

Special Feature

Korean Intellectuals' Perceptions  
of Baekdusan and the Historical  
Significance Thereof:  
Focusing on Travelogues Produced  
during the 1920s and 1930s

Lee Hyungdae

## Introduction

Many of the Joseon intellectuals who traveled to Baekdusan during the colonial era left behind travelogues of their journeys. This study analyzes the travelogues produced during the 1920s and 1930s and seeks to reveal their themes and historical significance.

The 1920s constituted a period in which the Japanese imperialists sought to completely distort the history and culture of colonial Joseon as part of their assimilation-oriented colonial policies. Japanese scholars were particularly fond of highlighting the theories of heteronomy and stagnation in conjunction with Joseon history. In this regard, the travelogues of Baekdusan produced by the intellectuals of colonial Joseon during this period can be seen as a resistive discourse against such theories. Joseon intellectuals desired to directly visit Baekdusan, which had been labeled as the point of origin of the Korean nation in historical materials, and to experience firsthand the dynamic development of national history. As such, their travelogues not only described the inspiration they drew from the beauty of nature, but also represented ethnographies that sought to investigate and report the mythologies of Baekdusan, as well as indigenous folklore and beliefs. They also, as part of efforts to respond to the ethnic cleansing policies of the Japanese colonial authorities, created an imaginative reproduction of the Korean nation.

Previous studies on the travelogues of Baekdusan have been concentrated on Choe Namseon's Baekdusan geunchamgi (白頭山觀參記, Record of Worship at Baekdusan). Based on their analyses of Choe Namseon's travelogue, scholars such as Seo (2005), Gu Inmo (2004), and Ryu (2007) have concluded that Choe's travel was meant to reaffirm the sacred origin and existence of the Korean nation. Choe's Baekdusan geunchamgi has indeed occupied an important status in terms of the various travelogues written about Baekdusan. However, many other travelogues about the mountain were also produced by authors that exhibited different motivations and sentiments in conjunction with their visit to Baekdusan. In this regard, a thorough examination of the overall perceptions of Baekdusan possessed by intellectuals during the colonial era must inevitably involve an expansion of the scope of the

related materials under analysis. As previously mentioned, this study reviews travelogues about Baekdusan produced by Joseon intellectuals during the 1920s and 1930s and analyzes them in a chronological manner. This exercise is designed to gain a better understanding of the prevailing trends in terms of the perceptions of the national territory that existed during this period, with a special focus on Baekdusan.

## Characteristics of the Travelogues of Baekdusan Produced during the Colonial Era

The travelogues of Baekdusan produced during the 1920s and 1930s consist of: Min Taewon's Baekdusan haeng (白頭山行) (1921), Choe Namseon's Baekdusan geunchamgi (白頭山觀參記) (1926), An Chaehong's Baekdusan deungcheokgi (白頭山登陟記) (1930), Dae Eun's Dongbangui Himalaya Baekdusan jongbogi (1930), Yi Gwangu's Baekdusan tamheom bihaenggi (白頭山探險飛行記) (1935), Seo Chun's Baekdusan tamheomgi (白頭山探險記) (1936), and Yi Sangho's Baekdusan haeng (白頭山行) (1936). These travelogues can be summarized as follows.

No.	Year	Title	Author	Main characteristics	Special remarks
1	1921	<i>Baekdusan haeng</i> (白頭山行)	Min Taewon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exhibited an interest in the housing and lifestyle of people in the Baekdusan area</li> <li>Numerous descriptions of people's daily lives and customs</li> <li>Relatively low interest in the nature and topography of Baekdusan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Records compiled during the ascent of Baekdusan from August 6 – August 20, 1921 as part of an expedition organized by the provincial government of Hamgyeong Namdo</li> <li>Published in serial form in the <i>Donga Ilbo</i></li> </ul>
2	1926	<i>Baekdusan geunchamgi</i> (白頭山觀參記)	Choe Namseon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Divided the trek to Baekdusan into forty entries, with in-depth descriptions provided regarding each phase of the expedition</li> <li>Emphasized the origins of Dangun and established the foundation for <i>Bulham</i> culture theory (不咸文化論)</li> <li>Exuded a strong nationalist-laden sense of admiration and pride for Korea's territory</li> <li>Included many emotion-laced descriptions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Written after taking part alongside Pak Hanyeong in the expedition to the Baekdusan area organized by the Joseon Education Association in 1926</li> <li>Published in serial form in the <i>Donga Ilbo</i> from July 28, 1926 – January 3, 1927, a total of 89 articles and published in book form in 1927 by the Hanseong Library Press</li> </ul>

