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Recreational Hiking in South Korea:
Transforming the Body, Transforming the Land

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Abstract

Mountains have long held a central role in Korean culture, a role that has been newly highlighted by the surging popularity of recreational hiking in South Korea. And yet, to the extent that hiking foregrounds the significance of the mountains, it also foregrounds the significance of the body in South Korean society today, as both the land and the body are implicated in the growth of hiking. After charting the historical and cultural background of the hiking phenomenon, which has ascended to a national pastime, this article will analyze the meanings attached to the mountains and the body as a result. What emerges from the analysis is evidence of recreational hiking's truly transformational potential, its capacity to recreate. In terms of the body, the ritual and performative dimensions hiking has acquired unlock occasions for physical and spiritual transformation, as well as structure new opportunities for the playful and ethical reinvention of the self. In regard to the land, hiking literally transforms the faces of mountains as its mass appeal challenges competing claims for land use and development. Equally important, however, are the ideological transformations of mountain space that sustain hiking's material claims.

Keywords: hiking, mountains, Korea, recreation, the body, ritual, leisure

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Introduction

The mountains in Korea, which comprise more than two-thirds of the land area, have long been central to Korean culture. Whether to provide a space for religious worship, aesthetic inspiration, day-to-day sustenance or political refuge, the historical roles of Korea's mountains are as varied as the mountains themselves are timeless, a claim which points to the interpretive and functional malleability of the mountains in the hands of the people that live among them.

Yet, over the last forty years, hiking in South Korea has come to dominate the mountain scene. On any given day and in any given season the mountains are brimming with outdoor enthusiasts, a phenomenon duly observed by the South Korean public, the international press, and by direct implication recreation equipment companies, the fashion industry, environmental conservation groups, and the South Korean government. Thus, regardless of the diverse practices facilitated by the mountains, today they are predominantly characterized as spaces of recreation and leisure. This is not to argue that they have become trivialized or insignificant. On the contrary, South Korea's case of leisure hiking—intensely ritualized and laden with implications for the nation—is rather serious,[1] for despite what may appear to be a frivolous outdoor fad, the popularity of hiking is both a source and a symptom of the mountains' ongoing role as a vital cultural space.

If the recent popularity of hiking has freshly highlighted the significance of Korea's mountains, it has also drawn attention to the significance of the body in Korean society. Not only is the typical South Korean hiker scrupulously—and even ceremoniously—dressed, but also the very physicality of hiking suggests a preoccupation with corporeal health and fitness. Add to this the fact that hiking is most popular among middle-aged and

1. Within the field of leisure studies, the concept of "serious leisure" was first elaborated by the sociologist Robert Stebbins (1982), who argued that leisure is "no longer seen as chiefly a means of recuperating from the travail of the job" (253), but rather a means of fulfilling one's human potential.

older Koreans rather than the youth, and one can sense the preponderance of body-related issues at hand.

The South Korean hiking boom hence opens two sites fertile for critical discourse: the land and the body. Interpreting data culled from newspaper reports, magazine articles, and government documents through relevant sociological lenses, this article will demonstrate the extent of hiking's transformative role at each of these sites. At the site of the body, it is the ritual and performative dimensions of hiking that unlock occasions for transformation. Physical and spiritual renewal, alongside the playful and ethical reinvention of identity, is the most characteristic of these transformations. At the site of the land, hiking literally transforms the faces of mountains as its mass appeal challenges competing claims for land use and development. Of course the material transformations of the land are sustained by specific, socially propagated conceptualizations of mountain space. This section will thus focus on the *ideological* transformation of Korea's mountains—their social, political, and economic identity shifts. Together, the two sections of this article, accounting for the actor and space of hiking, will provide a comprehensive tale of the truly recreational capacity of recreational hiking in South Korea. Before proceeding with the analysis, I want to begin with a prefatory description of the historical background and cultural influences that made hiking the South Korean national pastime that it is today.

