



Celebrating the Rooster-Dragon Goddess

Bringing back ancient mountain ceremonies revives national unity in South Korea



(xxxxx)International Fleet Review, a parade of naval firepower, planned for October; (lower right) a giant warship's tower is taller than the palm trees.

By David Mason
Photography by Stephen Wunrow

I first visited Gyeryong-san National Park in 1983, within my first year of living in Korea. I went to the famous Donghak-sa Temple far up a deep valley on the eastern side, then relatively easy to get to from Daejeon City. This has long been a popular mountain hiking area, since it was designated as a national park in 1968.

The Gyeryong Park has an area of about 61 square kilometers: It was only the second area to be so designated for high levels of preservation and recreation. Now, there are 22 such areas. Back in '83, I was already vaguely aware of the park's reputation for alpine beauty and rich cultural history. The designation of Gyeryong

as the second national park after (the much larger and equally sacred) Jiri-san has much to do with the indigenous religious institutions and activities of that area.

continues on page xx >>>

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Bringing back ancient mountain ceremonies revives national unity in South Korea *(continued)* | BY MARTHA VICKERY

(continued from page 45, cover of the second section)

The western, southern and northern sides of Gyeryong-san were still relatively difficult to access back in the ‘80s, and so I didn’t begin explore those until about 1988. That area became one of my favorite places to research historic Korean religious culture in the 1990s and beyond, especially as I wrote my book about Korea’s Sanshin (mountain-spirits) in the late ‘90s. I have visited this mountain over 20 times — it never disappoints. It is filled with soaring peaks, spiritual activities, steep waterfall gorges and various cultural experiences.

I’m not even sure that I could coherently explain why I became so interested in Korean mountains and the indigenous religion of Korea (shamanism) that is imbued into them. Since I was a teenager, I was fascinated with far-eastern religions and spiritual traditions, especially Daoism and Zen Buddhism; I also really loved hiking in beautiful mountains. In Korea I found those two things in combination, far more than in most countries.

I particularly fell in love with the spiritual culture in these lovely mountains, along with the healthy food and other natural qualities of the place, so different from the densely-packed urban cities where I lived. In particular, the Shamanic-rooted Sanshin mountain-deities that brings all of the above together into a fuzzy but wholistic complex of mind, body and spirit fascinated me. I ended up building a career around it — I researched, hiked, photographed, educated others, and in general spent much of my adult life in studying and experiencing everything related to the Korean mountain spirits.

The “spirit” of each mountain is unique. They are fairly similar in fundamental nature and effective activity, and can be thought of as various characters of a single family. In general, it is said that most mountains to the west of the Baekdu-daegan “backbone” mountain range, which meanders north to south through the peninsula, have female spirits, and on the backbone and east of it have male spirits.



xxxxxxx praying protesters every day on their way to work at the Gangjeong naval base. *Photo by Stephen Wunrow*



xxxxxxxxxxxxbegin the 100 Bows at 7 a.m. *Photos by Stephen Wunrow*

The national-patriarchal spirit of Baekdu-san mountain is in North Korea (identified with the Dangun Wanggeom myth of the founder-king of the first Korean state) and the national-matriarchal spirit of the highest peak of Jirisan mountain in southern South Korea is his wife. They are said to have had eight sons or eight daughters (or both), and those children became the spirits of the

primary mountains of Korea’s eight provinces.

Between the two parent mountains in the extreme north and south of the peninsula the Baekdu-daegan mountains, considered to be their grandchildren, those of the main jeongmaek branch-ranges that channel Korea’s biggest rivers to the sea are their great-grandchildren, those of the lesser ranges are

their great-great-grandchildren, and so on. There is a very Confucian conception of family in this national geographic unity.

Gyeryong-san is key to one of the central branch ranges, guiding the Geum River (South Korea’s third largest). It has been one of Korea’s most sacred mountains since ancient times, and had different names and different designations



depending on the era. It was the central holy mountain of the Baekje Kingdom, and is also the western peak of a group known as O-ak (the Five Guardian Peaks) during the the Unified Shilla and Goryeo Dynasties. Later on, it was known as the central peak of the (similar) Sam-ak (Three Guardian Peaks) during the Joseon Dynasty.

Gyeryong-san is not very high by Korean standards. The summit (Cheonhwang-bong or Heavenly King Peak) is 848 meters tall, but it stands out prominently on the west coast flatlands where few



xxxxxxxxxxe Choi.

mountains top 1000 meters. It is a complex of about a half-dozen other main peaks.

The Sanshin, or revered spirit, of Gyeryong-san is believed to be more than just a spirit, but rather a higher-ranking goddess. Her position is the “first daughter” of the supreme national-patriarchal spirit of Baekdu-san up north and the national-matriarchal spirit of Jiri-san down south.

As a powerful and beneficent matriarchal spirit who protects the nation and benefits its people, she can be supplicated to grant good fortune and for relief from bad fortune. Practitioners of traditional Korean spirituality respect her, and the mountain’s reputation remains very high, demonstrated by the mountain’s early national park status and recognition in an annual festival for the Sanshin Goddess.

The name Gyeryeong-san means “Rooster-Dragon Mountain,” because of the way it looks. The main ridge winds around like a



dragon’s body, and its 20 or so sharp peaks resemble a cockscomb when viewed from a distance. The rooster and the dragon are among the 12 symbolic animals of the (Asian) zodiac, and thus the name has a deeper meaning. The “gye” syllable can also be read as “phoenix,” a fire-bird counterpart to the Blue Dragon, which gives “Dragon-Phoenix Mountain” a profound yin-yang meaning.