3	1930 <i>Baekdusan deungcheokgi</i> (白頭山登陟記)	An Chaehong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Similar standpoint and descriptions to those found in Choe Namseon's <i>Baekdusan geunchamgi</i> (白頭山觀參記)</li> <li>• Recorded the trek from Seoul-Wonsan-Musan-Duman River- Baekdusan's Cheonji Lake to Hyesan-Bukcheong Coastal area-Seoul in 23 entries rendered in a solemn literary style</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Published in the <i>Joseon Ilbo</i> in 1930 and published in book form by Yuseongsa Press in 1931</li> </ul>
4	1931 <i>Dongbangui Himalaya Baekdusan jongbogi</i>	Dae Eun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on the Sakyamuni Buddha's practice of asceticism on the snowy mountains, the author made, based on the notion that Baekdusan was a snowy mountain, a pilgrimage to Baekdusan</li> <li>• Exhibited an interest in the customs and lifestyle along the border area</li> <li>• Exhibited an interest in the national boundary and national life in the sections on Gando (Jiandao) and the Baekdusan Boundary Stone</li> <li>• Interpreted Cheonji Lake from Buddhist standpoint; maintained a critical distance from the <i>Guksadang</i> (Shrine of the National Preceptor)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invited by the Women Buddhists' Association of Jongseong-gun, Hamgyeong Province</li> <li>• Started out from Gyeongseong (Seoul) on July 10, 1931, conducted religious propagation activities along the border area on July 22, and climbed Baekdusan from July 23 onwards</li> <li>• Published in the in the October and December issues of the monthly magazine, <i>Bulgyo</i> (Buddhism) in 1931</li> </ul>
5	1935 <i>Baekdusan tamheom bihaenggi</i> (白頭山探險飛行記)	Yi Gwangu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recorded the development of new routes to Baekdusan and the mysterious features of Baekdusan as observed from the sky</li> <li>• Laid out the topography of Baekdusan from above and made geographical observations</li> <li>• Described the encroachment of civilization in the Baekdusan area in a negative manner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explored Baekdusan from September 27 – September 29, 1935, starting out from Nanam in an aircraft</li> <li>• Published in a series of 16 articles that appeared in the <i>Joseon Joongang Ilbo</i> in 1935</li> </ul>
6	1936 <i>Baekdusan tamheomgi</i> (白頭山探險記)	Seo Chun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Described the daily schedule of the journey in a realistic manner</li> <li>• Considered the public interest rather than the nationalistic standpoint</li> <li>• Included interesting episodes and lyrical poems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participated in the Baekdusan Expedition Team organized by the <i>Joseon Ilbo</i>, in August 1936 in his capacity as the editor-in-chief of the <i>Joseon Ilbo</i></li> </ul>
7	1936 <i>Baekdusan haeng</i> (白頭山行)	Yi Sangho	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Described the border area of Baekdusan and the reality of the nation in a detailed manner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participated in the Baekdusan Expedition Team mentioned in the previous entry in his capacity as the <i>Joseon Ilbo</i>'s editor of the social affairs desk</li> </ul>

