-Asian mythology. Kim Chŏng-suk on those ridges and in those valleys becomes another, for North Korean purposes, female Korean *sanshin*.

3. Ch'önsönnŏ, the Woman of Heaven in GiCheon

Moving the focus of this paper to the South Korean movement of GiCheon, we now address and analyse the Ch'önsönnŏ legend. This legend directly connects to the view of GiCheon and other similar practices as a 'techniques of immortality', through which mortals achieve eternal life, and human beings become divine⁴). Ch'önsönnŏ represents *sinsön* (神仙 *sinsön*, Chinese *shenxian*, divine immortal⁵), an ancient concept reviving within the reconstructed traditions of South Korean *ki suryŏn* (氣修練 training related to *ki* – life energy).

The term *ki suryŏn* indicates Korean contemporary mind-body practices, which, similarly to Chinese qigong (Palmer 2007) and Indian yoga (Van der Veer 2007), are re-invented in modernity on the basis of ancient Asian traditions. GiCheon is one of the vivid examples of contemporary *ki suryŏn* tradition. U Hye-ran defines *ki suryŏn* as a *ki*-based practice directed toward moral and physical development of a person. *Ki suryŏn* is supposed to lead to harmonization of mind-body, actualization of hidden potential of an individual in the context of a union with the universe. *Ki suryŏn* groups focus on bodily practice, while selectively appropriating various elements of Korean religious traditions. *Ki suryŏn* has spread beyond particular *ki suryŏn* groups, becoming a cultural product approachable to the majority of the population. As a part of popular culture, the cosmology and values of *ki suryŏn* are interiorized by contemporary South-Korean community,

4) For a connection between *ki suryŏn* and immortality in the perceptions of *ki suryŏn* adepts see Ten 2013.

5) *Sinsön*, an important figure in East-Asian practices of inner alchemy and nourishing life, is a category within a hierarchy of celestial beings (Miller 2008). *Sinsön* and *chinin* (真人 Chinese *zhenren*, perfected man or woman) embody immortality, often a goal of such practices. Immortality, in this context, indicates a process of personal purification and enhanced perception of reality, resulting from physical, moral-spiritual and cognitive development (Kirkland 2008).

including through Internet computer games, animation and films. The terms *ki* and *ki suryŏn* are among vital keywords of contemporary Korean culture (U, Hye-ran 2006 b, 71-73).

Scholars in South Korea approach *ki suryŏn* within the frameworks of anthropology (Sin, Hye-suk 2008), sports and medicine (Pak, Mi-suk 2003), contemporary history and mythology (Yi, Kwang-ho 2013), new religions, nationalistic discourse and globalization in the case of Dahn World [단월드 *Tanwŏldŭl*] (U, Hye-ran 2006a). However, not much has been written by way of analysis on *ki suryŏn* or GiCheon in English, and the social roles and functions of these cultural phenomena are only starting to attract academic attention⁶⁾.

While the visibility and significance of a revolutionary heroine Kim Chŏng-suk within Korean culture is unquestionable, comparison of such a person with the Woman of Heaven from GiCheon mythology might seem a strange choice of a subject. Yet, this article suggests that mountain worship has always been one of the central features of Korean cultural landscape. While specific traditions of mountain culture have been utilized by North Korea's leadership for the purpose of promotion of the state ideology, in South Korea mountain culture has acquired different forms. We argue that contemporary South Korean *ki suryŏn* constitute such manifestation of mountain-related culture. The central place Korean mountains occupy in the mythology and practice of GiCheon is one of the reasons of selecting GiCheon legends for analysis and comparison in the present article. Other reasons include the fact that GiCheon and Kouksundo (國仙道 *Kuksŏndo*), as originating in 1970s, are among the first South Korean *ki suryŏn* groups (U, Hye-ran 2006 b, 77 on Kouksundo). Though un-known to English language readers and to many Koreans, GiCheon influenced many later *ki suryŏn* groups. Four of the seven founding members of Dahn World, one of the largest *ki suryŏn* groups in Korea, originally called *tanhak sŏnwŏn* (단학선원) were GiCheon practitioners, and instructors of *tanhak sŏnwŏn* used to attend GiCheon studios and practice in the 1980s. Also in the 1980s, Kim Chŏng-ho and Na Han-il, two students of the first GiCheon initiator, Taeyang Chinin (真人perfected man⁷⁾) created Haidong

6) One of the first scholars mentioning the existence of GiCheon in English is Don Baker (2007). See also Ten 2014.

