

Will the Dormant Volcano Erupt Again? Mt. Paektu and Contemporary Sino-Korean Relations

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Abstract

Mt. Paektu/Changbai is a 9,000 foot volcano that straddles the border of North Korea and China. As the source of the Korean foundation myth, it has become a potent symbol of both North and South Korean nationalism. Historically, Sino-Korean border demarcation generally followed the Tumen and Yalu Rivers converging on Mt. Paektu. The Sino-North Korean border agreement in 1962, however, is still disputed by South Korea and contentions over territorial jurisdiction as well as cultural claims to the region have generated tensions between China and the two Koreas for decades. How significant is this national symbol in shaping foreign relations on the Korean peninsula? Will it become an issue on the path towards Korean reunification?

Key words: Mt. Paektu, nationalism, Sino-Korean relations, border agreements, Northeast Project

Introduction: The Summits, 2018

On April 27, 2018, the future of the Korean peninsula attracted world attention. For the first time in eleven years, the leaders of North and South Korea met in person and Kim Jong Un became the first North Korean leader to set foot on South Korean soil since the 1953 Armistice of the Korean War. In a peace ceremony on the southern side of the P’anmunjŏm Joint Security Area, they planted a pine tree together using soil from Mt. Paektu,

which is located on the northern border with China, and from Mt. Halla in the southernmost province of Jeju (Cheju) Island. The planting symbolized the dream of a unified Korea.



Tree planting ceremony at the North-South Korean Summit of April 2018 (Korea Summit Press Pool)



Map of the Korean peninsula indicating location of Mt. Paektu (Baekdu) and Mt. Halla (Metropolitan Museum of Arts)

On May 26, 2018, the two leaders convened for the second time on the northern side of P’anmunjŏm, warmly embracing “like a routine meeting between friends” as South Korean President Moon Jae-in put it. The meeting room where they talked for the next several hours had a large folding screen in the background showing the beautiful landscape of Heaven Lake atop Mt. Paektu, the Korean nation’s mythical birthplace. The heavy deployment of Mt. Paektu imagery at the inter-Korean summits is indicative of the significance that its craggy peaks and the glistening azure waters of Heaven Lake hold for both Koreas.



First couples of North Korea (left) and South Korea (right) in front of Heaven Lake (Korea Summit Press Pool)

The symbolic importance of Mt. Paektu was maximized during the third inter-Korean summit from September 18-20, 2018 as Moon Jae-in became the first South Korean president to travel to Mt. Paektu. The leaders, accompanied by their wives, rode a cable car to the peak of Mt. Paektu. Gazing upon the waters of Heaven Lake, Moon told Kim that even though many South Koreans had visited Mt. Paektu by way of China, “I resolved that I wouldn’t go through China. No matter what, I would ascend Mt. Paektu on our soil. Finally I have fulfilled my wish.” Moon was alluding to a longing among many South Koreans to climb the Korean slope of Mt. Paektu, a dream that is often associated with the goal of Korean reunification.

Mt. Paektu (*Paektusan* in Korean and *Chángbáishān* in Chinese) is a 9,000 foot volcano that straddles the border of North Korea and China. Korea’s foundation myth claims that its founder, Tan’gun, was born here more than four thousand years ago. In modern times, Mt. Paektu became the epicenter of North Korean ideology to highlight the legitimacy of the regime. The association with Mt. Paektu indirectly portrays its leader as the heirs of Tan’gun. It also holds symbolic significance to many South Koreans for its association with several religious movements. Mt. Changbai has also been the focal point of

Chinese policies aimed at absorbing the region into the People's Republic (PRC), such as the "Revitalizing Northeast China" Project (*zhenxing dongbei*) which sought to revive the regional economy as well as to reinforce Chinese identity in the region (Lee 2005: 250). But how much power does this national symbol possess in shaping foreign relations on the Korean peninsula and in Sino-Korean relations?

To answer this question, we trace the history of territorial agreements surrounding Mt. Paektu and review contemporary territorial claims through the lens of Korean national identity to show how the myth, historical memories, propaganda, and cultural representations of this mountain could have important ramifications for future Sino-Korean relations, particularly if Korean reunification becomes a distinct possibility.

Tan'gun Foundation Myth, Mt. Paektu, and Ethnic Nationalism

According to the earliest known text on Tan'gun, *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (Samgukyusa, 1281 AD), he was born atop Mt. T'aebaek - an ancient name for Mt. Paektu - in 2333 BC. The offspring of the son of heaven (Hwan'ung) and a she-bear turned into a woman (Ungnyŏ), Tan'gun descended the slopes and went on to establish the first Korean kingdom of Kojosŏn. Given popular belief in Mt. Paektu as Tan'gun's birthplace, it became an important symbol of modern Korean nationhood. In the centuries following the publication of *Memorabilia*, however, the Tan'gun foundation myth did not hold the same significance for Koreans that it would develop during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Aside from its significance in geomancy, Mt. Paektu's popularity paled in comparison to other Korean mountains and fell out of favor during the late Chosŏn dynasty due to critique of geomantic practices by Neoconfucian officialdom (Schmid 2002: 221).