## The Themes Exhibited in Baekdusan Travelogues

### *Metaphors of Baekdusan and the Return of the Prodigal Son*

A beautifully decorated gateway welcomes back this immoral, wicked, and shabbily clothed descendant upon his return home. All of this is reminiscent of the heart of parents who think and love a child who has taken a wrong turn in life more than any other. Taking a look back, it is obvious that we have disobeyed their message of love and squandered all our fortune and property. We have even disgraced our family name and dishonored our ancestral tablets without knowing that such an act was resentful, deplorable, and shameful. Do such silly and foolish people who cannot even try to be motivated to take what is ours back still deserve to be loved? Will she welcome us simply because we are her descendants, forgetting all else? ... [T]hat arched gate must be a symbol of her welcome to us, we who she has long been looking forward to seeing. (Choe 1973:107)

One day during his travel to Baekdusan in July 1927, Choe Namseon saw a beautiful rainbow hanging above Yeonji Peak and interpreted it as a symbol of a loving and benevolent mother welcoming back her prodigal son. This rainbow was perceived to be a symbol of the love and forgiveness which Baekdusan, in her capacity as the mother of the nation, exhibited toward her children who had wasted all of their fortune and property and disgraced the family name and dishonored their ancestral tablets. Here, the metaphorical prodigal son can be understood to have been all the colonized people of Joseon who struggled under Japanese imperialism, including the intellectual Choe himself. As such, Baekdusan was a resting place for the souls of those who had been damaged by the Japanese colonial rule during the 1920s and 1930s. Baekdusan was also perceived as a sphere within which the national consciousness could be reinvigorated while looking back on the origin and history of the Korean nation.

Travel was strongly encouraged by enlightened intellectuals during the modern enlightenment era that preceded the March 1<sup>st</sup> Movement of 1919. Travel was regarded by many of those who wanted to create a modern nation-state as a good means to become a healthy and strong people, but also as a tool through which to acquire a wide range of experience and knowledge. It is well known that while Yi Gwangsu introduced a vision for

the enlightenment of the Joseon public and the modernization of the state, Choe Namseon encouraged the younger generation to develop a pioneering and progressive spirit through his travelogues in which he explored the homeland.

However, the travels to Baekdusan undertaken during the 1920s and 1930s had an entirely different significance, a denouement that was closely related to the changes in colonial Japan's ruling policy. In the aftermath of the March 1<sup>st</sup> Movement, the Japanese colonial government abandoned its gendarmerie-based rule in favor of a seemingly softer line that revolved around the permission of cultural activities. However, in reality, it took steps to promote cultural assimilation with Japan through such means as the advocating of the theories of ilseon dongjoron (日鮮同祖論, Japan and Korea share the same ancestry), Naeseon ilcheron (內鮮一體, Japan and Korea as one entity). Such attempts were designed to thoroughly distort and destroy the unique history and culture of Joseon. Outwardly, this cultural assimilation policy was hailed as a campaign to replace the barbaric culture of Joseon with the advanced civilization of Japan. However, in reality, this was tantamount to the extinction of the spirit and identity of the people of Joseon (Kim 1998).

Therefore, travel to Baekdusan during the 1920s and 1930s became a part of the search for the national identity of the people of Joseon. Such treks to the sanctum that was Baekdusan in essence became a means of following in the sacred footsteps of the founder of the Korean nation, Dangun, and of restoring the pride that came from being a racially homogenous nation. Therefore, Choe's descriptions of his trek to Baekdusan in a solemn and devout manner rather than as a simple journey should be perceived as being in line with the context of this period. To this end, the travelogues of Baekdusan produced during this period were in many ways a "narrative designed to facilitate the discovery of the identity of the nation" and a resistive discourse against the colonial assimilation policies put in place by Japanese imperial forces.

### *The Landscape of Colonial Joseon and Awareness of the Homeland*

The Donga Ilbo dispatched one of its reporters, Min Taewon, to take part in an expedition to Baekdusan that commenced on August 6, 1921. By

emphasizing the significance of Baekdusan as the point of origin of the founder of the Korean nation and Korean history, this newspaper in effect raised its readers' expectations regarding the reports that were to be filed by this special correspondent. However the nature of the actual articles written by Min Taewon as part of his Baekdusan haeng, articles which were published in the *Donga Ilbo*, differed greatly from what had been touted beforehand. Here, this anomaly can be understood as being the result of the gap that existed in terms of prevailing vantage points.