Gumdo (海東劔道 Haedong kōmdo) on the basis of GiCheon sword art.

Many *ki suryōn* groups locate their mythic origin in ancient times, connecting their legacy to East-Asian beliefs in *sinsōn* (divine immortals), Korean mountain cults, *sanshin* (山神 mountain god, or spirit of the mountain⁸), and Tan'gun, the legendary father of Korean nation. In GiCheon, the notion of mountain immortals is central (Pak, Tae-yang, Ch'oe, Hyōn-kyu). Most GiCheon flyers, books and web-sites abound with images of mountainous places, and frequently bring up the term *sanjung suryōn* (山中修練 training in the mountains). The retreats to GiCheon mountain centres are considered as vital for the practice. This appropriation of mountainous spaces as 'GiCheon spaces' draws on Korean spiritual tradition of *sinsōn* and are contemporary manifestation of mountain culture and mountain worship.

The Woman of Heaven from the legend discussed here can be identified as a contemporary avatar of traditional East-Asian immortals. They support adepts as intermediaries, preceptors and counsellors on the path toward immortality. Traditions of inner alchemy and nourishing life abound with stories about female celestial teachers leading male adepts toward perfection (Despeux and Kohn 2003, 111; Campany 2002, 192).

The legend of Ch'ōnsōnnyō reveals linkages between the feminine and the mountainous in the mythology of *ki suryōn*. Similar connections between such images and terrains manifest in the more general contexts of Korean culture and spirituality. The majority of Korean shamans are female, often combining their vocation with that of a priestess to a Mountain Deity. Scholars concur that the Gods of Korean Mountains were held to be female in ancient times, and have mostly transformed, changing their gender into male under the prevailing patriarchal norms during the last half-millennium (Mason 1999, 37). Nevertheless, female mountains spirits are still actively worshiped in South Korea today, sustaining old traditions and evolving new ones. One example is Mt. Unje northeast of Kyōngju. Today many female pilgrims frequent this Korean mountain to pray

7) See note 5.

8) The authors Romanize this term as *sanshin* instead of *sansin* after consulting with David Mason. David Mason first introduced this concept in the English language a few decades ago, and accordingly the authors of this paper respect his right to define its spelling.

to the Unje Yösanshin (雲帝 女山神 Goddess of Unje Mountain). This worship goes back in historical record for at least a millennium (Grayson 1996, 126-130)⁹). Other examples of this female-oriented Korean contemporary myths include the developing cult of ‘Mago, the Mother Goddess of the Korean people’ advanced by adherents of the mind-body movement Dahn World. Mago, a Mountain Goddess from Korean folktales, is promoted in Dahn World mythology into a ‘mother of all humans’, living in the “highest spot on the face of the earth” (Baker 2007, 511-513). The image of Mago is becoming linked in recent years with a generalized conception of female *sanshin*, an association even spreading beyond Dahn World circles¹⁰) (David Mason, personal communication July 2014). This paper considers two instances of present-day mythology establishing and embedding the power of Mt. Paektu through feminine archetypes constructed within a national-political narrative.

The legend of the Woman of Heaven and Bodhidharma is rather short, but contains a multiplicity of connotations. The initial friction between two central protagonists develops into a relationship of cooperation, and this collaboration has multiple meanings. This contest between female and male heroes represents respectively Korea and China, or Chinese Buddhism and Korean mountain worship. Here classical and socially acknowledged spiritual contents – such as Buddhism – counter obscure and allegedly ‘secret’, hence unknown, but actually newly invented traditions such as GiCheon. Besides, the bond arising between Ch’önsönnŷ and Bodhidharma can be conceptualised not only as a master-disciple relationship, but also as human-spirit alliance, and We versus Others controversy.

In the following analysis, the myth of Ch’önsönnŷ and Bodhidharma is asserted as a distinct example of gendering Korean mountain-scapes, in which their encounter impacts upon and is impacted by nationalistic power discourse, spiritual-religious meaning and mortal-into-immortal transformation. First we examine the version of the legend appearing on the movement’s official site (www.gicheon.org) and in the Lee’s (2002) GiCheon DVD¹¹). “According to

9) For research on other Korean mountain goddesses see, for example, Kwön, T’ae-hyo 1998 and Ch’oe, Un-sik 2004.

10) See also Kwön, T’ae-hyo 1998.