The Tan'gun myth was revived by nationalist scholars and Korean independence activists, such as Sin Ch'aeho (1880-1936) and Na Ch'ŏl (1863-1916) just prior to Japanese colonization. Sin Ch'aeho played a key role in forming a blood-based, ethno-nationalist historiography which maintained that the Korean nation could be traced from the progenitor, Tan'gun (Schmid 2002: 181-182). Beginning in 1906, the image of Tan'gun visibly shifted from a mythical to an historical figure in the Korean public psyche as history textbooks described him as a human who had actually lived (Em 2014: 79-80). Sin insisted that Korea must "demand the return of the old territory of Koguryŏ and revive the glory of Tan'gun."²

In 1909, Na Ch'ŏl brought the myth full circle by founding Taejonggyo, the first religion that worshipped Tan'gun. Na believed that a religion based on the Korean progenitor would bind the country together through a shared history and spirit, creating resistance against encroaching Japanese imperialism. Taejonggyo's strong association with the Korean independence movement and fervent evangelism contributed to its rise in popularity, and its membership was estimated to be nearly 400,000 followers by 1920 (Kim 2014; Yi 2016: 54). It is also Taejonggyo that started celebrating Tan'gun's presumed birthday on October 3, which became known as National Foundation Day (*Kaech'ŏnjŏl*) and was recognized by the Korean Provisional Government in exile during Japanese colonial rule. Tan'gun worship, intertwined with ethno-nationalist historiography, seared a sacred image of Mt. Paektu in the Korean mind.

National division, internecine war, and ongoing conflict between North and South Korea have not dampened the fervor of ethnic nationalism surrounding Tan'gun and Mt. Paektu.³ In the south, various attempts were made to build Tan'gun's presence in the public consciousness soon after the establishment of the Republic of Korea (ROK). An official calendar (*Tan'gi*) was

created based on the reported birth of Tan'gun, and continuously used until 1961. In addition, National Foundation Day was officially designated as a national holiday in 1949 and continues to be observed as a public holiday in South Korea. While not a public holiday in North Korea, National Foundation Day is usually marked by a ceremony held at the Tan'gun Mausoleum outside of Pyongyang.⁴

Mt. Paektu as South Korea's Sacred Mountain

Mt. Paektu, along with the Tan'gun myth, remains a powerful symbol of the ultimate goal of national reunification. The first line of the South Korean national anthem enshrines Mt. Paektu in the mind of the public by portraying it as the upper reaches of the ROK's legitimate territory.⁵ Although the majority of South Koreans today seem to acknowledge that Tan'gun is a mythical, symbolic figure, the opposite might have been true in the last century.⁶ Promoted by the government and politicians, the ethnic nationalist fervor surrounding Tan'gun created the fringe history (*chaeya sahak*) movement.⁷ Fantasizing about Korea's glorious ancient history, this movement is "distinguished by the irrational obsession with national power and territory" to be expanded over Manchuria and beyond. The attraction of such nationalistic "pseudo-history" remains strong today across the political spectrum, "embraced by left and right as well as conservative and progressive alike" (Ki 2017: 220, 236).

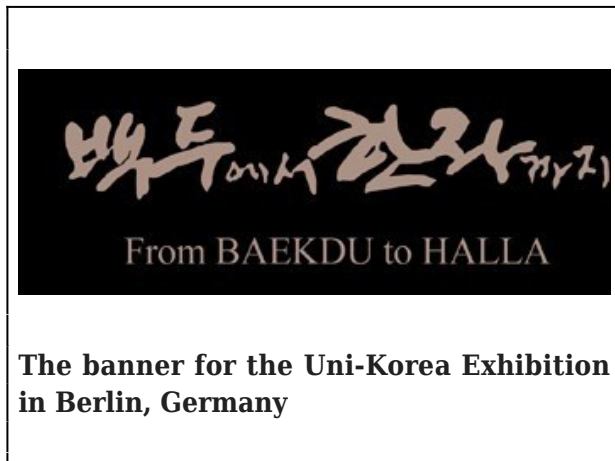
As Cold War tensions relaxed internationally and the struggle for democracy intensified domestically, South Korean reverence for Mt. Paektu increased. References to Mt. Paektu as "the national sacred mountain" (*uri minjogŭi yŏngsan*) began to crop up in newspapers in the 1980s (Ten 2017: 38). This belief, compounded by the fact that access to Mt.

Paektu was not possible for South Koreans during the Cold War, contributed to an increased longing for the spiritual home of the Korean people. The establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the ROK and the PRC in 1992 provided the opportunity for South Koreans to travel to Mt. Paektu via China, allowing South Koreans to directly engage with the national symbol for the first time. Since 2011, the annual number of tourists visiting Mt. Paektu from the Chinese side has passed the one million mark and continues to increase. In 2016, Nearly 80% of foreign tourists to Mt. Paektu on the Chinese side were reportedly from South Korea.⁸

Mt. Paektu also began to appear frequently in South Korean television broadcasts. For example, the cast of the popular reality-variety show, *Two Days and One Night* (Ilbagiil), traveled to Mt. Paektu in 2008. As the group gazed upon Heaven Lake with tears streaming down their face, a cast member stated, "Mt. Paektu is the spiritual essence of the Korean people." And "Tokto is Korean territory and Mt. Paektu is ours, too" was displayed across the scene.⁹ Each cast member then poured bottles of water that were collected from regions across South Korea into Heaven Lake, illustrating the hope that all the waters of Korea will one day be reunified. A small broadcast segment explained that the national waters needed to be disguised in regular bottles, as Chinese officials forbade Korean nationalistic activities such as singing the national anthem and waving the Korean flag within the vicinity of Mt. Paektu. The televised stunt appealed to the emotional attachment many South Koreans felt toward Mt. Paektu, highlighting their sorrow for the 'lost' territory.