One can find two overarching vantage points inherent in the travelogues produced during the 1920s and 1930s, namely modernity and the nation. While the former revolved around the perceptions of a person who had enjoyed life in civilized urban spaces that had been sent out to observe primitive nature as well as the people who clung to local and traditional ways of life in the northern provinces, the latter encompassed the attitudes of a colonial intellectual who traveled to the mountain situated on the border of his homeland to ponder the state of the nation. The narrative found in these travelogues generally involved the interaction of these two vantage points. Nevertheless, a clear emphasis on one or the other of these vantage points is evident in all of these works.

In this regard, Min Taewon's Baekdusan haeng can be regarded as being more heavily laden with the former vantage point.

The party continued to move forward after having lunch at Botae-ri. The area between Botae-ri and Potae-dong is a rough pass that involves crossing the foot of Potaesan's Janggun Peak. Although not very steep or dangerous, one finds himself enveloped by darkness even in the middle of the day when he navigates this narrow pass through a forest so deep that the trees cover the skies. The presence of full usneas hanging loosely from the branches of old trees which look like cedars left me feeling as if I was looking at the adornments of a magnificent and solemn sanctuary. As moisture and cold seep into one's clothes, one is overcome with the feeling that he is walking in a mysterious and spiritual land. It is already sunset by the time we traversed this mysterious and spiritual land and arrived at Potae-ri. (Min 2005:29)

The shock and admiration exhibited by travelers emanating from Seoul upon looking at the blessed natural environment created by the heavens and the

unexplored landscape of Baekdusan is one that is inherent in all travelogues related to the great mountain. Marvelous landscapes were etched in the minds of travelers. These included the sea of larch trees visible from Mudu Peak, the abundance of sour-tasting blueberries along the way to Sinmuchi, full usneas hanging loosely from the branches of old trees in Potae-ri, snowflakes falling in the middle of summer, and the sudden appearance of Cheonji Lake between dark clouds in the midst of unstable weather.

The travelers also witnessed the encroachment of modern civilization into remote corners of the border area, a process that was akin to a wrench tearing up holes in the pristine natural environment. They saw firsthand the results of modernization, results that included the advent of a modern public elementary school in the deep mountainous area of Bocheon-ri, the establishment of electrical facilities across the forests of Potaesan, and the opening of post offices in mountainous villages. The speed at which civilization was conveyed becomes even more evident when we analyze the travelogues in a chronological manner. In fact, these very treks to Baekdusan were made possible by the conveniences of modern civilization, such as the trains and automobiles which shortened travel times and distances and the guns that kept both beast and bandit at bay. The speed at which modern civilization spread was nothing short of outstanding. In 1921, Min Taewon arrived at Cheonji Lake after traveling to Hyesan by automobile and then ascending the mountain for six days. However, the travelogues written by Seo Chun and Yi Sangho in 1936 show that the time needed to complete the climb of Baekdusan was further reduced with the establishment of a road for automobiles that reached all the way to areas in closer proximity to Cheonji Lake, such as Potae-ri and Nongsa-dong.

Travelers who were critical of the reality of colonial Joseon never failed to notice how the landscape of their homeland was being exploited and damaged by Japanese capital. An Jaehong worried about the inroads made by Japanese capital in Joseon when he saw firsthand the nitrogen plants that had been established in the Seohojin area. Meanwhile, Yi Sangho strongly criticized Japanese exploitation of natural sites, including Mitsubishi's dynamiting of mountains in the Musan area in search of iron ore and the felling of thousands of pyeong of forest by the Bukseon Paper Mill. The following is Yi's description of the activities of the Japanese company known as the Onoda Cement Factory:



There is a three-story concrete factory located at the foot of the mountain that sits across the (Gomusan) station. This structure is so imposing that it almost looks as if it were competing with the mountain in the back. This is the Onoda Cement Factory, or what can be referred to as the outreached tentacle of Japanese capitalism that has infiltrated northern Korea. This stronghold of modern capitalism seeks to pursue its own interests by destroying the crater walls of Baekdusan in order to get access to cheaper electricity in the form of the waters of Cheonji Lake. This scary serpent that has already eaten all the grass in the fields has now come to this steep mountain area and entrenched itself so that it can spew out smoke through its devil-like chimney. (Yi 1989:141-142)

The awareness these travelers had of the depth of the colonial tragedy of the Korean nation reached a new zenith when they came across the border area guarded by a frontier garrison located on the banks of the streamlet-like Duman River and the Baekdusan Boundary Stone located at Yeonji Peak. After arousing the national pathos by stating that the rain falling on the Baekdusan Boundary Stone represented the suffocated lamentations of the nation, Choe Namseon approached the issue of the national boundary from the standpoint of a historian. The problems in his mind stemmed from the fact that Baekdusan was regarded by both Joseon and Qing as the most sacred of places, and as the site from which their respective nations emanated. It was to rectify this situation that the Baekdusan Boundary Stone was erected in 1712. However, the location of the Boundary Stone imposed upon Joseon by the Qing delegate Mu Kedeng soon emerged as a major point of contention. Debates also emerged over the provision that called for the "Tomun River" to serve as the "eastern boundary." As the Tomun River flows into the Songhwa (Songhua) River that originates from Baekdusan, a literal interpretation of this provision would in effect situate northwestern Gando (Jiandao) well within to the territory of Joseon. However, the boundary disputes were further heightened when Qing declared that the Tomun River was in fact the Duman River. The boundary disputes once again bubbled to the surface when Japan, who had by then deprived Joseon of its diplomatic sovereignty, sided with the Qing line of reasoning in the Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1909. On this matter, Choe Namseon revealed his resentment stating that this was in fact the first "gift" bestowed upon weak Joseon by the much stronger Japan, and one that would not be forgotten by

the Korean nation. In this regard, what was the life of the people like after the reestablishment of the boundary?

As soon as we left the Musan-eup area, our automobile entered an area in which while the banks of the Duman River were located to the right. Sloped hills featuring cliffs of at least hundred cheok in length could be seen on the left. The hills on the other side of the river belonged to Manchuria. The Duman River is only about ten gan (six feet per gan) wide. While one can define the distance between two points using one's fingers, the other side of the bank was so close that we could in fact describe it as having been not even one's lip length away. A ferry that crosses to the Manchurian side is anchored under one of the cliffs. A closer look at the ferry reveals that it is a long and narrow dugout boat, a relic from the previous century and a long-gone era. This ferry was, in the past, used by the farmers of Joseon to cross the border. While this may sound strange, this in fact sheds some light on the life of farmers who in the past resided on this side of the Duman River and farmed on the other side. As such, while they went to work in Manchuria during the day, they came home across the border at night. (Yi 1989:150)

Traveling to Baekdusan by automobile, Yi Sangho (whose work was originally published in the Joseon Ilbo in 1936) was able to shed some light on the daily lives of farmers prior to the establishment of the boundary and on the current landscape when he reached a stretch of road that took him along the banks of the Duman River. While farmers had traditionally lived on this side of the river and farmed on the other, all that was now left of those days was an old rickety wooden ferry from a previous era. What was now visible on the other side of the river was a proverbial sea of white clothes hanging on clotheslines. All in all, in excess of two million Joseon people were believed to be residing on the other side of the Duman River. However, this would inevitably have to be regarded as the features of another country as long as the newly-established boundary remained in place. Yi had heard beforehand about how the new boundary had altered the people's sphere of activity. However, witnessing firsthand the continuation of such Korean customs despite the presence of this artificial division, Yi Sangho inevitably found himself thinking of the nation.

### *Conceptions and Illusions of the Origin of the Nation*

Nearly every travelogue about Baekdusan incorporated notions of the nation. However, it was Choe Namseon who most strongly emphasized the notion of the nation, and sought to restore the origins of the Korean nation. In this regard, while An Jaehong's travelogue includes a magnificent attempt to restore national history, this effort in effect expanded upon the theoretical framework first developed by Choe Namseon.

