

# China and the Two Koreas Clash Over Mount Paekdu/Changbai: Memory Wars Threaten Regional Accommodation

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## China's Changbai

Mount Paekdu (Korean), meaning “White-Topped Mountain”, or Changbai (Chinese), meaning “Forever White Mountain” straddles the border between North Korea and China. It has long flared as a hot spot in claiming national history, identity and territory involving China, Korea and earlier kingdoms in the region. It has also emerged as a source of contention between China and the two Koreas, North and South. China has recently moved aggressively to develop the Changbai area in Jilin Province on the Chinese side of the border. Plans include economic and infrastructural development including the Mt. Changbai Airport and the Mt. Changbai Eastern Railroad, both under construction. The railroad is a key to linking China’s largest nature preserve to Changchun (1) and to the promotion of domestic and international tourism. China has also filed a claim to make the mountain a UNESCO World Heritage Site.(2) There is even momentum behind a Chinese proposal to hold the Winter Olympic Games there in 2018. In addition, Chinese actions like the torch-lighting ceremony for the 2007 Asian Winter Games atop Mt. Changbai, the naming of schools after the mountain, and military operations in the area have exacerbated tensions between China

and the two Koreas. The Asia Winter Games’ official song includes a paean to Changbai. The pressroom for the Games at Changchun in February 2007 provided pamphlets on Changbai Mount.(3) All these activities lay foundations for claims that the landmark is Chinese.



Chinese students perform a torch-lighting ceremony for the 2007 Asian Winter Games at Lake Tianchi/Chonji (Heavenly Lake) on top of Changbai/Paekdu Mountain



Pamphlets promoting Mount Changbai distributed at the 2007 Asian Winter Games

In 2005, China’s Jilin Provincial Government established the “Committee for Protection, Development and Management of Mt. Changbai,” an organization directly under the provincial government and responsible for management of the mountain.(4) The committee channels foreign and domestic investment toward the building of several new resorts within the mountain that include attractions such as hot springs, ecological sightseeing, a water park, animal and plant appreciation, hot-air balloon sightseeing, a golf course, hunting, horseback riding, and ice and snow sports.(5) The Changbai range also has rich natural resources such as timber and coal deposits, and a variety of ginseng grows there.

Chinese attempts to revitalize the border area speak to multiple agendas with broad regional implications: political, economic, cultural and ethnic. This is the area inhabited by China’s 2.2

million ethnic Korean minority, including the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture. Bolstering the economy through tourism is a means to jumpstart the economy of a region on the China-Korea border. The implications include strengthening loyalty to China among the Korean minority, a particularly important factor in the event either of a North Korean meltdown or significant steps toward Korean unity and reunification. The concern of China’s Central Government relates both to the consequences of a possible future reunification and the present situation in the border area around the mountain where large numbers of North Korean refugees are living, and where the potential exists for territorial boundary disputes. Pan-nationalistic activities by South Koreans aimed at creating a united Great Korea, including Yanbian, a Chinese prefecture, have intensified China’s concerns. (6)



Tourists on Mount Changbai, Jilin

Turning the Paekdu/Changbai area into a major tourist destination has the potential to increase tension between China and Korea. The majority of tourists to date are South Koreans. Indeed, the number of South Korean tourists to China has grown rapidly and they now rank as the second largest source of tourism. Changbai Mountain is among their favorite destinations.(7) Indeed, the area has become a major tourist attraction for both Chinese and Koreans. The homepage of the provincial

Department of Commerce enjoins, “Let’s make more and more foreigners know Changbai Mountain and know Jilin.”(8) Yet the area is not without frictions. In 2006, China ordered a dozen hotels including four run by South Koreans and one by a North Korea-affiliated resident in Japan, operating on its side of Mount Changbai/Paekdu on the border with North Korea, to stop business and leave by the year’s end, as part of its preparations to list the mountain as a UNESCO Natural World Heritage. (9) The conflict is rooted both in Chinese claims to a UNESCO site and to attempts to secure tourist revenue in the area. The World Heritage Project speaks to Chinese claims to historic greatness, with implications for sovereignty, which have sparked angry rejoinders from North and particularly South Korea. Indications of Chinese attempts to monopolize the tourism industry in the area suggest a further source of conflict.