Similarly, South Korean First Lady Kim Jung-sook also furnished a bottle filled with water from Mt. Halla for Moon Jae-in to take water from Heaven Lake during their visit on September 20, 2018. This ritual resonates with a common slogan in Korea: "from Mt. Paektu to

Mt. Halla (*Paektusanesŏ hallasankkaji*)." The phrase, enshrined in the South Korean national anthem, evokes images of national reunification and is used to spur inter-Korean cooperation. For example, a Uni-Korean art exhibition entitled, "From Baekdu [Paektu] to Halla," was held in 2015. This exhibition, held in both Seoul and Pyongyang, displayed the work of both North and South Korean artists "to sustainably express the connectedness of both parts of Korea."¹⁰



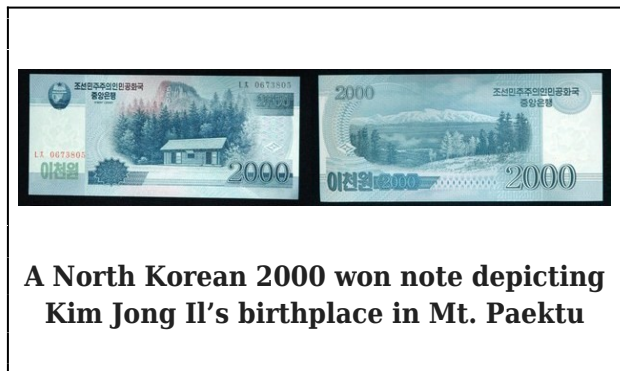
The banner for the Uni-Korea Exhibition in Berlin, Germany

Taekwondo, the Korean martial art, is governed by World Taekwondo (formerly the World Taekwondo Federation) in South Korea, an organization created by the ROK government. World Taekwondo requires its students to learn various forms (*p'umsae*), one of which is called "T'aebaek," referring to Mt. Paektu's old name. According to the World Taekwondo website, T'aebaek is the "name of a mountain meaning 'bright mountain', where Tan'gun, the founder of the nation of Korean people, reigned over the country", and "has been typically known as the cradle of Korean people".¹¹ Naming a form after such a national symbol is hardly surprising for the governing body of the national martial art. Many South Korean children attend taekwondo classes and by 2018, nearly 8.8 million South Koreans had earned black belts, with 9,699 official World Taekwondo studios operating in South Korea.¹² A significant number of South Koreans are therefore exposed to this training which

reinforces the strong link between Tan'gun and Mt. Paektu.

North Korea's "Sacred Mountain of Revolution"

North Korea has used the myth of Tan'gun and Mt. Paektu to bolster the legitimacy of the Kim ruling family. Unlike their South Korean counterpart, North Koreans are taught that Tan'gun existed as a historical figure, and he takes on a larger than life role in the Kim family saga. The peaks of Mt. Paektu are featured across North Korean propaganda, from news reports to paintings of the leaders. The Kim family has anchored itself to Mt. Paektu. Its rugged slopes are depicted as the place where Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese guerrilla fighters fought valiantly against the Japanese imperialists before founding North Korea. Indeed, the historic raid on Poch'ŏnbo from his Mt. Paektu hideout in June 1937 made Kim Il Sung famous throughout colonial Korea (Suh 1995: 34-36).



A North Korean 2000 won note depicting Kim Jong Il's birthplace in Mt. Paektu

North Korean propaganda further underlines the Kim family connection through the "Paektu bloodline (*hyŏlt'ong*)" to highlight its strong ties to the location. According to official North Korean historiography, Kim Il Sung's son and successor Kim Jong Il was born in a small cabin on Mt. Paektu in the midst of a snowstorm (Ahn 2007).¹³ The area is now a key site for North Koreans on state-sponsored pilgrimages to Mt. Paektu, which is referred to as "the sacred

mountain of revolution.” Upon the death of Kim Jong Il in 2011, the Korea Central News Agency described a series of supernatural occurrences at Mt. Paektu:

On the morning of Dec. 17 layers of ice were broken on Lake Chon [Heaven Lake] on Mt. Paektu, shaking the lake with big noise... Kim Jong Il's writings "Mt. Paektu, holy mountain of revolution. Kim Jong Il." Carved on the mountain, in particular, was a bright glow... A Manchurian crane was seen flying round the statue three times before alighting on a tree. The crane stayed there for quite a long while with its head drooped and flew in the direction of Pyongyang at around 22:00.¹⁴

The current, third-generation leader Kim Jong Un is referred to as the “Prince of Paektu”. On several occasions, he was praised by the state news media for having hiked up Mt. Paektu in order to view Heaven Lake. The Kim family’s close association with Mt. Paektu is used to portray them as direct descendants of Tan’gun himself, imbued with a mystical quality as the leaders of the Korean nation.¹⁵ In the words of North Korean defector, Sungju Lee, “in my imagination, Kim Il Sung was a descendant of Tan’gun. He was part god, too” (Lee and McClelland 2016: 7). North Korean propaganda highlights images of Mt. Paektu in art and repeatedly references it in official texts. Events are regularly held to strengthen the link between the ruling party in Pyongyang and Mt. Paektu. For example, a relay race between Mt. Paektu and Pyongyang was held in 2012.¹⁶

North Korea created the International Taekwondo Federation to rival South Korea’s World Taekwondo. Students of North Korean style taekwondo are required to learn patterns (*t’ŭl*) equivalent to South Korean forms

(*p’umsae*).¹⁷ The first pattern that students learn is called “Ch’ŏnji”, whose meaning is ‘heaven and earth’ (天地) interpreted as ‘the beginning of the universe’. Interestingly, it is also a homonym of Heaven Lake (天池). The second pattern is “Tan’gun”, named after the mythical founder of the Korean nation. Learning such concepts as a part of daily training reinforces the sacred importance of both Tan’gun and Mt. Paektu among practitioners of North Korean taekwondo.

Mt. Paektu/Changbai: Overlapping Spheres of Chosŏn and Qing

As a result of the increasing reverence for Mt. Paektu, many Koreans believe that Mt. Paektu is their ancestral land. Some contemporary Chinese scholars, however, insist that “early Korean kings did not regard Changbaishan [Mt. Paektu] as the birthplace of their first ancestor. The Koreans called Changbaishan ‘mountain in foreign lands’” (Shen and Xia 2013: 3).¹⁸ Whatever the status of Mt. Paektu might have been in pre-modern Korean minds, the Sino-Korean border along the region has a history of overlapping territorial claims and trade, several rounds of border negotiations, foreign incursion, and the division of the peninsula. All of this has generated clashing views over the right to control the region.