Why did Choe Namseon use a trek to Baekdusan as an opportunity to search for the origins of the Korean nation? The nation and national character can only be maintained through the mechanism known as the state. Choe was an intellectual from a state that had now become a colony. An avowed national activist, Choe became a historian after having served a two-and-a-half year prison term that had followed his arrest shortly after the March 1st Movement was implemented as a part of the national independence movement (Seo 2005). Thus, Choe found himself during the early 1920s, a period that saw a marked increase in the intensity of the nationalist movement, trying to develop a way to preserve the national character at a time when he was essentially stateless. The answer he came up with was that the national character could in fact be preserved as long as the members of the nation had a common perception and recollection of the origin and history of the nation. This can be regarded as the reason why Choe concentrated on the theory of Dangun.

However, this proved to be a thorny research theme that drew the ire of positivist Japanese historians such as Shiratori Kurakichi who asserted that the Dangun Myth was nothing more than a legend fabricated by the monk Ilyeon. This assertion was rooted in the imperialist logic that it was impossible for a state like Gojoseon to have existed as a unified political unit before Japan itself had established a unified kingdom.

The only way to counter such assertions was to create a new disciplinary methodology. To this end, Choe Namseon not only established a new sphere of inquiry with the establishment of the study of Dangun, but also explored the origins of the Korean nation based on comparative cultural studies such as comparative anthropology, comparative folklore, and comparative linguistics (Kim 2004). Given that approach, for Choe Namseon, the trek to Baekdusan was an exploration designed to search for vivid materials which

could be used to prove the existence of Dangun.

Nervously opening the door, I found myself going limp before the sacredness of the ancestral tablet that lay in front of me as well as the uncontrollable emotions and inspiration that suddenly overcame me. Looking at the characters ‘天王之位 (the tablets of the heavenly king)’ engraved on the tablet enshrined at the forefront of the altar, I suddenly felt as if my heart had skipped a beat, the lump in my abdomen had been removed and my heart was filled with thanks. I found myself bowing more excitedly and emotionally when I saw the characters ‘國師大天王之位 (tablets of the tutelary deity and great heavenly king)’ engraved on another tablet that appeared to have been used as an ancestral tablet in the past.

The god of Baekdusan must be the ‘heavenly god.’ Yes, this has to be the ‘國師大天王 (great tutelary deity and heavenly king).’ As the god of the homeland, mountain god, and heavenly god, what else can he be called but the ‘heavenly king?’ That being the case, this ‘heavenly king’ must indicate Dangun, and the Heavenly King Hwanwung[.] (Choe 1973:50-51)

Choe Namseon is said to have fallen onto his knees and bowed in an emotional and inspired manner when he saw the ancestral tablet on which it was written ‘國師大天王之位’ at the Guksadang (國師堂, Shrine of the Tutelary Deity) located at Heohang Peak. According to Choe’s interpretation, while the tutelary deity indicated the divine being, the heavenly king referred to Dangun. Who is or was Dangun? Simply put, Dangun is the ancestor of the Korean nation, the point of origin of the state, a man-god and a celestial being, and the beginning and essence of Korean civilization. Upon his own visit to this Guksadang at Heohang Peak five years before, Min Taewon had asserted that there must have been a reason why the residents of the Baekdusan area continued to worship this tablet at a time when the people of Joseon had all but forgotten about Dangun. In Min’s mind, the ‘heavenly king’ referred to on the tablet was none other than Dangun. The exploration conducted by the nationalist historian Choe Namseon can as such be regarded as the furthering of the position first suggested by Min Taewon. The sense of admiration exhibited by Choe as he stood before this Guksadang, which was perceived as a Shaman site, was motivated by a simple observation, namely the fact that Dangun had continuously existed, albeit in a symbolic and concealed manner, in the

folklore and linguistic culture of the nation. This, he perceived, represented a way to overcome the absence of historical materials, to respond against the logic established by the Japanese imperialist scholars who had asserted that the Dangun myth was a fabrication, and to further restore the origins of the glorious national history of Korea.