In contrast to recent friction over developing the mountain area, there has been multilateral cooperation among China, North Korea, and Russia on the Sino-Russian-North Korean border area, where the Tumen River Economic Development Program, with UN Development Program (UNDP) support, gained formal recognition in 1995. This Development Program originated with attempts by Jilin province to secure an outlet to the East Sea/Sea of Japan via the Tumen River.(10) Paekdu was in fact part of the UN Tumen River Development Program. This earlier example of multilateral economic cooperation among the three bordering countries stands in sharp contrast to the conflict over the Paekdu/Changbai mountain area.

Clearly, the mountain has importance to both China and Korea, but in different ways. For China, Changbai appears to have economic and strategic value in a potentially volatile border region, but it is also linked to Chinese historical claims to greatness and regional primacy, hence the World Heritage project. For Koreans

in both North and South, Paekdu has profound historical and cultural significance. In an April 19, 2007 interview, Prof. Han Zhenqian of Peking University, said, “Of course Changbai is a sacred mountain range, but for most Chinese people it might be just one of China’s mountains.” What should be noted, however, is its significance for people of the Northeast Provinces as the homeland of the Manchus, who ruled China from 1644-1911 under the Qing dynasty. The mountain range is the mythical birthplace of Bukuri Yongson, ancestor of Nurhaci and the Aisin Goro Imperial family, who were the founders of the Manchu state and the Qing Dynasty. The sacred mountain is prized as the original Manchu homeland. During the Qing, annual rites were held there to celebrate the origins of the ruling dynasty. Changbai can be found in Chinese geographical texts dating back to the *Shanhai jing*, “Classic of Mountains and Seas,” of the 3rd century B.C. to 2nd century common era, a major source of Chinese mythology.(11) The homepage of the Jilin Department of Commerce states, “Changbai Mountain is the symbol and pride of Jilin and also the name card to the world.” (12) A 2005 ‘Report on the Changbai stratagem by North and South Korea’ by a group in Jilin Province, urged promoting and educating people about Changbai as the origin of the Manchu and thus Chinese territory.(13) This claim can be seen in an interview with a guide at the Manchu Museum by KBS (Korean Broadcasting System). The guide states, “The Manchus originated from Changbai . . . while the Koreans came to Changbai later.” (14) Changbai as essential to the Manchu heritage has been promoted by the Jilin provincial government. Thus, Changbai plays a significant role in the regional identity and history of various inhabitants of China’s Northeast, above all, but not limited to, the Manchus.

How do Korean Chinese, especially residents of Yanbian, view this conflict between Korea and China? In a June 8, 2007 interview, Kim Kwang

Il observed: “For us, Changbai is a sacred mountain, too. When I was on the summit of the mountain, our land, Choson, could be seen. China’s claim to Paekdu is related to North Korea’s lack of strength in international forums. So the two Koreas should be reunited so as to become stronger.” Kim, a 3rd generation Korean Chinese who left Yanbian almost 10 years ago to find work in South Africa, visited Mount Paekdu on a field trip organized by the Yanbian authorities 15 years ago. Kim expresses particular concern over the loss of autonomy of ethnic Koreans in Yanbian. This is evident in the Changbai development program. When the Jilin Provincial Government established the “Committee for Protection, Development and Management of Mount Changbai” in May 2005, the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture’s right to manage Mount Paekdu was transferred to Jilin Province. Moreover, when the new highway between Changchun and Tonghua and the airport in Baishan near Mount Paekdu are completed, tourists will be able to reach Baishan directly without passing through Yanbian. That means the significance of the Korean Autonomous Prefecture as the “path to Mt. Baekdu” will be reduced.(15) Consequently, not only will Yanbian benefit little from the Changbai development project, its tourism industry will actually be negatively impacted. It is difficult, however, for Korean Chinese to convey the importance of Mount Paekdu. Thus, for example, Korean Chinese visitors who reach the summit of the mountain, in contrast to some South Korean visitors, do not shout “Hurray” or “Paekdu is our territory”. Nevertheless, Korean Chinese scholars in Yanbian University interviewed by the Donga Daily, a leading South Korean newspaper, all stressed the centrality of Mount Paekdu for ethnic Koreans. But given the sensitivity of the issue in China, the interview with the Donga Daily was anonymous. The scholars urged Koreans to refrain from emotional outbursts which could negatively affect the outcomes.(16) An interesting question is whether Korean