Several dynasties have planned to or attempted to build their capital at Gyeryong-san, and it has always attracted a wide variety of religious enthusiasm to its slopes. Today, there are three great historic Buddhist temples in its lower valleys — Gap-sa (one of the oldest existing temples in all Korea), Shinwon-sa (featuring the largest and fanciest pre-modern mountain spirit shrine in Korea) and Donghak-sa (the sec-

ondary main study temple for the nation’s female monks). In its territory are also the ruins of two other temples and a dozen smaller temples and hermitages.

There are also many dozens of Shamanic shrines, perhaps the nation’s greatest concentration of them. They are so dense in some areas, such as within a central western strip from Shinwon-sa up to Gap-sa, that intrepid explorers can just walk from a short distance from one to the next. Sites of Korean Daoism and Neo-Confucianism, and a handful of Christian prayer-camps, are also present. It is a prime area to explore Korean Shamanism,

There are various regional styles of Shamanic practice. The northern style, in an area including North Korea as far south as Gangwon province was quite different from the style of the southern provinces. In the north, there is a more dynamic and spontaneous style that emphasizes the spiritual calling of an individual. In the south, the style is more

orderly and sedate, depending on heredity and set ceremonies performed at village festivals.

In the late ‘40s to early ‘50s, when what is now North Korea was occupied by the Soviet communists and Il Sung Kim was installed as leader, many northern shamans escape to the south. They became more popular over decades, while the hereditary village shamans have mostly faded away. A common pattern in the south is of sons getting modern educations, and moving to the city away from the traditional lifestyle, maybe becoming a Buddhist or Christian, and never learning the ceremonies from their fathers. This has been a huge change in South Korean indigenous spiritual culture since the war. Now, the older masters may hold one or two performances annually, but most performances are in the northern style now dominating South Korea.

After the first truly democratic president was elected in 1987, oppression of Korea’s tradi-

tional religion lifted. Annual public ceremonies to venerate the mountain spirit were revived, with explicit themes of national identity, protection, and re-unification. In April 1998, I was among several hundred attending the first Gyeryong-san Sanshin-je (Rooster Dragon Mountain Spirit Ceremony/Festival). It was held Friday night through Sunday afternoon, during the third full moon of the lunar year, near the Jungak-dan (central peak altar) San-shin shrine at the rear of Shinwon-sa Buddhist Temple.

During this long celebration, Buddhist, Neo-Confucian, northern-Shamanist and southern-Shamanist public rituals for the Gyeryong Sanshin goddess (and the Geum-gang River which flows around these mountains) were consecutively held in full-dress splendor and with sincere religiosity. Very few non-Korean participants have ever been seen there. My presence and participation drew curious but welcoming reactions from the crowd, from the monks of Shinwon-sa Temple and the ritual leaders.

The events were organized by U-seong Shim, a highly-respected cultural leader in South Chungcheong Province and the founder/curator of the Gongju City Folk Museum. He told me that he regards all the mountain spirits as “sons or daughters of Dan-gun” and thus ancestral spirits for all Koreans. He said that the Gyeryong Sanshin is one of the most powerful, and this large-scale, multi-religion spectacle was designed to foster national unity and Korea’s prosperity. The ceremony has been held annually for the three decades since, and has become my favorite event in this country.

There were a half-dozen performances that weekend by well-known shamans, representing various different regional styles of Korean shamanism. Such performances are very colorful and dynamic, and the rituals of this festival are presented in a style that is authentic and sincere, focused on actually venerating the mountain spirit, not just a staged cultural observance for tourists.

The Neo-Confucian and Buddhist rituals for the mountain spirit are each held at their own separate shrine near Shinwon-sa. There is also a Neo-Confucian ritual for the spirit of the Geum River, at the riverside altar a 40-minute drive away.

There is an unfortunate logistical problem for these ceremonies in most years, because celebrants want to do the ceremonies on the correct date, which is the day after the third full moon (lunar date 3/16). The date is often on a weekday (Tuesday, May 1 in 2018). Because of the timing, few are able to attend except for some local women. This tends to spoil the spirit of multi-religious veneration of this mountain.

In the years when the lunar date falls on a Saturday or Sunday, the ceremonies can be consecutively arranged on the same dates. As a tourism professor, I have advocated that the associations in order to hold them on the weekend every year, or at least to hold some duplicate ceremonies during the weekend festival, but so far, this is not being done.

After Dr. Shim’s death in 2005, the Gyeryong-san Sanshin-je Festival lost some of its official support, and was steadily reduced in scale, and is not well known outside the local region. I hope that it will be revived to its former size, and that other regions will hold ceremonies after this model at other mountains on the Korean peninsula.

As of last year (2018), Shim’s son and other aficionados began some activities to revive the festival, and invited me to bring a busload of fortunate international residents there to experience it on the Sunday of the festival. They wanted more international attendees, to give it more prestige and media attention,

There were only a few events we could see, due to the scheduling protocol I described. We compensated late in the afternoon by visiting the amazing Golden Dragon Hermitage, a Shamanic-Buddhist compound next to a waterfall deep in a gorge behind the festival area, one of my personal favorite sacred sites. ●

Author’s note: We are likely to rent a bus to attend Gyeryong Sanshin Festival in 2019, to be held April 19 through 21. We are fortunate that the day after the third full moon (Lunar 3/16) falls on Saturday April 20 in 2019, so all the major Buddhist, Neo-Confucian and Shamanic ceremonies can be held on the same weekend. The tour will likely include one overnight. To find out more about this tour, please email me: mntnwolf@yahoo.com

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Local Festivals

Visitors traveling to Gurye in October are in for a colorful cultural treat. Gurye’s vibrant **Dongpyeonje Sori** festival features renowned Korean traditional music performers from across the country performing on stage and off for three days. Between March to April succession of **flower festivals** awaits you. Plum and sansuyu flowers are in full bloom in March and are followed by cherry blossoms and royal azaleas.