A huge and grand field called Cheonpyeong comes into sight as one crosses Heohang Peak. Choe Namseon estimated in 1918 that this place may in fact have been the *sinsi* (神市, god's city) built by Hwanwung and his three thousand men that had been referred to in the *Samguk yusa* (三國遺事). In other words, this Cheonpyeong in Baekdusan was the place where Gojoseon was founded. Choe Namseon started to compose a solemn and emotional narrative about the origin of the Korean nation upon his arrival at this sacred place. He described the degree of culture which had been achieved during the rule of the heavenly king Dangun as having been quite advanced. Moreover, while other tribes were focused on hunting, the Dangun tribe had already developed agriculture. Gojoseon was described as an advanced Asian kingdom both in terms of culture and economy. Choe described the situation as follows.

However, only our people possessed a civilian and military culture; meanwhile, all others possessed what can best be termed as a barbaric culture. The outstanding degree of civilization that had been achieved is evidenced by the fact that while all other peoples focused on hunting, our people had already developed an agrarian economy. Viewed from the standpoint of cultural spirit, the culture of *Sinsi* can be said to have been more advanced than that of Silla. Gojoseon was an advanced kingdom both in terms of culture and economy in Asia. All of this of course originated from *Sinsi*. Under the rule of the heavenly king Dangun, this was a peaceful world where grain was abundant, industry was developed, and a passionate civilization flourished. This was a prosperous society. That green field in which the horses are standing may have been a rich residential area, or the garden of a member of the aristocracy. The fragrant poems and songs of a beautiful maiden and the remains of prestigious households may be buried under the sand. Even these mounds and fields that have been exposed to the winds and rains for such a long period of time that they have become flattened, may actually at some point have served as the site where youth trained and took part in forms of entertainment such as horseback riding, playing games, making weapons, and flying falcons. (Choe 1973:64)

Choe's descriptions should be regarded as the creation of a new myth rather than as the reproduction of history. In Choe's subjective interpretation, the onset of the national history of Korea can in fact be traced back to well before the civilizations of Silla and Goryeo. In this regard, Choe can be said to exhibit his skills as a passionate poet rather than as an objective historian. The pages of this work are filled with fantasies and illusions. These include a reference to vestiges of Dangun's rule over his kingdom being submerged beneath the holes in the empty fields; the claim that the mountain's green fields could have at one time been a wealthy village or a garden owned by the members of the ruling class; the assertion that the surrounding hills could have been the place where courageous youth honed their horseback riding skills; and the contention that beautiful songs and poems left behind by lovely maidens may have been buried underground.

Viewed from this standpoint, Choe Namseon's imagined reality in which the nation originated in Baekdusan's Cheonpyeong was not meant to restore the past, but rather to inspire future independent activists. As such, Choe's strong desire to build a nation-state far removed from the reality of colonial history led him to imagine an advanced civilized state that had taken root at Baekdusan, the location where Joseon itself was born. In reality, Choe called for "a new country to be built with our own hands." The state that should be established was one composed of pure-blooded Koreans, in which the Korean language was spoken, and the spirit of Korea was cherished in the hearts of the people. He also claimed that such a nation, if it could not be actually brought about, should remain in the people's hearts after having been conceived in their minds. As such, this can be regarded as a call on Choe's part for the "indigenous composition of the nation," and as the completion of his narrative of the racially homogenous nation (Gu 2004:146-47).

### *Poetic Language and Historical Truth*

The imagined reality of the Korean nation found in the pages of the travelogues of Baekdusan produced during the 1920s and 1930s reached its zenith in Choe Namseon's Baekdusan geunchamgi (白頭山觀參記). His travelogue was published in serial form in the Donga Ilbo and subsequently published in book form. In this regard, Yi Eunsang wrote a review of the book.