GiCheon mythology, some very famous historical figures have studied GiCheon. Perhaps the most famous is Bodhidharma, the 18th generation heir of Mahakasyapa, founder of Chan Buddhism and the developer of Shaolin kung-fu. Bodhidharma heard about the great strength and wisdom of the female GiCheon grandmaster known as Ch'önsönnö, sought her out on Mt. Paektu and asked her to spar with him. It didn't take Bodhidharma much time to realize how formidable Ch'önsönnö was and he begged her to teach him the art of GiCheon. She offered him one lesson, only if he could show her something: a bouquet of red flowers in a pure red sky. To satisfy Ch'önsönnö's request, one snowy day in the mountains, Bodhidharma cut off his left arm to prove his sincere desire to learn GiCheon. The blood gushing out of the wound coloured the earth and the falling snow red. The grandmaster was appeased by the spectacle, which did indeed resemble a red bouquet, and she taught him the great secret of GiCheon: *Yökkän*¹²).

A different version of the legend appears in books published by the GiCheon movement, summarised as following: “Bodhidharma heard that ancient wisdom originates in the East, at Paektu Mountain, which is the Gate of Heaven. Having arrived at the mountain Bodhidharma prayed: “Oh the great Paektu Sanshin (God of Paektu Mountain). I came searching for truth. Let me meet a *Chinin* (真人 perfected person¹³)”. Twenty-one days passed and a secret valley opened. A beautiful woman was sitting there, her eyes closed. Bodhidharma tried to approach her, but the mysterious power was pushing him away. Bodhidharma called the woman with all his might, and the woman opened her eyes. Bodhidharma begged her to take him as a student, and the woman replied: “If the red flowers bloom, and the red snow falls, then, following the will of Heaven, I will take you as my

11) The legend is reproduced here on the basis of the text on www.gicheon.org web-site, managed by Lee Ki-tae with a few slight changes, such as romanization etc (Sang Mu Won 2014).

12) *Yökkän* (易筋 Chinese *yijin*) is a principle of maximal bending the joints in GiCheon, which facilitates the flow of life energy (*ki* 氣) while enhancing physical, moral and mental well-being. *Yök* (易) means “change”, and *kän* (筋) means “muscles”, “flesh” or “physical effort”. Chinese chronicles also mention that Bodhidharma wrote a book titled *Yökkän Kyöng* (易筋經 Chinese *Yi Jin Jing*) (Shahar 2008, 12-19). Korean GiCheon adepts claim to possess true understanding of this *Yökkän* principle, of which, according to their mythology, only an imperfect and distorted reflection was left with the Chinese Shaolin Monastery disciples, to whom Bodhidharma had allegedly passed his book.

13) See note 5.

student”. Bodhidharma waited and waited, in spring the flowers blossomed, but red snow did not fall. And so, when winter came, Bodhidharma cut off his left arm. The blood gushed from the wound and the falling snow turned red, coming to resemble crimson bouquets. The sincere devotion of Bodhidharma touched Ch’önsönnýö and she taught him the *Yökkün* principle of GiCheon” (Kim, Hui-sang and Kich’önmun Ponmun 2000, 52-55).

While distinct in time and space but involving the same protagonist this legend also borrows important motifs from Bodhidharma-related Buddhist legends in China. Hui-K’o, the disciple of Bodhidharma, has cut off his arm to prove his sincerity, thus becoming the second Chinese patriarch of Chan after Bodhidharma, the first patriarch (Maguire 2001, 58). According to a different version, Hui-K’o’s arm was cut off by scoundrels (Broughton 1999, 62). The narrative structure of the GiCheon legend here clearly follows the Chinese legend: Hui-K’o is the disciple, Bodhidharma is the master. Hui-K’o cuts away his arm in order to prove his sincerity to Bodhidharma, and as a result becomes next acknowledged master after Bodhidharma. In the GiCheon legend, Bodhidharma is the disciple and the Woman of Heaven is the master. Bodhidharma cuts away his arm in order to prove his sincerity to the Woman of Heaven, and as a result becomes next acknowledged GiCheon master after her. Within the constructed legendary time and space, he becomes ‘GiCheon propagator dispatched to China’ – Bodhidharma will transmit the secret teaching to the Shaolin disciples, while the Woman of Heaven will continue teaching GiCheon in Korea. Both Hui-K’o in Chinese legend and Bodhidharma in Korean legend transcend their human status through an act of self-inflicted violence and upgrade to the position of the master.

Notably, arm-cutting and *Yökkün Kyöng* mythological narratives on Bodhidharma do not contain motifs relating to femininity or gender (Shahar 2008). These elements appear to be the contribution of GiCheon practitioners themselves, who modelled the legend in the spirit of other Paektu legends, according to which Paektu is guarded by a female divinity (Zhang 2012, 10).