Chinese could act as mediators in the conflict between Korea and China.

### South and North Korea’s Paekdu



Outraged South Korean protestors against China’s claim of Mount Paekdu chew on a Chinese flag.

Some South Korean nationalist groups argue that recent activities on the Chinese side of the border amount to preemptive Chinese claims to the whole mountain as Chinese territory. One significant protest took place during the 2007 Asian Winter Games, which were held in Changchun, in China’s northeast. A group of victorious South Korean women athletes held up hand-printed signs during the award ceremony on January 31, 2007, which proclaimed in Korean “Mount Paekdu is our territory”. Chinese netizens immediately denounced the athletes and released a parody picture on the internet, in which the athletes claim “Mars is our territory” (17) (Picture 6) Chinese sports officials responded that this was a “politically-motivated banner that undermines China’s territorial sovereignty”, and delivered a letter of protest stating that political activities violated the spirit of the Olympics and were banned in the charter of the International Olympic Committee and the Olympic Council of Asia. The head of the Korea Olympic Committee responded by stating that the incident was unplanned and held no political meaning. (18)



South Korean medal-winning athletes triumphantly raise signs reading "Mount Paekdu is our territory!" during the award ceremony at the 2007 Asian Winter Games.



A Chinese netizen's parody mocking the South Korean medalists' claim to Paekdu. It reads "Mars is our territory."

The Paekdu controversy has reignited the China-Korea "history wars" which have raged for five years over the ancient kingdom of Koguryo (Korean)/ Gaogouli (Chinese) (37 B.C. to A.D. 668). As the Paekdu mountain range is located in the old territory of Koguryo and furthermore, Koguryo also considered the mountain sacred, China's claim is deemed tantamount to claiming the ancient kingdom as Chinese territory. Thus, the Paekdu issue relates to the ongoing Koguryo dispute. South Korea's Donga Daily criticized China's recent move, calling it the "Mt. Paekdu Project" and interpreting it as a bid to retrospectively incorporate the territory of Koguryo into Chinese history and territory.(19) In short, the recent "Mount Paekdu Project" is viewed by South Korean nationalists as integral to the

"Northeast Project", a five-year state-funded project launched in 2002.(20) This project deals with various problems related to history, geography and ethnic issues in China's Northeastern provinces, Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning. In re-examining the ancient history of the region, it concludes that the Koguryo kingdom, which Korean nationalists consider an ancestral state of Korea, is an ethnic regime which constitutes a part of China's national history. This has given rise to political tensions between Korea and China.

In part, in response to China's "Mount Paekdu Project" and "Northeast Project", viewed as attempts to claim Korea's ancient history as China's, the South Korean Education Ministry decided in February, 2007 to rewrite history textbooks to highlight the historical significance of ancient Korea by advancing the start of the Bronze Age among the states that ruled the Korean Peninsula to about 2,000 -1,500 B.C.(21) In this and other ways, greater stress is placed on the antiquity of the Korean nation. Moreover, various government branches in Seoul actively deploy images of Paekdu in public places such as the Incheon airport and the Seoul railway station, as well as in government offices. In dealing with the Paekdu issue, the government and South Korean NGOs speak with one voice. South Korean academic and civic groups, as well as the press, have also called for unity of North and South Korea "to preserve (the) sacred mountain". They stress that the two Koreas ought to unite at least when their territorial rights and historical and cultural claims are threatened.(22) In the "history wars" over Koguryo, a shared Korean nationalism has come to the fore to deal with the Changbai/Paekdu dispute.