Although Yi Eunsang praised Choe's travelogue for the rich imagination displayed by the author and the latter's valiant attempt to awaken the national spirit, he nevertheless took issue with what he identified as the work's many philosophical and academic problems. More to the point, while Choe claimed that he was always scientific in his approach, Yi's chastened him for being overly religious and subjective, and for opting for a mythical and idealistic approach instead of a realistic or practical one. This can be viewed as sharp criticism. The great majority of today's scholars have also criticized Choe's travelogue on the same grounds. Rather than having abandoned academic rigidity, Choe can be said to have created an ideology of the nation that was based on religious faith. However, his logic and lack of objective verification meant that he also shared many similarities with the Japanese imperialist scholars of his day.

Even today, Baekdusan continues to have a profound meaning for the people of Korea and China, both of which perceive it as the point of origin of nationalist thought and indigenous historical descriptions. To this end, the main lesson which can be gleaned from the travelogues about Baekdusan compiled during the 1920s and 1930s is that Baekdusan should serve as a base to bring us closer to the historical truth rather than as an ideological hub.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, let us now summarize the review of the travelogues of Baekdusan written by the intellectuals of colonial Joseon during the 1920s and 1930s that was conducted herein. This study explored the theme-based significance of seven travelogues of Baekdusan, ranging from Min Taewon's Baekdusan haeng compiled in 1921 to Yi Sangho's Baekdusan haeng in 1936.

Although each author exhibited certain descriptive differences, all of these travelogues share the commonality of searching for the national identity of the Korean people. By once again drawing attention to the boundary issue and expounding upon the sacred vestiges of Dangun, these works focused on reflecting both the pride that came from being a racially homogenous nation and the scars of imperialism. To this end, the

travelogues of Baekdusan produced during this period not only helped give form to the national identity, but also simultaneously become a resistive discourse against the assimilation-oriented policies of imperial Japan.

These travelogues of Baekdusan captured the development of the national landscape that took place in the name of civilization but was in reality undertaken as part of capitalist exploitation. They also described the draw of Gando (Jiandao), an area that had been lost because of Japanese coercion. Moreover, by drawing attention to living spaces that had been wrenched from the daily realm of the people of Joseon as a result of the adjustment of the border, these works also helped to induce a stronger awareness of the nation.

In addition, increased attention was paid to Baekdusan as the space within which the nation originated via a focus on the relics of Dangun, the individual widely regarded as the founder of the Korean nation. Such a line of reasoning was particularly evident in Choe Namseon's travelogue. Choe imagined an outstanding racially homogenous nation that had formed around the Guksadang and Cheonpyeong at Baekdusan, and highlighted the fact that the Koreans were the descendants of this civilization.

However, Choe's narrative left itself open to criticism because of the fact that it was based on subjective rather than objective logic and rooted in mythical imaginations rather than science.

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**Lee Hyungdae** (leehd@korea.ac.kr) received his Ph.D. from Korea University and currently is a professor in its Department of Korean Language and Literature. His academic interests lie in studying the trends of *sigajon* literature during the transition period to modernity as well as in comparative approaches to the aesthetics of East Asian literature.

## Abstract

This study explores the theme-based significance of seven travelogues of Baekdusan written in the 1920s and 1930s by Korean intellectuals, ranging from Min Taewon's Baekdusan haeng compiled in 1921 to Yi Sangho's Baekdusan haeng in 1936. These travelogues of Baekdusan are based on a search for the national identity of Korea but they each have their own characteristics. They mainly have two perspectives. One is related to the criticism of the reality of colonial destruction in Korea which was justified under the name of modernization by the Japanese. Through this perspective, authors often paid attention to the draw of Gando (Jiandao), an area that had been lost because of Japanese coercion. The other is about searching for the national identity of Korea by reminiscing about Korean myths while visiting Baekdusan, which is a relatively subjective perspective. As in the case of Choe Namseon's work, Baekdusan is regarded as the space from which the nation originated via a focus on the relics of Dangun, the individual widely regarded as the founder of the Korean nation.

**Keywords:** travel, colonial Joseon, Baekdusan, awareness of the homeland, nation, historical truth