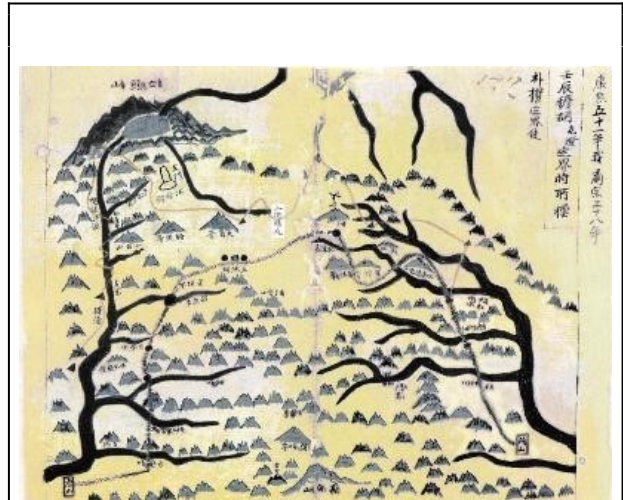
North Korea and China share a 1,334 km long border. At first glance, the border between the two countries appears clearly delineated along the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. However, the ostensibly distinct aquatic border belies an ambiguously defined borderland that has been subject to continuous investigation and renegotiation between Chinese and Korean authorities from the eighteenth century to well after the founding of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948. Sino-Korean border negotiations centered around the Mt. Paektu/Changbai region, from which both the Yalu and the Tumen originate. There is an

extensive literature on the history of Sino-Korean border negotiations (Schmid 2002; Lee 2017; Kim 2017; Song 2018).

Beginning in 1459, the Royal Court of Korea's Chosŏn Dynasty banned settlements in the regions south of the Yalu to prevent interaction and conflict with the Jurchen population across the river. However, shifting Sino-Korean relations ultimately tested the stability of this borderland as human migration and trade patterns would call it into question. The dawn of the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty resulted in the designation of the Mt. Paektu/Changbai region as the Manchu birthplace. With its rich natural resources, the region became a pillar of both Korean and Chinese trade. Such resources included sable, pearls, leather, and most importantly, ginseng. Ginseng was a highly profitable commodity and the desire to harvest and sell it propelled Korean and Chinese traders to traverse the region, testing the border structure. Activity in the forested and riverside regions brought Chinese and Koreans into greater contact, and increasingly, conflict. The value of the ginseng trade demanded a resolution to the increasing tension in the region.

The Mukedeng Stele and the Tumen River

In 1712, Qing Emperor Kangxi dispatched his emissary Mukedeng to Chosŏn territory and the two sides jointly designated the border. Korean officials were concerned that China might suggest a border far south of the Yalu and Mt. Paektu, resulting in a huge loss of Korean territory. The Korean emissary Pak Kwŏn insisted that the border be set at the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. Mukedeng agreed and climbed Mt. Paektu to identify the sources of the rivers and draw the boundaries. As a result, the Mukedeng Stele - or Mt. Paektu Demarcation Stele (*Paektusan chŏnggyebi*) in Korean terminology - was erected to establish a Sino-Korean border accepted by both sides.



A map of the 1712 Sino-Korean border with the Mukedeng Stele¹⁹

With the established border, Korean-Chinese commerce expanded and the number of residents grew throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Counteracting the surge of Korean migration, in 1881 the Qing Dynasty reversed its policy banning Han Chinese migration to Manchuria, the sacred homeland of the Manchus. However, this did not stop Koreans from becoming the majority on both banks of the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. Korean residents petitioned Chosŏn that the border should be redrawn farther north because the name Tumen (土門) on the Mukedeng Stele referred to a tributary of China's Songhua River rather than the river dividing Korean-Chinese-Russian territories.²⁰

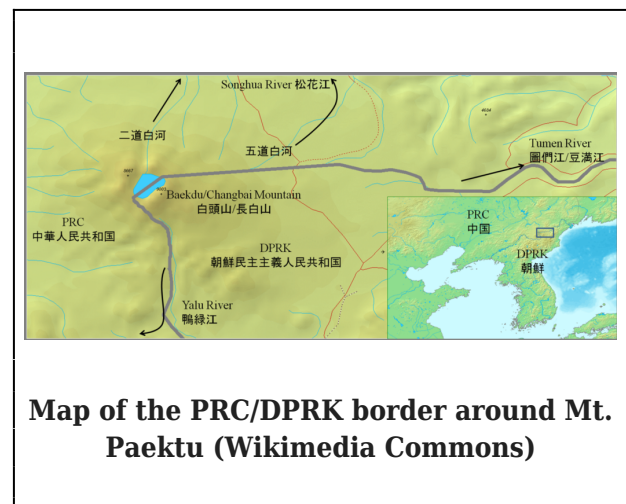
By 1883, Chosŏn authorities took up this expansionist argument by Korean residents in the region. The Sino-Korean border had grown in significance for Korea as the region was transformed from a frontier buffered by zones of isolation, to a crucial commercial region. Chosŏn maintained the new official position through border negotiations that began in April of 1887. The Chinese were hesitant to place much emphasis on the 1712 negotiations as all existing documentation had either been lost or

had rotted away. Instead, they proposed a new border marker at a Tumen River watershed further south within already existing Chosŏn territory, an offer which Korean officials rejected. Negotiations ended without a settlement, never to be reopened. The symbolic value of Mt. Paektu was not a major issue in the border negotiations between Chosŏn and the Qing. The Mukedeng Stele was located well south of Heaven Lake, requiring Chosŏn to cede Heaven Lake and several peaks of Mt. Paektu to the Qing in 1712. However, Chosŏn’s expansion in the 1880s resulted in Korean claims to a large portion of Manchuria, including the entire Mt. Paektu region. Neither Korean residents nor officials in charge of border negotiations with China appeared to be concerned about where Heaven Lake would be located. This seems to corroborate the aforementioned Chinese scholars’ claim that Chosŏn regarded Mt. Paektu as a “mountain in a foreign land”. But the actual story is far more complicated as the Chosŏn kings and officials went back and forth about worshipping Mt. Paektu as a sacred mountain before finally deciding to do so in 1786 (Kwon 2010; Song 2018: 65). This formal recognition of Mt. Paektu laid the groundwork for future generations of Koreans to explore and expand on both the myth and meaning of the mountain and for the continuing Sino-Korean dispute over its territoriality.

