

Daoism in the Korean Mountains



Mount Taebaek

Koreans love their mountains. They are the splendor of Korea. When I ask my Korean friends "What are you doing this weekend?", they often reply "I will climb a mountain". About 75% of the Korean peninsula is mountainous. There is a joke that "if Korea were flattened with an iron, it would be as big as China"¹. The mythical origin of Korea is a mountain story. "Koreans associate the origin of their history with the great crater-lake mountain on their northern border Paektusan (Mt. Baekdu), or White Head Mountain. They remain today a 'mountain people'"². Historically, mountains have had a strong impact on Korean life and culture.

There are many mountain ranges in Korea, but one stands out more than the others. This range begins at Mt. Baekdu, or *Baekdu San*, which is located in the northeastern area of North Korea (see the note at the end of this article about the division of Korea). The Chinese currently call this mountain Changbai Shan and it sits on the Chinese/Korean border. From Baekdu-san this range runs east and then turns south. The path south is sometimes central and at other times along the eastern coast. It spans almost the entire length of the Korean peninsula and finally ends close to the southern tip of South Korea. The length of the range is estimated to be about 900 miles.

This splendid range of mountains is considered to be the spine of Korea and to contain a powerful qi flow that is the source of life for all things Korean. There are several sacred

mountains along this range and Daoists, Buddhists, and Shamans can be found there today practicing in temples and caves. Koreans have long believed that their strength and life force come from this energy channel mountain range. The Japanese, during their occupation of Korea from 1910-1945, wanted to break this qi flow and, using 8-foot long iron spikes, "drove them into geomantically strategic mountain peaks and passes throughout Korea in order to geomantically sever the ties between the Korean national spirit and the energy of the land on which they lived."³ The strong bond between the Korean people and the qi of their mountains, still evident today, was clearly perceived by the Japanese.

There have always been a variety of spiritual practices in the Korean mountains. Buddhism came into Korea around 382 C. E. Son (seon) is one form of Buddhism practiced in Korea today. Son (ch'an in Chinese; zen in Japanese) is a meditation/sitting practice. There are many son temples in the Korean mountains. Won-hyo (617-686 C. E.) is a significant figure in Korean son Buddhism. He was not only a writer/scholar who produced some 80 books, but also was a serious practitioner who reached the highest level of enlightenment.

Shamanism is also practiced extensively in Korea. Most shamans in Korea are women. They perform rituals during which they go into a trance and contact the spirit world. These rituals, or *kut*, are performed in order to bring good fortune, abundant harvests, cure illnesses, and improve communication between spirits and humans. Shamanistic rituals and practices in Korea are several thousand years old.

Daoism in Korea is less well known. Until recently, there had never been any official daoist organizations. The first Korean daoist organization appeared in 1967. Whereas China has many historical documents about Daoism and Daoist practices, few such documents exist in Korea. Historical records of the Three Kingdoms Period (57 B.C.E. – 668 C.E.) show that Daoism first came to Korea in 624 C.E. when the Chinese Emperor, Gaozu, sent Daoist priests to give practice instructions to King Yongryu.⁴ Records from the earlier Three Kingdoms era, however, show that Daoist cultivation practices existed before 624 C.E.⁵ Currently there is an active debate about whether Daoism existed in Korea before the importation of Chinese Daoism in 624. Daoism is, nevertheless, a significant part of Korean culture and daoist practices exist in the Korean mountains today.

An example of Daoism in Korean culture can be seen through the concept of *San-shin* which means *mountain spirit*. Out of respect for the mountains and the energy they provide, Koreans, since ancient times, believe that each mountain has a spirit.⁶ The mountain spirit is usually given the same name as the mountain it represents.⁷ The mountain spirit is a symbol of the relationship between people and nature. There are many paintings of San-shin in Korea. In these paintings a San-shin is usually shown as a Daoist immortal or *shinseon*. In Korean culture, the concepts of *san-shin* and *shinseon* are closely linked. Daoist immortals are an important theme in mountain life and culture.

