

# The Korean Mountain Spirit

EDWARD R. CANDA

The necessary starting point for the understanding of a religious experience of mountains is a direct encounter with the mountains themselves. One must be willing to strain endurance, even risk one's life; and above all one must be willing to approach the mountains with respect and an openness to power and mystery. An encounter with mountains must be guided by the heart in order to yield a religious experience. Religiously climbing a mountain is an extremely literal metaphor for the ascension of the heart to heaven. The Korean experience of the mountain spirit is a culturally unique response to ineffable stirrings of the heart which mountains everywhere evoke in sensitive persons. The Korean awareness of the mountain spirit developed through millennia of constant living with mountains in a relationship of interdependency. Mountains dominate Korea's landscape and thus impress themselves upon the Korean heart. In practical terms, the human social order and agriculture necessarily must be harmonized with mountains. Furthermore, such intimate and prologued experience with mountains naturally engenders numinous feelings which well up into verbal exclamations of mystery. In Korean folk and shamanist tradition, this mystery is concretized anthropomorphically

in a conventional image of the mountain spirit.

## **Mountains are Sacred and Alive**

Verdant Korean hills undulate in graceful curves, bearing up paddies and planted fields, mounded ancestral graves, and stately pines. In spring they bloom with a stunning array of brightly colored flowers. The hilly contours seem to flow lush with life as if the earth itself is breathing, its abdomen rising and falling in the motion of hills, filling mountain lungs with invigorating air.

Mountains tower above farms and villages throughout seven-tenths of Korea. They rise up from the zone of human habitation to touch the heavens, where clouds commingle in their peaks. Mountain hinterlands defy cultivation. They are difficult to

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access and remain untamed by human effort. Mountains harbor forces of greater than human strength and cunning. They bestow wind and rain essential for agriculture. And they are everpresently looming threats of disaster. Mountains are intensely and supremely real; they are bastions of vitality and extraordinary nonhuman power.

According to the *I Ching*, earth is associated with the trigram *k'un*, 'the receptive;' it is completely *yin* in character. Heaven is associated with the trigram *ch'ien*, 'the creative;' it is completely *yang* in character. Earth and heaven embrace each other in the inextricable activities of *yin* and *yang*. Mountain is associated with the trigram *ken*, 'keeping still;' it consists of two *yin* lines topped by a *yang* line. The Chinese commentary *Shuo Kua* identifies the meaning of the mountain trigram as the junction of beginnings and ends where all things reach fruition in stillness. Another image associated with this trigram is the gate, derived from its shape: ☶.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, one may envision the mountain as an embodiment of *yin* opening up toward *yang*. The mountain is a gateway between earth and heaven. It is a focus for incipient interaction between *yin* and *yang* as well as a resting place for action brought to completion. The mountain is a locus of generativity in repose, a nexus of both birth and surcease.

The eminent Korean poet Yun Sŏn-do (1587-1671) has written:

Mountains are the more beautiful  
 After the sun has gone down  
 And it is  
 Twilight. Day closes, darkness  
 Settles. Boy,  
 Watch out for tigers, now.  
 Let's not  
 Wander about in the field.<sup>2</sup>

In Yun's eyes the beauty of mountains is enhanced by twilight, for twilight obscures the mountains and heightens their mysteriousness. And as the poet warns, one must beware of danger lurking in tranquility, because the tiger is on the prowl. Danger, strangeness, and uncontrollable power enhance the beauty of mountains with an

awesome nonhuman quality. In the terms of Rudolf Otto, a renowned philosopher of religion, mountains evoke awareness of numinous reality by their mightiness, fearfulness, sublimity, and overwhelming power. Mountains tend to evoke a religious human response tinged with both dread and fascination. Furthermore, according to the historian of religions Mircea Eliade, mountains are felt to be sacred because their natural form corresponds to a transcultural archetype of 'the center of the world' where vertical passage between earth and heaven occurs.<sup>3</sup> The mountain is a location where earth and heaven touch; it is a portal through which humans and spirits can traverse the ontological distance between heaven and earth.

Acute oriental observation of the powerful energy inherent in mountains has been incorporated into the complex system of geomancy, the practice of determining auspicious energy flows in configurations of the five elements of nature. The mountain is a very important factor in Korean geomantic reckoning. Mountain configurations may determine the appropriate locations for ancestral graves, Buddhist temples, cities and other important sites.<sup>4</sup> Mountains possess not only geomantic energy, but the vital force of life itself. This vitality is expressed vividly in Korean art. For example, a genre of painting developed among both folk and literati artists of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) which depicts the Diamond Mountains of Kangwŏn Province as a multitude of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic shapes.<sup>5</sup> In fact, shamanist paintings depict the spirits of all mountains in vivid physical detail.