Some nationalist groups in South Korea go further in claiming the entire mountain as Korean territory. In short, the friction has the potential to grow into a border dispute between China and both Koreas. The border between

North Korea and China was clarified in 1962.(23) The two countries then agreed to share the mountain and the lake that formed in the volcanic crater at its peak, Chonji/Tianchi (Heavenly Lake). Since the Paekdu/Changbai area is considered sacred terrain by nationalists in both Koreas as well as in China, the dispute is not only over “national” land, but also over soil that is historically integral to the very sense of nationhood.

Why have Korean nationalists been so outraged over China’s recent actions? What does Mount Paekdu mean for them? Koreans consider Paekdu, the highest mountain on the Korean Peninsular and in China’s Northeast, to be the ancestral birthplace of their people. The mythical founder of Korea, Tan’gun, is said to have been born here, making Mount Paekdu the site of the Korean national foundation myth. In short, Mount Paekdu is a Korean holy site that is emblematic of the “national spirit”. Thus, China’s claim of Paekdu is interpreted as laying claim to Korea’s ancestry.(24) The geobody of the Korean Peninsula is represented as ranging “from Halla to Paekdu”, two mountains which span the peninsula. Mt. Paekdu is located on the border with China and Mt. Halla is located on Cheju, an island off the southernmost tip of the peninsula. Mount Paekdu appears in the beginning of the South Korean national anthem, “Aegukka” (Song for Love of Country): “Until the East Sea’s waves are dry, and Mt. Paekdu is worn away, God will watch over our land forever! Our country forever!” These points illustrate the overriding cultural and historical significance of Paekdu in Korea.



Lake Chonji/Tianchi (Heavenly Lake) at the Paekdu/Changbai peak (above), and Mount Halla (below)

Paekdu has yet greater significance in North Korea. The present leader, Kim Jong Il’s official biography states that Paekdu is his birthplace.(25) Paekdu is deemed the birthplace of the Korean revolution, for it was there that the young General Kim Il Sung, the father of Kim Jong Il, organized the anti-Japanese guerrillas in the 1930s. And North Korea’s Central Broadcasting Station describes Kim Jong Il as having been “born with Paekdu’s spirit.”(26)



North Korean souvenir stamp issued in 1992 shows Kim Jong Il braving the elements in a winter landscape of Paekdu Mountain.



Kim Il Sung (middle, back row) with soldiers of the Anti-Japanese Army in Manchuria in a 1937 photo.

The 2000 edition of the magazine Democratic People's Republic of Korea describes Paekdu as "the ancestral mountain...the symbol of Korea and the cradle of Korea... In Paekdu forests the Great Leader Kim Il Sung mapped out the great plan to liberate Korea... and led the arduous and glorious anti-Japanese resistance.... Kim Jong Il grew up there as the 'son of Mt Paekdu', 'son of guerrillas', hearing the sound of guns in the flames of the anti-Japanese revolution as if a lullaby..."(27) Thus, Paekdu is glorified as the holy place for revolution and as the key base for Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle in the 1930s. Paekdu also locates Kim Jong Il on the continuum of anti-colonial guerrillas with his father. The façade of the Korean Museum of the Revolution in

Pyongyang is decorated with an image of Mount Paekdu. North Korea's Central News Agency claimed that two Million North Koreans made the pilgrimage to Paekdu in 2006.(28) The number of visitors, officially put at two million, or 10 percent of the population, should be understood to convey the importance the leadership ascribes to the revolutionary site. In sum, Paekdu is representative both of the Korean nation and of the two Kims's revolutionary past.