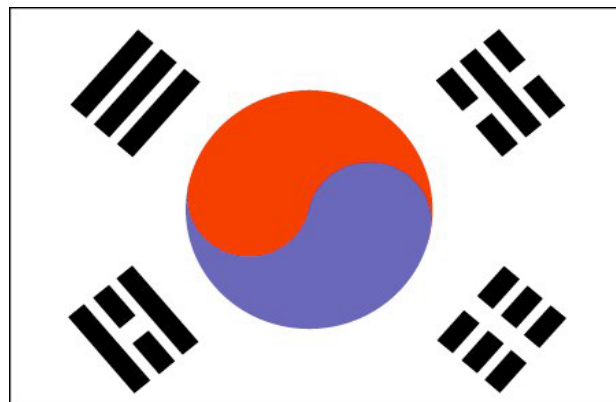
Many paintings of Daoist immortals are found in Buddhist temple complexes in the mountains. Buddhists wanted to show respect for the local mountain spirit when they constructed their temples so they would enshrine him in a separate building in the complex.⁸ These buddhist monks recognized the significance of Daoist immortals in Korean mountain culture. Giving recognition to the mountain spirit helped them gain respect and support from the

local people. Buddhist paintings, although not intentionally, have preserved an important part of ancient Korean daoist culture.

The inclusion of Daoism in Korean culture can be traced all the way back to Dangun, the mythical founder of Korea. Dan-gun was born on a mountain top, most probably Baekdu-san. He practiced both daoism and shamanism and eventually founded the first kingdom of Korea, called *Old Choson*, around 2333 B.C.E. Later in his life Dan-gun returned to the mountains and became an enlightened daoist and a spirit immortal.

The mythical Dan-gun is still an integral part of Korean culture. During times of crisis, Koreans turn to Dan-gun to restore their sense of identity. This was especially true during the Japanese annexation from 1910 to 1945 when Dan-gun's legend became a rallying point for national identity.⁹

The national identity with Dan-gun and daoism is also evident in the South Korean flag. Designed and created in 1882, readopted in 1948 and 1984, the flag is white with a yin-yang symbol in the center. The I-Ching trigrams for heaven (or sky), earth, fire, and water are located in the corners. Flags previous to 1882 also contained yin-yang symbols. The design of a country's national flag usually reflects its history, culture, and traditions. The South Korean flag expresses the country's ancient philosophical ties with daoism.



Flag of South Korea

The heart of Korean daoism is the actual practices that can be found in the mountains, cities, and towns. Korean daoist practices tend to focus on dan-tien development and the process of internal alchemy. Korean daoism uses dan-tien breathing, *dan-tien ho-hup* in Korean, as the primary tool for cultivating the dan-tiens. There are several *dan-tien ho-hup* practices in South Korea. Some of these dan-tien breath practices are yogas.

Sundo is the main form of daoist yoga in South Korea today. Other daoist yoga practices have evolved from it and are known by different names. Sundo focuses on dan-tien cultivation. Although many people in South Korea practice Sundo, it is not well known outside the country. Originally only practiced in the mountains, it has, at various times in Korean history, been practiced in cities and towns. During the Confucian dominated Choson Dynasty (1392-1910), Sundo, along with Buddhist and Shamanistic practices, retreated to the mountains. It remained a practice only for mountain dwellers until the late 1960's when it began to reappear in cities and towns.

Breathing techniques, postures, meditations, and visualizations are central to Korean daoist practices. The breath, however, is primary. Correct breathing pulls energy of the Dao into the human body from the outside world. Pulling in energy of the Dao is called *sup-saeng* (pulling life energy or absorbing life energy) in Korean. Dao energy pulled into the body is stored in the three dan-tiens (lower, middle, and upper). Korean daoist practices focus on breath refinement in order to pull life energy efficiently.

Many factors go into breath refinement. An even breath rhythm, smooth transition between inhale and exhale, keeping the inhale low, and relaxed muscle movement in the lower abdomen are all important. But the most significant factor for refining the breath is that the mind and breath are not separated while breathing. This is difficult to describe with words, but one way to say it is, *the mind becomes the breath and the breath becomes the mind*. Uniting the mind and breath first requires centering (or absorbing) the mind into the lower dan-tien, i.e., a strong connection develops between the lower dan-tien and the mind. In western culture the brain is usually thought to be the seat of the mind; in eastern culture the mind sits in the heart. When the lower dan-tien is strengthened the mind naturally migrates toward it. Thus, the mind sits in both the heart and lower dan-tien. Mind and breath, as well as mind and body, unify when the mind is strongly connected to the lower dan-tien..