This legend shows a desire to reiterate the place of GiCheon within the broader context of East-Asian historical and mythological heritage, while simultaneously

contributing to nationalistic Korean identity and building up the identity of GiCheon, through clarification of the relationship with the Other. The Other – Bodhidharma coming from China - comes to signify ‘other nations’, ‘other martial arts’ and ‘other teachings’ such as Shaolin kung-fu and Chan Buddhism. This is how ‘GiCheon identity’ is built and the We (GiCheon practitioners and Koreans) versus Others relationship is explicated. On the other hand, the legend on Bodhidharma and Ch’önsönnŏ creates a boundary of the ‘followers of the true Way’ among which GiCheon adepts are the vanguard. Bodhidharma and Shaolin kung-fu are included and acknowledged, but their place is defined as second. Bodhidharma is the student of Ch’önsönnŏ. Korea is represented as teacher, China – as student.

As a representative of Chinese civilization Bodhidharma is the Other, but as a GiCheon practitioner he achieves self-transformation and self-transcendence through suffering and violence. So he also represents GiCheon practitioners themselves. Bodhidharma crosses the border between the Other and the We through painful and violent initiation, transforms into the disciple of Ch’önsönnŏ and incorporates himself into GiCheon tradition. After becoming a mediator between the Others and the GiCheon We, one-armed Bodhidharma will keep passing the *yökkün* principle on to Shaolin monks in China.

The Ch’önsönnŏ is a *sinsön*, a divine immortal, and the art of GiCheon she teaches is identified by the adepts as ‘techniques of immortality’. Not daring to hope for final immortality, practitioners aspire to advance at least a few steps upon this road, a journey of improvement of their physical-moral-mental state and life. This is how the idea of GiCheon practice is linked to a notion of self-transformation and transcendence. GiCheon stances are hard and painful, of which the adepts often complain. The pain Bodhidharma experienced in cutting away his own limb might be interpreted as metaphoric manifestation of self-inflicted pain of GiCheon practice. Bodhidharma’s venturing into the mountains is an embodiment of such a transformation, which is hard and requires extensive sacrifice.

David Mason suggests that an image of *sanshin* can be a culmination of a whole chain of transformations starting with the ordinary person. This transformation

from mortal into immortal involves a few intermediate steps. First an ordinary person studies the true way and becomes a teacher. Then he becomes an adept in the techniques of immortality. The following stages are a divine immortal (*sinsŏn*), with a final aim of becoming a *sanshin*, a mountain god (Mason 1999, 25). Understood as such, the symbols of *sinsŏn* and *sanshin*, visualising the progressive self-cultivation, or the advancement towards immortality, reconstitute mountainous space as a space for the transmutation of the self. The legend of the Woman of Heaven establishes such a space on Mt. Paektu, and it is there that Bodhidharma undergoes physical and spiritual transformation. He cuts away his arm, learns an art of GiCheon and changes from an ordinary mortal into one initiated into techniques of immortality.

The complex immortal-mortal and female-male interactions in Bodhidharma legend have multiple meanings and can be interpreted from various perspectives. This legend, composed by GiCheon adepts in 1980s, contains a strong aspect of powerful, subjective, individual male agency, which acts upon landscape, deities, spirits, and the will of Heaven itself. In this reading, the landscape of Mt. Paektu, other Korean mountains, the Paektu *sanshin* and Ch'ŏnsŏnnyŏ herself are passive spectators rather than active protagonists. It is Bodhidharma, a stranger coming from afar, who awakens them to activation and actualisation. Bodhidharma comes to Korea from China, because he "heard that ancient wisdom originates in the East". Bodhidharma cannot find anyone on Mt. Paektu, and he prays to the Paektu Mountain Deity, who reacts by letting Bodhidharma meet Ch'ŏnsŏnnyŏ. The magic valley opens but Bodhidharma has to persist with continuous effort to approach the Woman of Heaven, to call her and to make her open her eyes. And when the 'will of Heaven' does not bring any red flowers, Bodhidharma has to take matters in his own hands and cuts away his arm. He succeeds in 'shaking' of Paektu Sanshin and Ch'ŏnsŏnnyŏ out of their 'sleep', and in altering the landscape of Mt. Paektu and the will of Heaven by "making red flowers blossom and red snow fall".