Paekdu is viewed not only as a symbol of nationhood, but also as an area with economic potential and showcase to the world. Both North and South have an interest in promoting Paekdu tourism, particularly developing a route that would allow South Korean tourists to short cut to visit the mountain via North Korea, rather than through China. In 2005 North Korean leader Kim Jong Il gave Hyundai, one of South Korea's major conglomerates, and the Korea National Tourism Organization, a government organization in South Korea, permission to develop Mt. Paekdu tourism with an eye to infrastructure construction, including the renovation of Samjiyon Airport as a gateway for Paekdu tourism. South Korea's Roh administration has supported road construction for Paekdu tourism.(29) The joint North-South Paekdu project has been viewed as a symbol of reconciliation between North and South Korea by the South Korean media, with political as well as economic implications.



North Korean stamp, issued in 1992, of the log cabin in the secret camp on Mt. Paekdu from which Kim Il Sung is said to have conducted guerrilla war against Japan that is also the designated birthplace of Kim Jong Il.

In short, in both North and South, Mount Paekdu is deeply inscribed on the national consciousness. The mountain symbolizes the identity and the origin of the Korean nation and, thus, plays a crucial role in the politics of nationalism and identity in Korea, above all North Korea. It is the very core of the national geo-body with transcendent significance for forging Korean national identity. In these respects, Paekdu is far more significant for Koreans than Changbai is for Chinese, with the possible exception of China's Manchus.

### **Paekdu/Changbai as a shared regional treasure**

The dispute illustrates the ways in which the geography surrounding Mount Paekdu/Changbai is closely intertwined with representations of the nation on the China-Korea border. Nationalizing geographical space is employed to determine the distinctions between "us" and "them". Geographic space is territorialized. As the geographical landmark is regarded as inseparable from the nation, the mountain Paekdu/Changbai becomes a contested site of nationalist powers in China and in North and South Korea. As the mountain has two names, Paekdu in Korean, Changbai in Chinese, and as it stands astride the border between North Korea and China, exclusive claims of territory and legitimacy can only incite cross-border tensions. The geographic space needs to be shared by both, rather than claimed as the exclusive territory by either, if heightened tension over territory and history of the border area between neighbors is to be avoided. The historical formation of Korea or China as nations from an amalgamation of peoples in the border region where Mount Paekdu stretches has not been acknowledged in this dispute. Mount Paekdu/ Changbai should

be rooted in shared understandings of territory and history, rather than exclusive claims in support of the political agenda of a single nation. The experience of multilateral cooperation in the Tumen River Development Program offers the most hopeful precedent for cross-border co-operation by China and North and South Korea, cooperation that could make it possible to develop and preserve the Paekdu/Changbai area not as the singular property of a nation-state but as a regional treasure to be cherished.

### **Notes**

- (1) Department of Commerce of Jilin Province Homepage, "[Round Changbai Mountain Tourist Highway](#)". Xinhua News Agency, September 10, 2005, "[Construction starts with new railway connecting to Mount Changbai](#)".
- (2) Donga Ilbo, July 31, 2006, "[China Seeks U.N. Title to Mt. Baekdu](#)".
- (3) Joong Ang Ilbo, January 29, 2007, "[With the World Watching, China Claims Paekdu](#)".
- (4) Donga Ilbo, July 31, 2006, "[China Seeks U.N. Title to Mt. Baekdu](#)".
- (5) China Daily, July 25, 2006, "[Ecological Protection Plans Mapped Out](#)".
- (6) Outi Luova (2007), "[Mobilizing Transnational Korean Linkages for Economic Development on China's Frontier](#)", Japan Focus, March 29, 2007.
- (7) People's Daily, May 25, 2005, "[ROK becomes 2nd largest overseas tourists source of China](#)".
- (8) "[Changbai Mountain - One of the Ten Famous Mountains in China](#)", Department of Commerce of Jilin Province Homepage; CCTV (China Central Television), May, 2, 2004, "[Yanbian](#)".
- (9) The Hankyoreh, December 24, 2006, "[N. Korean Diplomat Requests China to Withdraw Order to Remove Hotel From Mount Paekdu](#)".
- (10) Sebastien Colin, "The two Koreas and the Tumen Area Development Programme: Actors, Contacts and Current Plans", paper presented at the AKSE (Association for Korean Studies in



Europe) 30th Anniversary Conference, April 16-20, 2007, Dourdan France.