Breathing in general, of course, pulls in life energy to some degree. We all breath to maintain our life. But refined breathing pulls in purer forms of energy. It primes the body to utilize pure forms of qi such as five-element energy or yin-yang energy. These pure forms of qi are important during dan-tien cultivation for the process of internal alchemy. Energy in the dan-tiens naturally refines when the breath refines. Pulling in pure life energy with the breath directs us toward our original nature. Breath/qi is used as a direct conduit to the Dao.

Dan-tien cultivation and internal alchemy go hand in hand. Jing, qi, and shen, the three treasures, are the main ingredients used in the alchemical process. Each dan-tien cultivates one of the three. In many daoist practices, the lower dan-tien cultivates jing, the middle cultivates qi, and the upper cultivates shen. Sundo practice, however, reverses the functions of the middle and upper dan-tiens – the upper cultivates qi and the middle cultivates shen. The middle and upper dan-tiens are used in this way because of the microcosm-macrocosm relationship.

In the macrocosm of nature, humans form and exist between heaven (yang) and earth (yin). The inner energy and structure of a human follows the structure of the macrocosm. Thus, in Sundo practice, the lower dan-tien functions as earth (yin, jing), the upper functions as heaven (qi, yang), and the middle functions as human (heart and shen). The lower and upper dan-tiens are eventually united at the middle dan-tien to form spirit/oneness with the Dao. This form of daoist practice coincides with the asian medical model of shen (spirit) residing in the heart. It is characteristic of Korean daoist practices but is not unique to Korea. The Celestial Masters (other names: Orthodox Unity, Five Pecks of Rice, Tian Shi Pai) of the Eastern Han Dynasty in China also used the dan-tiens in this way.¹⁰

The body positions (postures) of Korean daoist yogas play an important role. This is especially true with Sundo. Postures are practiced simultaneously with breathing techniques. Promoting qi and blood flow and strengthening muscles and bones are standard functions of postures. However, postures have more important functions.

Postures align the body with universal energy forces which help the human microcosm come into alignment with the external macrocosm. Aligning the body/mind with universal energy flow creates a natural practice environment that teaches us the way of the Dao. Postures are ideograms that represent and convey principles of nature and the universe.¹¹ In conjunction with dan-tien breath techniques, they teach the body/mind to experience harmony and disharmony without thinking.¹² This type of non-conceptual experience connects us with the Dao.



Water Posture - Sundo

Postures, when combined with dan-tien breathing, put the human body in the proper position so that energy of the Dao can be pulled in with breath. The body/mind, with proper alignment, takes in universal Dao energy and the non-conceptual wisdom it contains. This energy/wisdom gets stored in the lower dan-tien and creates an internal microcosm patterned on the external macrocosm. Thus, postures energetically communicate with the macrocosm and influence the creation of an internal microcosmic structure in which, as mentioned above, the upper dan-tien cultivates qi and the middle cultivates shen. Postures contribute significantly to the microcosm-macrocosm relationship.



Fire Posture - Sundo

Great daoist masters have lived and currently live in the Korean mountains. One came out of the mountains in 1967, entered Seoul, and began teaching Sundo. Among daoist practitioners and philosophers throughout the country he became known as a master who had truly entered the Dao. His name was Chung San and he set an example of the potential for human development. He taught Sundo all over South Korea for 20 years before returning to mountain life in 1988. His book¹³ about daoism in the Korean mountains contains valuable insights into mountain daoist practice, daoist philosophy, and the human condition. The following excerpt from his book tells about his first experience when he began training with a daoist master. He was 13 years old at the time. They had walked deep into the mountains and slept next to some large boulders. The next morning:

The master said, "Sit down. Have some breakfast." I discovered I was very hungry. But I was very disappointed when I saw what I had to eat. It was some strange granular mixture of raw food. Even though life with my grandfather had been plain and simple, I saw in my mind's eye all the foods I used to enjoy. Rice, rice cakes, barley-rice with pepper paste. With these in my memory, I couldn't bring myself to eat what was now presented to me. But the master ordered "Eat, eat!" So I had a taste of the ground-up, mealy substance and a swallow of water. The food was bitter, dry and gritty. I could not eat this food! But again, I put the ground-up mixture to my mouth with determination, forcing myself to do as the master had told me. It was no use, and finally I complained "I cannot eat this." The master said, "Here in the mountain this raw food is the only kind we have. You must learn how to eat it. If you really cannot eat it now, just drink water. If you fast for many days, you'll be hungry enough that this food will taste wonderful to you!"¹⁴ (note: the food was a ground-up mixture of pine needles, roots, and wild beans).

The next excerpt is an experience Chung San had after he had been practicing for a few months:

When I was practicing Jung Ki Dan Bup (level 1), I lived in a small cave. The entrance was very narrow with stone edges protruding. In the daytime it wasn't bad going in and out, but at night my body wasn't flexible or responsive enough to always avoid the edges. I often bumped my forehead and scraped my hands. One night, I woke with the urgent need to relieve my bladder. As I tried to move quickly through the opening I hit my head, giving myself a large gash. My teacher came in the night, and without speaking smoothed mountain medicine on the wound. As he left the cave he made some easy slicing movements with his hands, as if he were cutting through tofu. The next morning I was shocked to see that he had somehow cut through the stone at the opening, smoothing out one of the large protrusions. That evening he spoke to me saying, "Even when you are hurrying, your mind must take time to be spacious."¹⁵



Mount Baekdu

Daoist practices in the Korean mountains are unique and rich. They are examples of the essence of dan-tien and internal alchemy practice. One of these practices, Sundo, is a complete system of daoist yoga and an authentic expression of Korean daoism.

Korean society today is in fast-forward mode. There is a great push to become westernized. People in the high-tech, fast-paced cities of the new Korea are beginning to forget about past ties with their rich mountain heritage. But not everyone. Even with their busy, western-type life styles, many Koreans still find time to go to the mountains. The love between Koreans and their mountains is ancient and deep. The Korean scholar, Bruce Cumings, points out that "The

Korean mind-heart is attuned to the spirits that inhabit the nature of all things. This is the human mind connected to the viscera and the body in touch with its natural environment, ..."16 When you climb to the top of a mountain you become closer to heaven and more in touch with the spirit and energy of the cosmos.

South Korea's emergence into the modern world is often referred to as the *miracle on the Han*, a reference to the Han River which runs through the center of Seoul. *Miracle on the Han* primarily refers to the economic success of a country that lay in ruins in 1953 when the Korean War armistice was signed. But there are other miracles and treasures here in this glistening peninsula. The Korean people themselves and their vital spirit are the main miracle. The Korean mountains and the spiritual practices within them are the primary treasures.

Notes

1. Cumings, Bruce. Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History. Updated Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005, p. 22.
2. Cummings, p. 22.
3. Mason, David A. Spirit Of The Mountains: Korea's SAN-SHIN and Traditions of Mountain-Worship. Elizabeth, NJ; Seoul: HOLLYM, 1999, p. 150.
4. Jung, Jae-seo, "Daoism in Korea". Daoism Handbook. Edited by Livia Kohn. Boston: Brill, 2000, p. 794.
5. Jung, p. 796.
6. Mason, p. 34
7. Mason, p. 15
8. Mason, p. 97
9. Mason, p. 136
10. Cohen, Kenneth S. The Way of Qigong: The Art and Science of Chinese Energy Healing. New York: Ballantine Books, 1997, p. 344.
11. Kim, Hyunmoon. The Tao of Life: An Investigation of Sundo Taoism's Personal Growth Model as A Process of Spiritual Development. Ph.D. Dissertation. San Francisco: Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, 2002, p. 28.
12. Kim, The Tao of Life: An Investigation ... , p. 28.
13. Chung San. The Way of Life. Seoul, South Korea: Kouksundo Federation. Written in Korean.
14. Kim, Hyunmoon. "The Story of Blue Mountain". Excerpted and translated from The Way of Life by Chung San. Seoul, South Korea: Kouksundo Federation.
15. Kim, "The Story of Blue Mountain".
16. Cumings, pp. 21-22.

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