The Kando Convention and the Sino-DPRK Border Treaty

Japanese colonial rule over Korea had profound ramifications for the Sino-Korean border and its contemporary interpretations. Following Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), Japan’s imperial gaze traveled north towards Manchuria and accordingly, the Tumen River and its northern environs (K: *Kando* C: *Jiandao*) became of critical importance to Japan as it realized that valuable

concessions could be gained from China if they supported China in the Sino-Korean border dispute. Japan and China convened in September of 1909 to sign the Kando Convention, which demarcated the border along Mt. Paektu. It closely followed the Chinese proposal from the 1880s that Korea had rejected. Heaven Lake, along with sixteen peaks on Mt. Paektu, were subsumed into Chinese territory. In exchange, Japan received rail construction rights throughout the region, which ultimately paved the way for its invasion of Manchuria in 1931.



Map of the PRC/DPRK border around Mt. Paektu (Wikimedia Commons)

The Sino-Korean border was renegotiated following Japan’s defeat in World War II and its withdrawal from the Korean Peninsula. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the DPRK and the PRC compared historical sources to establish a clear boundary. The DPRK insisted on scrapping the Kando Convention. After several rounds of high-level talks, the Sino-DPRK border treaty was concluded on October 12, 1962, however, details concerning Mt. Paektu and the Yalu/Tumen Rivers were not revealed to the public. The two parties agreed to divide Mt. Paektu along Heaven Lake, with a little over half of its waters going to the DPRK. This means that China ceded nearly 280 square kilometers of territory as defined by the Kando Convention to North Korea. These border

negotiations between the PRC and the DPRK took place during a period of intense Sino-Soviet conflict. Kim Il Sung masterfully took advantage of the conflict between his two powerful allies to maximize North Korean interests, thereby won significant territorial concessions from China (Shen 2012: 59; Lee 2017: 55).

South Korea's initial response to the Sino-DPRK border agreement was minimal due to the undisclosed nature of the agreement. However, on September 16, 1983, fifty-five National Assemblymen submitted a resolution proclaiming that the entirety of Heaven Lake is Korean territory.²¹ This assertion could develop into a serious international issue should a unified Korean government reopen the question of the 1962 Sino-DPRK agreement. This is not an implausible scenario as the ROK has long held that the Sino-Korean border issue has remained unresolved since the failure of nineteenth century negotiations between Chosŏn and Qing China.

The recent brouhaha in South Korea over the Kando Convention is a case in point. In 2004, ROK Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon declared that the Kando Convention was null and void as it had been made by Japan usurping Korean sovereignty.²² This statement came out in the midst of tensions surrounding China's Northeast Project (described below). However, on the day that such statements and evidence were to be presented to the National Assembly, they were suddenly recalled and the Kando portion was expunged from the documents.²³ This decision was due to South Korean reluctance to spark a diplomatic row with China over the potentially explosive northern border issue. The South Korean government continues to question the legitimacy of the border agreements, but thus far it has taken great pains to prevent these concerns from inhibiting peaceful Sino-ROK relations which have flourished since the 1980s.

China's Northeast Project and the Sino-Korean History Wars

China launched the Northeast Asian History Project (hereafter 'Northeast Project') in 2002 with the proclaimed goal of deploying academic research to restore historical facts "distorted by some countries' institutions and scholars" and "to further maintain the stability of the Northeast Frontier Region" of China.²⁴ Many South Koreans, however, view the Northeast Project as a thinly-veiled attempt to claim political control over North Korea, should the situation on the Korean Peninsula change. The scope of this project includes territory under the jurisdiction of the Kando Convention and the modern Sino-Korean border, which had long been at the heart of discord between China and the two Koreas. Specific points of contention were the borders of contemporary Chinese provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning, and the ancient kingdoms of Koguryŏ and Parhae.

Unlike the ROK, the DPRK has been silent on the modern border issue, presumably to avoid risking the loss of territorial gains from the 1962 border agreement with the PRC. This is not a baseless conjecture given internal Chinese criticism of territorial concessions made in the 1962 border treaty (Pinilla 2004; Shen 2012). When it comes to the "history wars", however, North Korea started battling China as far back as the early 1960s when a Sino-DPRK joint archeological excavation project was halted over the question of whether Koguryŏ's heritage belongs to Korean or Chinese history. As the self-proclaimed legitimate heir of Koguryŏ, the DPRK sternly rebuked China's repeated claims to the ancient kingdom; on November 27, 2003, at the height of the Northeast Project controversy, the DPRK condemned Chinese claims as "a pathetic attempt to manipulate history for its own interests."²⁵

The tension generated by the Northeast Project spurred unprecedented inter-Korean cooperation on border research. In 2005, South Korea's Koguryŏ Research Foundation led a team of North and South Korean scholars to Mt. Paektu to conduct a joint investigation over where the "true" border marker lay. Foundation president, Kim Chŏngbae, stated that the original 1712 border marker - the remains of the Mukedeng Stele - had been found near a North Korean army guard post about 4 km southeast of Heaven Lake, contradicting Chinese research claims that the original location of the Stele was 20 kilometers south.²⁶

Further spurred by their desire to strengthen ties between the border regions and Mt. Paektu/Changbai, Chinese authorities launched the "Mt. Changbai Culture" (*Chángbáishān wénhuà*) campaign elevating the mountain to a key cultural asset of Chinese culture and history (Yoon 2013; 2015). Mt. Paektu/Changbai has been accorded many titles befitting its status including a UN biosphere nature reserve, a top tourist destination, with Heaven Lake rated as the fifth most beautiful lake in China (Yoon 2015: 199). In the first six months of 2016, 468,000 tourists traveled to Mt. Paektu/Changbai.²⁷ The Chinese campaign to change the narrative on Mt. Paektu/Changbai and shape it into a valuable asset has met with success domestically.

