CHAPTER 1
Mountains and Renunciates: The Early Pan-Asian Cultural Landscape

Introduction

While a globalised world may consider Mount Kailas its most sacred mountain, that conception is the result of particular historical trajectories. It does not represent a Pan-Asian understanding of its status. There are innumerable Asian mountains considered sacred in local, regional, and national perspectives. Many, if not most of them possess characteristics and associations that might, under different historical circumstances, have seen them become pre- eminent. Before focussing on Mount Kailas, we shall briefly note some of these other sites in order to properly locate Kailas in the wider context of sacred mountains in Asia. While we do not have space to discuss these other sites in any depth, even a brief survey demonstrates that many aspects of the sacred status of Kailas are far from unique. Indeed many are generic, not least its close historical associations with esoteric ritualists, or renunciates, and we shall also briefly locate these ubiquitous figures in the history of Iran and China, those cultures most directly impacting on the Indo-Tibetan world.

For Koreans, the most auspicious centre in their sacred geography is Mount Baekdu (‘white-headed’). Situated on the North Korean border with China, the 6,000 foot (2,744 metre) peak is the highest point on the Korean peninsula. In accord with the number three being the most auspicious number in Korean geomancy, it is the source of three major rivers; the Tumen, the Yalu, and the Songhua (the largest tributary of the Amur).

According to the founding myth of the Korean peoples, the son of the Creator-god descended from heaven onto Baekdu, where he granted the wish of a female bear to become human and fathered her child. Their offspring, Dan-gun, united the Korean peoples and founded their first kingdom, ruling over it for 1500 years before retiring and becoming the mountain god. From at least the middle of the first millennium CE, Korean ruling dynasties held the mountain to be sacred and sponsored its ritual worship. Around the 12–13th century (broadly contemporary with formative constructions of a Buddhist Kailas), in an attempt to promote national unity in the face of threats of foreign invasion, the legend of Dan-gun was promoted in Korean Buddhist texts.1

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But the Manchu peoples also looked to Baekdu as their ancestral home, and not until 1712 did Korea and Manchu China formally recognise the mountain watershed as their border.

Baekdu’s sacred associations had long been recognised by Chinese. The Jin and later Qing Manchu dynasties held annual rites for Baekdu, and the Kangxi emperor decreed it the birthplace of the imperial family. More recently, according to his official biography, the late Kim Jong-il, the ‘Dear Leader’ of the Democratic People’s Republic of (North) Korea, was born on Mount Baekdu in 1942, his birth heralded by the appearance of a double rainbow over the mountain and a new star in the heavens.

In reality, the emperor Kangxi’s claim lapsed, while Kim Jong-il was actually born in Russia where his father was fighting the Japanese. But these claims to origin on Baekdu demonstrate how sacred peaks may be used as legitimising devices, linking rulers to the traditional origin-place of their peoples, the divine mountain of the ancestors, thus implying their manifestation as the essential identity of their peoples. Even in an atheist state, such claims resonate powerfully across time, reinforcing cultural identities and rooting a community in a territory, as well as legitimising the political interests of the elite classes.

In northern Thailand certain mountains are similarly “constitutive of what it means to be northern Thai.” One such mountain is Doi Ang Salung. In a late medieval chronicle (the Tamnan Ang Salung: ‘The Legend of Water Basin Mountain’), this peak is identified as Meru, the central World-mountain of Indic cosmology. The text also describes the Buddha’s (legendary) visit to the

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2 Some 2000 years earlier, a Chinese geographical text (the Shan Hai Jing) referred to the mountain as Buxian Shan (‘the Mountain with [a] God’). In 1172 the Manchu Jurchen Jin dynasty bestowed Baekdu with the title, ‘the King Who Makes the Nation Prosperous and Answers with Miracles’. In 1193 it was further ennobled with the title ‘the Emperor Who Cleared the Sky with Tremendous Sagehood’; see Elliot (2000: esp. 603–614); also see, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paektu_Mountain, accessed 9 September 2015.


5 As part of an Indic cultural ‘package’ Meru is widespread; e.g., Java has a 3,676 metre (Su)Meru peak in East Java; Klokke (1995: 84).