(11) See [this](#) and [this](#).

(12) “Changbai Mountain - One of the Ten Famous Mountains in China”, Department of Commerce of Jilin Province Homepage; CCTV (China Central Television), May, 2, 2004, “Yanbian”.

(13) Segye Ilbo, September 13, 2006, “Mount Paekdu as the Origin of Manchu is Chinese Territory”.

(14) KBS Special, broadcast December 3, 2006, “Mount Paekdu Project”.

(15) Donga Ilbo, October 26, 2006, “Highway Could Isolate Mt. Baekdu”.

(16) Donga Ilbo, September 4, 2006, “China’s ‘Mount Paekdu Project’ - History and Culture Distortion Has Become Conspicuous”.

(17) Chosun Ilbo, February 27, 2007, “Our Dispute With China Isn’t About Ancient History”;

Yonhap News, February 4, 2007, “Chinese Netizens Counterattack Against ‘Mount Paekdu Ceremony’ With a Parody”.

(18) For more information about the incident, see The Korea Times, February 2, 2007, “Seoul Cautious Over Rift With China”; Chosun Ilbo, February 2, 2007, “China Upset with ‘Baekdu Mountain’ Skaters”, ;

Yonhap News, February 2, 2007, “Seoul Asks Beijing to Respond in Composed Manner to Dispute Over Mount Paektu”.

(19) Donga Ilbo, July 31, 2006, “China Seeks U.N. Title to Mt. Baekdu”; Donga Ilbo, September 4, 2006, “China’s ‘Mount Paekdu Project’ - History and Culture Distortion Has Become Conspicuous”.

(20) The “Northeast Project” is officially called the “Serial Research Project on the History and Current Status of the Northeast Border Region”. The Korea Times, September 15, 2006, “China’s Ambition Over Mt. Paektu Angers Koreans”.

(21) The Hankyoreh, February 24, 2007, “Revised High School Texts Fuel Controversy”; Chosun Ilbo, February 27, 2007, “Our Dispute With China Isn’t About Ancient History”.

(22) The Korea Times, August 1, 2006, “Mt. Paekdu Project’ Koreans Should Unite to Keep Sacred Mountain”.

(23) The Korea Times, September 15, 2006, “China’s Ambition Over Mt. Paektu Angers Koreans”.

(24) Another dispute involves one of most sensitive territorial disputes over Tokdo (in Korean) /Takeshima (in Japanese), a small island in the East Sea or the Sea of Japan that is administered by South Korea but claimed by Japan. Both, Tokdo and Paekdu, are deemed to be an integral part of Korea’s national territory, but Paekdu as a sacred mountain of the nation has greater historical significance.

(25) The Economist, March 29, 2007, “History Wars”.

(26) Radio Free Asia, March 20, 2006, “North Korean Media See Heaven’s Blessing on Leaders, Defector Says” .

(27) Jon Cannon, “In North Korea”, London Review of Books, Vol.22, No.15.

(28) KBS Global, December 30, 2006, “2 Million Visit Baekdu War Venue in 2006”.

(29) KBS Global, July 18, 2005, “Government Aid for Baekdu Tour to Raise Dispute”; KBS Global, August 29, 2005, “Tour for Mt. Baekdu Expected at End of September”; Donga Ilbo, August 3, 2005, “5 Billion Won Materials Supported to Construct Roads for Mount Paekdu Tourism”.

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