The "Mt. Changbai Culture" campaign involves sinification of the region. In Yanbian Province with its large ethnic Korean population, the name Mt. Paektu is no longer used; the mountain is referred to exclusively as Mt. Changbai. Any signs or advertisements incorporating Paektu in their name are refused registration and already existing contracts are abruptly cancelled (Yoon 2015: 209). The Korean naming for geographical features is swiftly erased from all maps of the region. Careful to identify ethnic Koreans as Chinese citizens, Chinese authorities have deliberately

closed all avenues through which these ethnic minorities may identify with the Korean nation. Korean ethnic minorities are no longer allowed to hold dual Chinese/Korean citizenship, and the government barred the establishment of a Korean consulate in Jilin. The changing Chinese position over citizenship is likely a result of growing concern about the possibility of Korean reunification and a scenario in which growing Korean nationalism will lead to demands for Chinese territory in the border region. Documents released by the Jilin provincial government in 2007 speculate on potential actions that the two Koreas might take on Mt. Paektu/Changbai (Yoon 2015: 207). Interestingly, this action came at a time when Sino-Korean relations were relatively good. Trade between the two countries boomed and China was deeply involved in summits held between North and South Korea in 2000 and 2007.

In this light, the Northeast Project and other considerable efforts by the PRC to change the way that the Chinese - particularly ethnic Koreans in China - as well as the international community think about the region, can be seen as indicative of possible future territorial contention with a unified Korea. The domestic pursuit of such Chinese campaigns, however, has been met with increasing suspicion from the two Koreas. The tensions over Mt. Paektu/Changbai indicate that the issue might come to a head, particularly in the event that Korean reunification becomes a realistic prospect.

Volcano Reactivated? Sino-Korean Culture Wars over Mt. Paektu/Changbai

After the U.S.-China summit in April 2017, U.S. President Trump casually made the following statement in a media interview: "[Chinese President Xi Jinping] then went into the history of China and Korea. Not North Korea, Korea. And you know, you're talking about thousands

of years... and many wars. And Korea actually used to be a part of China".²⁸ This statement incited rage in South Korea where commentators suspected a Chinese attempt to undermine Korean sovereignty and rewrite history in Chinese perspective. The Korean public took the Chinese government's silence in the face of Trump's remarks as proof that Xi had indeed rehashed claims from the Northeast Project. Commentators noted that these assertions were made as the North Korean situation took a major turn, creating the possibility of a future Korean reunification, a situation with potential implications concerning Chinese territorial ambitions. This belief was furthered when one news source claimed, "Korea will have to fight with China over the history problem as they had to when Japan asserted that Dokdo Island was its territory".²⁹ The parallels drawn between the two controversies could not be clearer. Koreans feel seriously threatened by Chinese historical claims.

In 2006, China filed a claim to Mt. Paektu/Changbai as a UNESCO Natural World Heritage site and expelled all international hotel investors from the region. Additionally, in September 2012, the cash-strapped North Korean government turned over development rights of its portion of the mountain (25%) to China. From this point on, North Korean territory was enfolded into the developing Chinese tourism industry (Yoon 2015: 200). In the years since China's launch of the Northeast Project, moments of tension have repeatedly cropped up over jurisdiction and territoriality of Mt. Paektu/Changbai.

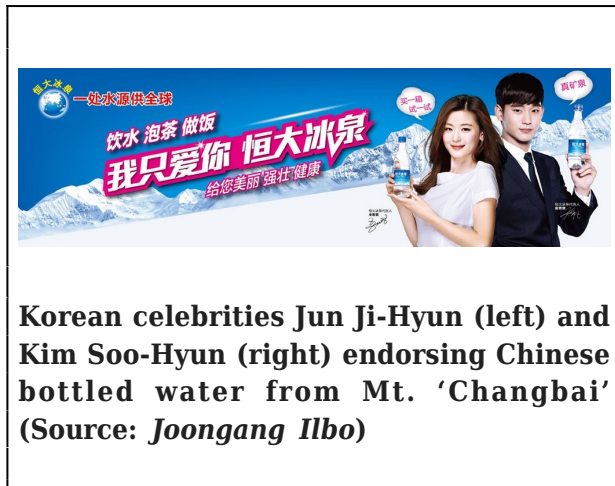
One of the first rifts occurred during the 2007 Asian Winter Games in Changchun, the capital of Jilin Province. South Korean media criticized Chinese activity in the Mt. Paektu/Changbai region, highlighting the techniques which China employed to stake ownership to the mountain and its environs. For example, the official guidebook of the event addresses the

mountain only by its Chinese name, Changbai, omitting any reference to its Korean name, Paektu. Mt. Changbai played a central role in the Winter Games opening ceremony; the torch lighting ceremony was held at the peak overlooking Heaven Lake. Such a visual display seemed geared towards establishing Chinese claims to the land. China also proposed to host the 2018 Winter Olympics in the Mt. Changbai region. Shi Guoxiang, the head of the Mt. Changbai Development Committee, made a statement that portrayed the mountain as China's Alps.³⁰

What transformed these rifts into a media spectacle was a spontaneous Korean protest over the perceived Chinese encroachment during the same events. When the South Korean women's short track team won the silver medal, they mounted the podium at the award ceremony and lifted up signs on which were written "Mt. Paektu is our territory!" China's response was swift, arguing that such an action was political, a violation of the rules of the Asian Winter Games. The South Korean government too, quickly downplayed the incident as an action by the individual players and not representative of ROK policy. This incident highlighted the emotion that the Korean public has invested in Mt. Paektu. Despite government attempts to quell any sort of action that would inflame relations with China by contesting China's partial ownership of the territory, some South Korean citizens protested, setting off a large public debate on Mt. Paektu territoriality (Ahn 2007).