The myth of the founding of Korean culture as related in the *Samguk Yusa* clarifies the religious significance of mountains in Korean experience. The Heavenly King sent his son down upon T'aebaek Mountain in order to establish a heavenly kingdom among people on earth. The heavenly prince together with loyal subjects and ministers of wind, rain, and clouds taught human beings the ways of agriculture and civilization. He transformed a she-bear into a human woman according to her wish and embraced her. They parented Tan'gun who established the Kingdom of Chosŏn. Tan'gun ruled Chosŏn for

1500 years until the age of 1908 when he retired to become a mountain spirit. The traditional date for the foundation of Korean culture is 2333 B.C.<sup>6</sup>

Tan'gun united in human form the natures of heaven (from his father) and earth (from his mother). As the embodiment of harmony between these three cosmic principles, Tan'gun was supremely qualified to rule as sovereign over human society. It is significant to note that T'aebaek Mountain (which is the highest point in Korea and therefore 'closest to heaven') served as the passageway facilitating this primal harmony. Tan'gun became a mountain spirit after completing his rule, enlivening the mountain which had enabled his birth and subsequent divine rule. Tan'gun, the sacred founder of Korean culture, is thus the pre-eminent personification of the mountain spirit.

### The Korean Mountain Spirit

*San sin* (or *san sin lyōng*), translated here as mountain spirit, should be understood as an entity which is tangible, specific, and personal. *San sin* are evident to human senses through the vitality, power, and mystery of physical mountains. They also make themselves directly known through visions and dreams. *San sin* are localized in space, usually associated with specific mountains. They are subject to causal and magical conditioning. *San sin* are endowed with personalities, each having unique emotive qualities and typical patterns of behavior. They are envisioned anthropomorphically. They are concretely involved with environmental processes and they have vested interests in human activity.

Although there are many mountain spirits, Korean shamanists represent the mountain spirit uniformly as a benevolent old man with a long white beard.<sup>7</sup> Their resemblance to Korean grandfathers indicates a relationship with shamanists characterized by respect and comfortable familiarity. *San sin* is supernatural not in the sense of being above and detached from nature, but rather in the sense that he is supremely natural. The mountain spirit personifies earth at its highest



Painting of *San sin*

point of development (both literally and metaphorically) at which earth meets heaven and receives its most direct blessings and sacred communications. Paintings usually depict this immortally mature man riding or fondling his companion and servant, the tiger. The extremely powerful and dangerous tiger, once a common predator in Korean mountains, is directly associated with the awesomeness of mountains; in fact, folk tales and accounts of visions sometimes indicate that the old man and the tiger are identical and capable of assuming each other's appearance. This pair symbolizes the prime characteristic of *san sin*: awesome natural power in the service of sacredness and wisdom.

The wise old man's attire in different paintings of *san sin* may suggest a shamanist deity, a Confucian scholar, a Taoist immortal, or a bodhisattva. There is a high degree of inter-religious syncretism in Korea, so the mountain spirit represents all these ideal figures in one exalted being. *San sin* is a

moral and religious exemplar as well as an enforcer of propriety in human behavior. If someone is harmed by a tiger it is often assumed that the mountain spirit has been angered by some transgression; in such a case, the impropriety must be corrected and *san sin* is appeased with offerings and ceremony.

*San sin* is benign and protective as well as demanding and righteous. Since mountains preside over human habitations and farms, the mountain spirit must be attended in order to insure good crops, suitable weather, and prosperous family fortune. Likewise, wood-gatherers and deer hunters must respect the authority of *san sin* over the mountain forests. The mountain spirit guides seekers of *sansam* (wild *insam*: wild ginseng) an extremely potent medicine; their success depends upon the correctness of their intentions and behavior. The hegemony of *san sin* extends even to ocean-going vessels, since the wood of the boat has been taken from mountains. Stowaway dogs on a boat are portents of bad luck and must be purchased from their owners to be sacrificed before the tiger mast-flag.<sup>8</sup> The prevailing idea is that harmony between the mountain spirit and the human community is essential to the greater cosmic harmony and is therefore essential to the well-being of mankind. This is understood in the very concrete notion that if *san sin* is offended, disaster is imminent. Accordingly, the mountain spirit is honored in numerous shrines containing a portrait of the old man and his tiger. Korean Buddhist temples, even the most strict meditation temples, maintain such shrines because they are usually located in geomantically auspicious mountain areas.