From this perspective, the legend is rather 'conventionally patriarchal' in its gender dynamics. Here is the male protagonist looking for a female, calling the female, 'awakening the female from her sleep', begging for something and finally

getting his reward. Reacting to his advances, Mt. Paektu opens to admit persistent Bodhidharma in, unfastening, as a woman's body in the act of sexual love, the motif doubled when Ch'önsönnnyö opens her eyes responding to his call. The notions of a flower opening in spring, evoking the themes of love, male-female union and sexual reproduction are encoded within the phrase 'make red flowers blossom'. However, contrary to prevailing gender dynamics where a male sexually subdues the initial resistance of a female, the Woman of Heaven overpowers Bodhidharma in battle. His, and not her (virginal or vaginal) blood is spilled in the act of reproduction. And reproduction is again not sexual reproduction, but the spiritual transmission of a secret sacred knowledge. Challenging the patriarchal conceptions of male and female weakness and strength, Ch'önsönnnyö is the teacher, and is the strongest of the two. Unlike Kim Chöng-suk, Ch'önsönnnyö is not at all 'kind', but rather indifferent and ruthless like the mountain landscape she represents and embodies. The living flesh and blood Bodhidharma has to sacrifice willingly reminds us of traditional sacrifices to spirits, including mountains spirits, in exchange for benefits, protection, and magical abilities.

The transformative process of Bodhidharma also includes alteration of the landscape as he willingly cuts away his left arm, the gushing blood transforming the landscape and creating red snow. Mountainous spaces acquire decisive historical and spiritual weight in this story, coming alive and embodied in the deity of Mt. Paektu and Ch'önsönnnyö herself. Mt. Paektu features in this legend not only as an altered *space*, but as a *living being* – listening, talking, moving and reacting – the valley opens to admit Bodhidharma in.

The landscape, gods and immortals of Mt. Paektu witness and participate in the encounter between Bodhidharma and Ch'önsönnnyö. All of them mutually stimulate, challenge and transform each other, being themselves transformed in the process.

4. Conclusion

In contemporary legends of North and South Korea Mt. Paektu is depicted as a space of violence, embodiment and transcendence. Comparing the Southern mythos with Northern legend enables the identification of common motifs. Similarly to Bodhidharma, Kim Chŏng-suk embraces sacrifice and provides a role model for emulation. Bodhidharma is an exemplary GiCheon student, embodying virtues of patience, determination and dedication. Kim Chŏng-suk equally embodies qualities of loyalty and fortitude, which North Koreans are expected to reproduce. Bodhidharma and Kim Chŏng-suk are both ranked ‘second in command’. They effect abilities for independent judgment and leadership skill. These two Paektu heroes possess exceptional self-discipline and the sense of the ‘higher purpose’, though, of course, their goals differ: Bodhidharma wants to learn and later transmit GiCheon and Kim Chŏng-suk aspires to protect Kim Il-sŏng, fight Imperial Japanese forces and bring about Socialist revolution. Both stories, however, carry out ideological functions. Kim Chŏng-suk and Kim Il-sŏng consolidate the North Korean regime authority while Ch’ŏnsŏnnyŏ and Bodhidharma strengthen GiCheon identity through contributing to its authenticity, confirming connections of GiCheon to other disciplines of self-perfection. As an embodiment of Korean mountains, Ch’ŏnsŏnnyŏ also urges national pride.

Besides reinforcing official ideology in general, Kim Chŏng-suk is important as a model North Korean woman. Authors such as Suzy Kim (2010), Sonia Ryang (2000) and Park Kyung Ae (1992), among others, have examined the female situations in North Korea. In line with Suzy Kim’s conclusions, Kim Chŏng-suk stories presented in our paper are influenced by a Confucian worldview. Confucian morality itself was never targeted for eradication in North Korea’s revolution, despite the fact that concubinage and early marriage were outlawed as feudal and colonial (Kim, Suzy 2010, 745). In Kim Chŏng-suk’s case, echoes of Confucian virtue are promoted twice – Kim Chŏng-suk is a wife and at the same time a military leader, both the lover and the second in command of Kim Il-sŏng.

Another important point that became clear through comparison of both legends

is the notion of enduring pain and hardship, often in a violent fashion. Bodhidharma cuts away his arm, and we argue that his pain is an embodied pain of ordinary GiCheon practitioners, performing hard GiCheon positions. We suggest that similar interpretation might be given to Kim Chŏng-suk's pain and suffering. These are never emphasized in the narrative, yet are present. Kim Chŏng-suk exerts herself in the extreme, going for days without food. Are these allegoric representations of what North Korea's population has gone through during the last decades? With experience of famine, increased working hours and amplified demands for dedication and sacrifice, life for its population has been difficult.