The Mt. Paektu/Changbai controversy again boiled over in 2014, set off by an incident involving celebrity advertisement. Korean pop culture (*hallyu*) top stars Kim Soo-Hyun (Kim Suhyŏn) and Jun Ji-Hyun (Chŏn Chihyŏn) signed an endorsement deal for a Chinese bottled water company, Hengda Bingquan, that sourced its water from the Mt. Paektu/Changbai region. The South Korean public took umbrage at the prospect of Korean

celebrities endorsing bottled water that carried only the Chinese name for the mountain, Changbai, and profited a Chinese company. This was tantamount to a representative of Korean culture endorsing Chinese claims to what they believed to be Korean territory. Kim Soo-Hyun actually held several positions of cultural ambassadorship as an international celebrity, including the Promotional Ambassador for Korean Tourism. Despite calls to cancel the endorsement contracts, both celebrities followed through with the advertisement campaign, generating significant public ire.



Korean celebrities Jun Ji-Hyun (left) and Kim Soo-Hyun (right) endorsing Chinese bottled water from Mt. ‘Changbai’ (Source: Joongang Ilbo)

South Korea’s Legal Issues with the Sino-DPRK Border Agreement

To understand the ramifications of the border issue in the event of Korean reunification involves consideration of political, economic, and social factors that are in flux internationally as well as domestically for both Koreas. The speculative nature of such consideration has not deterred the South Korean government and legal community from engaging in extensive international legal analyses of the Sino-DPRK border agreement. The central premise of this speculation is this: should a reunified Korea emerge in future, the validity of the secret 1962 Sino-DPRK treaty would require review. Neither party has publicly acknowledged its existence and details

of the agreement were not revealed until 1999. Since the treaty was not registered with the UN, it is difficult to know whether its terms would be operative in the event of reunification. Reunification would presumably allow a reunified Korean state to take control of contemporary North Korean territory, and if the 1962 agreement was operative, this would include 55% of Heaven Lake at the peak of Mt. Paektu.

While a majority of legal opinions agrees on honoring the 1962 Sino-DPRK treaty as the best option for a reunified Korea (Lee 2007; Lee 2010; Chŏng 2016; Yi 2017), there is a dissenting opinion that all previous Sino-Korean border agreements - including the Mukedeng Stele, the Kando Convention, and the 1962 treaty - would become null and void and the reunified Korean state should be able to start negotiating borders without preconditions (Kim 2011). Even though this minority view has met with much skepticism, it shows that strong nationalist ideology affects not only public sentiments but also some high-level governmental and expert opinions in South Korea. The enduring influence of ultra-nationalist fringe history in South Korean politics and society shows an underlying desire for territorial ‘reclamation’. In short, collective identity in Korea may seriously impede the flourishing of Sino-Korean relations if the public comes to feel that its history and culture is under attack.

China would certainly not be willing to cede any of the Mt. Paektu/Changbai territory within the PRC to a reunified Korean state. This is evident from decades of policy aimed at both thoroughly assimilating ethnic Koreans into the Chinese population and discouraging any association of the region with the Korean foundation myth or even the Korean name of Mt. Paektu. China would also be concerned that Korean territorial gains on Mt. Paektu/Changbai would solidify Korean ethnic identity, potentially encouraging Chinese

ethnic Koreans to identify with the unified Korean state and weakening Chinese hold over its northeast territory. Additionally, North Korea was only able to broker such an advantageous territorial demarcation with China in 1962 due to the unique political pressures that the PRC faced at the time. Since then, China has developed into a regional and global powerhouse that will be unlikely to make territorial concessions. In 2018, speaking amidst tension with the US surrounding Taiwan, Xi Jinping stated that it would be “absolutely impossible to separate any inch of our great country’s territory from China.”³¹ Any Korean challenge to established territorial boundaries could touch off a serious conflict with China, jeopardizing prospects for regional peace and security through Korean reunification.

Concluding Remarks

Following the division of the Korean peninsula, North and South Korea embarked on different paths. Despite this, Korean ethnic identity spanned boundaries and continued to diffuse into both North and South Korean societies. Tan’gun, the progenitor of the Korean nation, ascended to legendary heights in the Korean psyche and Mt. Paektu developed into a potent symbol of the nation. The possibility that someday, the existing border may require renegotiation in a reunification era has fueled many efforts to resolve the border by China and the controversies raised by the two Koreas over Mt. Paektu and the region’s history. The Northeast Project is particularly interesting in this regard as North and South Korea have found considerable common ground over interpretation of ancient Korean history and collaborated in an effort to counter China’s perceived infringement on Korean history.

For the most part, the Sino-Korean border is clearly demarcated along the Yalu and Tumen rivers. Mt. Paektu lies at the headwaters of the

two rivers, and border negotiations over this mountainous terrain have suffered from ambiguity historically; several attempts were made over the years to renegotiate the border. The modern border was first clearly established through the Kando Convention between China and Japan, and further settled in a 1962 deal between China and North Korea. However, South Korea has periodically contested the legality of previous border agreements. South Korean majority expert legal analysis of previous border arrangements, however, concludes that a reunified Korean state would have scant international legal basis for challenging the currently existing border situation. Thus, barring a fundamental shift in the regional balance of power, a unified Korean state would be likely to pursue the least contentious route and accept the terms of the 1962 Sino-DPRK agreement. Nonetheless, we should not completely dismiss the risks of rising ultra-nationalism, re-ignition of Sino-Korean history wars, and even diplomatic tension given the significance of Mt. Paektu to the Korean nation.