The mountain spirit enforces propriety with stern and inescapable punishments which are justly administered and tempered with benevolence. A Seoul newspaper report well illustrates this.<sup>9</sup> In a remote mountain village during the summer of 1979, a two and one-half year old boy mysteriously disappeared from the back yard while his mother was out of house for just ten minutes. The next morning police searched the fourteen-family village to no avail. That day after much investigation and anxiety, the parents fell into an exhausted sleep. In a dream, the mountain

spirit appeared and scolded them for having impiously cut the branches of a three-hundred year old tree two months previously. When the parents woke they felt sure that a tiger had taken their son as punishment for mistreatment of the tree spirit. A further search revealed apparent tiger tracks two-hundred meters from their house in thick forest. The child was discovered in the forest after four days. The boy was exhausted, scratched by branches, and dehydrated; but otherwise he was in surprisingly good condition. His left side bore what appeared to be teeth marks of the tiger which carried him. Later, the boy told his father that he had in fact been playing with a tiger. Despite this seemingly harrowing experience, the boy described the tiger's actions as play! No harm came to the boy, but the mountain spirit was certainly successful in chastising the misbehaved parents.

The mountain spirit may act in more positive ways as an instructor for spiritual advancement. He can shed great inspiration upon sincere persons who meet him. He can be sought through quests for vision or he can manifest himself to the unexpectant worthy. The latter was the situation of the hermit Yi Kap-lyong. Yi was a Buddhist monk for five years when *san sin* appeared to him in a dream.<sup>10</sup> The mountain spirit prompted him to depart from the temple to search for a mountain shaped like giant horse's ears protruding from the ground. *San sin* directed him to Ma-i Mountain where Yi began a secluded life in a cave, subsisting at times on pine needles. In the course of many dreams, visions, and intimations the hermit established an extraordinary communication with *san sin*. The largest task which the mountain spirit set for hermit Yi was to construct towers of piled stones as an act of compassion for the benefit of suffering humanity. Yi positioned one large rock each day after long prayer and meditation. He alternated *yin* and *yang* rocks on the piles in order to create harmonized structures. Either *yin* or *yang* predominates in any phenomenon; therefore Yi's towers resemble breasts and phalluses. The towers range in height from several feet to approximately fifty feet. The hermit labored at least ten years to complete his task, residing at Ma-i Mountain until his death in 1957. A

statue of hermit Yi sits sage-like amidst these towers; Yi is honored with constant offerings there.

The towers consist of vertically piled rocks with small stones wedged between their edges for balance. The rocks are ordinary in appearance, rough hewn or uncut. They are neither glued nor mortared together. The inner cores of the large breast-shaped towers consist of packed earth. Local people marvel that the towers never fall despite strong winds. Three or four shelves are arranged like altars. Rocks of surrealistic appearance are gathered upon them. Enigmatic anthropomorphs array two altars. The stone figures look like a silent assembly of spirits awaiting human attendance. Offerings of rice, water, candles, and trinkets are placed by the statues. An enclosed shrine for *san sin* is nestled among the largest towers. Inside the shrine, paintings and statues of the mountain spirit, the spirits of the Big Dipper, and quasi-Buddhist figures are set above an altar bedecked with copious offerings.

Shamans very often have a special rapport with the mountain spirit. Shamans journey to mountains in order to strengthen themselves spiritually and obtain visions. *San sin* is commonly invoked in at least one section of a major *kut* (shamanist ceremony), especially regarding matters of fertility. Furthermore, the mountain spirit is sometimes a guiding or possessing spirit for a shaman. The first time I met a *mudang* (female ecstatic shaman), I was eager to ask many questions.<sup>11</sup> But she caused me to pause, insisting that I answer her own questions first of all. She asked, "What do you feel when you go up into the mountains?" This question was fundamental for her because it tested the quality of my rapport with mountains, a sure indicator of spiritual receptivity. Indeed, this shaman of Kyōngsan city has an intimate relationship with the mountain spirit. She handles Buddhist prayer beads and tosses coins in the process of divination, praying for her spirit guide to inspire her. Then the tiger comes to her in visions bearing sacred power on behalf of *san sin*.

The Kyōngsan *mudang* venerates the mountain spirit because he possesses a Buddha-like mind, expansive and compassion-

ate. She says that he is rightly the object of a religious person's reverence and obedience because of his great spiritual elevation. She explains that the image of the old man with tiger serves to focus the aspirations of devout people. Old men have ideally acquired the virtues of wisdom and benevolence; hence, Koreans feel an affinity with this image as a representation of sacred reality. The tiger is also an excellent spiritual teacher, having attained wisdom in service to the old man. The tiger acts as a means of sacralization in that he carries the old man on his back to heaven and also brings revelations from heaven down to humans. The sacred tiger can discern the inner quality of human minds. He destroys or punishes offensive persons who intrude upon the mountain spirit's domain; and he assists pure-hearted mountain-wanderers, as the shaman says, "leading them by the light of his eyes to their homes." She explains that shamans may don the attire of a Chōson dynasty general in the course of a ritual, indicating that they stand ready and obedient before the mountain spirit like an officer awaiting the commands of his king.

