

Mountain Spirits Still Watching over Korea

New book catalogs nation's vibrant tradition of *sanshin* worship

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by Choe Yong-shik, Staff reporter

Mountains are worshiped all the time here in Korea - public and private ceremonies are held deep in remote valleys and gorges, shamans chant in front of flames high up on sacred peaks, hikers add stones to cairns next to trails.

Outside of this country, mountain worship has almost disappeared. As aboriginal and agrarian cultures are eclipsed by modern civilizations, traditional indigenous religions are replaced by universal ones.

But in Korea, a developed industrial economy, various mountain-worship traditions are still practiced. Some of them are ancient, some are of more recent origin. But all are flourishing out on the peripheries of modern life.

"Korea keeps mountain worship at the center of its complex web of religious forms. And at the very center of mountain worship is *sanshin*, the personified mountain spirit," said U.S. scholar David A. Mason during a recent interview with The Korea Herald. "Korean people seem to believe that every mountain has a spirit, and those who live on or climb the mountain receive that spirit and experience a deepening of their humanity."

In search of the meaning of *sanshin* as a prevalent cultural icon of Korea, Mason has criss-crossed the nation for 17 years to survey the *sanshin* paintings in the temples and shamanist shrines that stand on most mountains.

His perennial zeal and passion for the subject led him to earn a master's degree at Yonsei University and, most recently, compile his findings in his comprehensive ethnological study, *Spirits of the Mountains* (Hollym Corporation, 30,000 won). Containing over 300 photographs, the 224-page book brings forth the mountain deity at the very heart of Korean people as a popular belief.

In the book, the deity's various cultural roles and manifestations are described, while photos of *sanshin* icons and their shrines all over South Korea show the religious and artistic characteristics that they share. *Sanshin's* relationship with the Peninsula's five major religious and philosophical traditions — Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Christianity — is fully explored in the book.

Other deities and symbols that share paintings and shrines with *sanshin* are briefly introduced, shedding further light on the spirit's identity. Cases of contemporary opposition to *sanshin* practices and the potential role of mountain worship in 21st century Korean culture are discussed to provide deeper perspectives.

"The Korean mountain spirit caught my interest when I first visited a Korean Buddhist temple in 1982. Since that time, I have collected photographs of and information about it as a hobby, along with hiking in Korea's beautiful and sacred mountains," said the 42-year-old, who now teaches English at Yonsei University in Wonju, Kangwon Province.

The *sanshin* spirit is always portrayed with a long, white beard, carrying a cane in front of a pine tree, next to a Korean tiger. It is sometimes accompanied by servants holding symbolic items, animals, plants, or, very rarely, its wife, said the folklorist, who has observed more than six hundred paintings of the kind.

Mason said that each *sanshin* painting has its own style and atmosphere, since they are all drawn by different craftsmen, whether they be active shamans, or secular or Buddhist artists. They are a uniquely Korean form, although they are depicted with Chinese artistic motifs, said the author.

The respect for mountains and the firm belief in *sanshin* are derived from Korea's natural and historical folklore, Mason said.

Constituting more than 70 percent of the Korean Peninsula, inhabitable mountains have always inspired gratitude, fear, respect, admiration, awe and worship in the Koreans. Many old legends feature benign mountain spirits.

Mason said that the legend of the Koreans' primordial father, Tangun, may have contributed to the flourishing of mountain myths. According to the legend, Tangun founded Korea's first nation, Kojoson, in 2333 B.C. and ruled Korea for 1,500 years before disappearing into a mountain and becoming a mountain spirit.

Throughout Korea's long history, the *sanshin* have looked over individual villages and towns, as well as the Korean nation as a whole. Despite their relentless modernization in the

past century, Koreans still pay respect to, or at least acknowledge, their *sanshin* in a wide variety of contexts.

"Not only is mountain worship still alive in Korea, it is evolving with new roles for itself in Korea's future cultural and political realities," Mason said.

According to him, Korea's mountain spirit will find new and important socio-cultural roles to play in the 21st century in the areas of national identity, ecological protection, and reunification.

Mason said that the mountain spirit could unite North and South Koreans, since it's a shared element of their cultural identities.

The *sanshin* have been known to be harmful when abused or ignored, but benign when properly treated. Human beings can attain better *bok*, good fortune, and improve their lives when they are in tune with the natural environment. In this sense, Mason contended that *sanshin* worship has a positive effect for the preservation and protection of nature for today's people.

As a deep-rooted element of ancient Korean shamanism, the *sanshin* tradition has evolved by exchanging symbols and practices with other Korean religious traditions, he said.

Looking down from the craggy heights over the whole sweep of Korean history, it is understood that the *sanshin* spirit as the representative icon of Korean shamanism has developed along with Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, all of which were imported foreign beliefs to the Korean people.

By the same logic, Mason said he thought Christianity in Korea will increasingly incorporate Korean shamanism through their belief in the *sanshin*. In fact, he said, such a trend already exists in Korean society, as evidenced by the increasing number of Koreans who go to mountains, rather than church, for Christian worship.

"Someday, Korean pastors might come up to the podium with a bell and a fan," Mason quipped.

"I hope and expect that *sanshin* shall find new, high profile roles as a symbol of environmental protection and ecological wisdom, as an ambassador of Korean culture, and as a leading symbol of the reunification and political reconciliation of Korea," the author said.

To place an order for "Spirit of the Mountains," call +81 (2) 735-7551~4.