Related articles

Ahn, Yonson. 2006. [“Competing Nationalisms: the Mobilisation of History and Archaeology in the Korea-China wars over Koguryo/Gaogouli.”](#) *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 4(2)

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Notes

¹ Cheng, Jonathan and Jeong, Andrew. "[Kim Reaffirms Korean Denuclearization Push, Looks Forward to Trump Meeting, Moon Says](#)", *The Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2018.

² Sin Ch'aeho cited in Song (2018: 214).

³ For the historical development of Korean ethnic nationalism, see Shin (2006) Part I.

- ⁴ N.A. [“North Korea, How it Celebrates National Foundation Day”](#) (북한 개천절 어떻게 지내나), *Tongil News*, October 2, 2001.
- ⁵ The lyrics translated into English: “Until the day when the East Sea's waters run dry and Mt. Paektu is worn away”; Mt. Paektu reference also appears in the second verse of the North Korean national anthem. Both Korea’s national anthems are entitled ‘Patriotic Song’ (officially romanized into *Aegukka* in the North and *Aegukga* in the South).
- ⁶ This is based on [Gallup Korea’s 2016 opinion poll](#), in which 47% answered Tan’gun as ‘myth’ as opposed to 37% ‘real’. The same poll in 1994 found the reverse, 49% ‘real’ and 39% ‘myth’.
- ⁷ An Hosang, South Korea’s first minister of education and a devout Taejonggyo follower, was the leading figure of this movement. See Shin (2006) for An’s role as the chief ideologue of the Syngman Rhee Administration.
- ⁸ Park, Hee Chun. [“Baekdusan Korean Tourists Rapidly Dropping Out of Fear of North Korean Terror Attack”](#) (백두산 한국인 관광객 급감...北 테러 우려 때문), *YTN News*, Aug 21, 2016.
- ⁹ KBS World TV. [“2 Days and 1 Night Season 1 To Mt. Baekdu! Part 3”](#). Aired July 2008. Tokto refers to the easternmost islets under South Korean sovereign control; it has long been a focal point of territorial dispute with Japan.
- ¹⁰ N.A. [“Uni-Korean Art Exhibition - in Berlin From Baekdu to Halla”](#), *Art Place Berlin: Forum for Contemporary Art*, accessed March 16, 2018.
- ¹¹ N.A. [“Poomsae Taebaek”](#), *Premier Taekwondo Manitoba*, accessed March 16, 2018.
- ¹² N.A. [“Statistics and Policy Materials”](#) (통계 및 정책자료), *World Taekwondo Headquarters*, accessed March 17, 2018.
- ¹³ Kim Jong Il’s purported birth on Mt. Paektu has been widely debunked by historical records outside North Korea. See Armstrong (1995).
- ¹⁴ N.A. [“Natural Wonders Observed”](#), *Korean Central News Agency*, December 19, 2011.
- ¹⁵ For the use of North Korean propaganda to parallel the life of Tan’gun and Kim Il Sung, see Nasr (2014).
- ¹⁶ N.A. [“Youth Carry a Torch Through a Cross-Country Relay”](#) (〈청년절〉 화불을 들고 전국계주한 청년들), *The Choson Sinbo Online*, August 30, 2012.
- ¹⁷ For a comparison of North and South Korean taekwondo forms/patterns, see Jang (2003: 49-50).
- ¹⁸ A US-based Chinese historian provides a balanced reading of Korea’s historical view of Mt. Paektu. See Song (2018: 63-66).
- ¹⁹ Mukedeng himself ordered this map drawn and gave it to Pak Kwŏn. It clearly shows that the stele was located on Mt. Paektu’s foothills to the south of Heaven Lake. See N.A. [“Mt. Baekdu Demarcation Stone”](#), *Northeast Asian History Network*, accessed August 14, 2018.
- ²⁰ The name ‘Tumen’ has a Mongolian/Korean origin. While Koreans have always been rendering it as 豆滿 (K: *Tuman*; C: *Dòumǎn*), the Chosŏn officials clearly understood that it was the same river Mukedeng identified as 土門 (K: *T’omun*; C: *Tǔmén*). The current Chinese rendering is 图们 (*Túmén*).
- ²¹ N.A. [“Territoriality Resolution Submitted: Paektu’s Heaven Lake is our Territory”](#) (領有權決議案 제출 "白頭山 天池는 우리땅), *Donga Ilbo*, September 17, 1983.
- ²² N.A. [“Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon: “Kando Convention is Legally Void”](#) (반기문 장관 "간도 협약 법리적 무효), *SBS News*, October 22, 2004.
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²⁴ Institute of Chinese Borderland Studies, “[Introduction: the Northeast Project](#)” (东北工程简介), *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, accessed on December 1, 2018.

²⁵ Quotation from Kim, Tong-hyung. “North Korea Denounces China's Claim on Goguryeo”. *The Korea Herald*, December 15, 2003. For more about the Sino-Korean “history wars”, see Ahn (2006; 2007; 2008).

²⁶ “Mt. Baekdu Demarcation Stone”

²⁷ Robertson, Mark. “[Chinese tourist trying to avoid the crowds? Try Mount Paektu](#)”, *NK News.org*, July 20, 2017.

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³¹ McDonell, Stephen. “[Xi Jinping warns any attempt to split China is 'doomed to fail'](#)”, *BBC News*, March 20, 2018.