## Conclusion

The religious symbolism of the benevolent old man is more than an idiosyncrasy of Korean shamanism. Carl G. Jung, the Swiss depth psychologist, has noted that the old man symbol derives from a panhuman archetype relating to the wisdom-principle inherent in every human psyche. The old man image appears in dreams, visions, and mythologies within many cultural contexts. Typically, the wise old man beckons an individual to advance in personal maturity and spiritual awareness.<sup>12</sup> It is highly appropriate that this wisdom symbol should be linked with sacred mountains in Korean shamanism, since these mountains are assimilated to the archetype of the passageway for spiritual ascent.

Korean shamanist experience of the mountain spirit arises out of a deep rapport with nature, a respect for the vital powers of the world, and the recognition that the

environment and humans are integrally related. This experience is more than ecological since it apprehends the mountain as a living, personal being rather than an impersonal scientifically calculable cluster of phenomena. The mountain spirit is affected not only by physical assaults upon the mountain, but also by moral transgressions. The mountain spirit's involvement in human affairs affirms the pervasiveness of the sacred in all aspects of human life, from food-gathering and procreation to ritual performance. Korean shamanist experience of the mountain spirit offers us a greatly valuable insight: that the hearts of men and mountains do commune.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Richard Wilhelm trans. into German, Cary F. Baynes trans. to English, foreword by C.G. Jung, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, Bollingen Series 19 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967 third edition), pp. 270-271, 278-279.
2. Peter H. Lee, compiler and trans., *Poems from Korea* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1974 East-West Center Book edition), pp. 128-129.
3. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), passim, especially pp. 63-64. See also Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World; Harvest Book, 1959), p. 38.
4. For a comprehensive work on Korean geomancy, see Hong-Key Yoon, *Geomantic Relationships Between Culture and Nature in Korea*, Asian Folklore and Social Life Monographs no. 89, Prof. Lou Tsu-T'ang with Wolfram Eberhard eds. (Taipei: Orient Cultural Service, 1976).
5. Zo Za-yong, *Diamond Mountain*, vols. 1 and 2 (Seoul: Emille Museum, 1975), passim.
6. Ilyön, *Samguk Yusa, Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea*, trans. Tae-Hung Ha and Grafton K. Mintz (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1972), pp. 32-33.
7. Some fine folk paintings of the Korean mountain spirit are reproduced in Zo Za-yong, *Spirit of the Korean Tiger*, Korean Art Series no. 2 (Seoul: Emille Museum, 1972).
8. See Donald Dean Owens, "Korean Shamanism: Its Components, Context, and Functions" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1975), pp. 76-83. Cf. Rev. George Heber Jones, "The Spirit Worship of the Koreans," *Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2 (1902), pp. 43-44; Horace H. Underwood, "Korean Boats and Ships," *Transactions of the Korean Branch of the R.A.S.* (1934), pp. 32, 36.
9. *The Joong-ang Daily News* (Seoul), 14 July 1979, p. 11.
10. Field research, Ma-i San, North Chölla Province, Korea, April 1977. An alternate account states that Yi discovered Ma-i San during wanderings which followed the three years of ascetic life required of a filial son after the deaths of his parents. At the age of 25, he stopped at Ma-i San and began an austere life there. During this period, *san sin* contacted him. See *Kwankwang Ma-i San (Sightseeing Ma-i San)*, (Seoul: Gi-Hong Kim, Ujin Kwankwang Munhwa Sa, July 1, 1976).
11. Interview with female shaman (anonymous), Kyöngsan city, North Kyöngsang Province, Korea, July 1976; and also Personal Letters, Shaman's responses to questions, conveyed by Suh Che-du, trans. Hwi-Ja Canda, June 1979.
12. Jung's account of his own experiences with the 'wise old man' are especially interesting. The psychic fantasy figure Philemon (portrayed as a winged and bearded old man) became his spiritual director. Jung also noted that an earthy, somewhat savage and even demonic figure often forms a pair with the wise old man. The Korean tiger's pairing with *san sin* may be understood in a similar manner. See C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffe, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Random House, Vintage paper, 1961), pp. 181-185.