In East-Asian tradition, self-transformation through pain, suffering and self-sacrifice is a necessary step on a way toward immortality. Both Bodhidharma and Kim Chŏng-suk follow this path. In the narrative of Kim Chŏng-suk, an admitted immortality practice can be identified, consisting of refraining from eating, drinking water only and later feeding solely on the air (Vasilyev 1970).

While the Southern and Northern mythographies are vivid and dynamic in their violent narratives of spilt blood, and in embodying East-Asian ideas of mortal-into-immortal transformation, they are distinct in their differences. The Woman of Heaven, for instance, induces Bodhidharma to shed his blood. However, Kim Chŏng-suk protects her husband in order to prevent the shedding of *his* blood – and that of her revolutionary guerrilla companions. But on the other hand, she appears adept at shedding the blood of the Japanese enemy (Biography 2002, 165). Both cases though, connect the spilling of blood to particular modalities of martial arts. Woman of Heaven is an acknowledged grandmaster of GiCheon, an art of moral and martial self-cultivation. Kim Chŏng-suk is an outstanding fighter and exterminator of the Japanese, who also excels in pedagogical arts (Biography 2002, 65).

The deeds and demeanour of the Woman of Heaven translate and transpose GiCheon practice into the heavenly, transcendental plane, as GiCheon is *her* attribute and an art that *she* teaches. This both creates and confirms the standing of GiCheon as an immortality technique linked to the ways of mountain immortals. The guerrilla struggles of Kim Chŏng-suk and Kim Il-sŏng have similar impacts. The process of 'divinization' of the revolutionary couple and the codification of

their valiant deeds amplifies the heroic activities' importance, upgrading it to an almost transcendent, heavenly level. Their story weaves and embeds them into the landscape of Paektu, drawing upon the more traditional motifs, yet pushing the limits of these motifs, transforming old and developing new connotations and signifiers.

In these legendary narratives, Paektu's terrain supports and reflects a complex re-signification of the gendered roles, particularly those connected to issues of strength and weakness. Heroic Kim Chŏng-suk supports and protects her husband and general Kim Il-sŏng in his moments of vulnerability. Though generally stronger and more authoritative, Kim Il-sŏng does at those moments appear weaker than his romantic companion and bodyguard. The relationship of Bodhidharma with the Woman of Heaven also demonstrates stronger female and weaker male agency. It focuses not on sexual reproduction, but instead on an educative process of physical and moral formation. Why the notions of 'teaching the truth', of total and absolute dedication and bloody sacrifice centred around Mt. Paektu both in the North and in the South are important questions that require further investigation. Some answers that we attempted to suggest are, of course, very partial and incomplete, constituting just first steps on the untrodden terrain of investigating the origins and development of contemporary Korean mountains myth.

In the story of the Woman of Heaven and Bodhidharma, the female participant acts as the dominant protagonist, asserting her strength and agency. This is, of course, not the case in the account of Kim Il-sŏng and Kim Chŏng-suk. This more classical patriarchal relationship is dominated by Kim Il-sŏng. Unlike their Southern counterparts, these Northern heroes' relationship is not antagonistic but instead loving and supportive. Unlike the Woman of Heaven, whose demand is to be satisfied by landscape alteration, Kim Chŏng-suk alters the landscape herself by promoting revolutionary feminism through slogans carved on wood and littering the mountainside with the bodies of dead Japanese soldiers. Both legends connect femaleness to motherhood, though: Kim Chŏng-suk becomes an actual mother to the next revolutionary leader Kim Chŏng-il. When it comes to the Woman of

Heaven, she contributes to ‘reproduction’ by assenting to the transmission of embodied knowledge, creating a GiCheon lineage through Bodhidharma. By passing on a sacred teaching through initiation Woman of Heaven becomes a kind of ‘spiritual mother’ to Bodhidharma. These twin examples of contemporary Korean mythos demonstrate gendering Korean landscape which, in turn, affects and redefines feminine and masculine roles and images. Very different in their form and content, these two legends of North and South Korea nevertheless manifest a commonality of motif and aspiration. Of particular importance is the fact that both narrations portray an archetypical Korean woman as a physically powerful warrior and a morally strong ‘teacher of the truth’ personifying and exemplifying self-transformation and self-cultivation, perhaps symbolic of Mt. Paektu and of the Korean nation itself.

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