Prologue

Hiking's Ascendancy

Koreans' ancient affinity for the mountains makes the history of mountain hiking difficult to trace. One could argue that hiking has always existed, in the form of the pilgrimage, the meditative escape, or the aimless excursion. Daily life itself often necessitated a "hike," perhaps to collect *yaksu* (medicinal water), gather *namu*l (forest herbs and greens), or pay homage to a buried ancestor, practices that persist in the present day. Moreover, as isolation

from society lends itself to forms of cultivating the mind and body, throughout history one encounters routine mountain excursions in the conventions of individuals ranging from *pansori* singers, to *gicheon* 氣天 spiritualists (Ten 2013), to reclusive literati (Keum 1994). Drawing from 16th century travelogues, Jung Min (2012) captures a mountain landscape variously peopled by Neo-Confucian pilgrims, Buddhist monks, lay pleasure travelers, falconers, and peasants.

Yet, despite premodern precedents for mountain hiking, the facilities and resources dedicated to it now, as well as the customs and routines structuring it, are without equivalents. Perusing the annals of hiking history, one can trace the nascency of mass recreational hiking in South Korea to the 1960s. A contemporary American citizen, Carl Miller, provides a glimpse of the early hiking scene during a 1963 excursion up Mt. Hallasan, South Korea's highest mountain. The "paths are poor" and "a guide is indispensable," he writes (Miller 1963, 28). Not only are encounters with other hikers rare, but also the areas Miller is passing through are visibly still healing from the ecological and emotional damage suffered during the Korean War and its build-up.

War scars would not heal quickly, but by the end of the 1960s hiking's foothold in the leisure lives of many South Koreans had strengthened, particularly among the upper classes, which could afford appropriate hiking paraphernalia, often acquired through American military Post Exchanges. Many others owed their entry into hiking to a college field trip or to one of the increasingly ubiquitous workplace hiking clubs. With the designation of the first Korean national park in 1967, the destinations and facilities catering to hikers continued to expand. It was at the turn of the decade, too, that Korea's largest and most ambitious Gyeongbu Expressway was built, spurring further getaways to the nation's mountains.

Weekend leisure hikers continued to multiply through the 1970s as did nationally designated park space, but it was not until the 1980s that hiking fever soared. One contributing factor is rooted in the industrial growth of the decade. As the detrimental effects of industrialization on the ecosystem were exposed by researchers and media outlets, a new environmental consciousness began to spread among a bulging urban population

(Cho 2004). Distrustful of urbanization and sensitive to leading an environmentally friendly way of life, this consciousness maintained an affinity for nature that could be expressed in hiking.

The 1980s also saw Seoul play host to both the Asian Games (1986) and the Summer Olympics (1988). It was not so much the concomitant expansion of sports facilities that stimulated hiking, but the growth in a discourse of "wellbeing." Adopted into the Korean language from English, the term "wellbeing" denotes a lifestyle focused on one's personal health and self-improvement or a prioritizing of the body through exercise and healthy consumption choices. Administrative promotion of wellbeing through exercise and sport began in earnest soon after Seoul's Olympic selection was announced in September 1981. Guided by ideals that sought national vitality in individual vitality and wanting athletes prepared for the international stage, the government began to turn its attention away from elite sports and towards sports for the masses (Chang 2002, 165).

Additionally critical to the recreational boom of the 1980s was the thriving economy. On the production side, low interest rates, low oil prices, and a low exchange on the dollar gave retailers, marketers, and business conglomerates incentive to capitalize on the wellbeing trend (M. Kim 2005, 62). On the consumer side, South Koreans had the disposable time and income to invest in leisure. With wellbeing on many minds and tongues, it was exercise, rather than travel, culture, spectacle, or art, that demanded many people's spare time. Widespread economic prosperity was also reflected in the dramatic rise in automobile ownership. Within the decade the number of registered automobiles increased from 528,000 to 3,395,000 (Chang 2002, 148). As Kim Moon-Kyum explains, suddenly "the radius of daily life expanded" (2005, 62). South Koreans could leave the crowded city for the day, heading outdoors to the mountains and green space.

Economic growth continued until 1997, when South Korea suffered a financial crisis and subsequent bailout from the International Monetary Fund. Surprisingly, however, the growth of hiking continued, this time attracting the displaced workers who had nowhere to go during the daytime. Wanting to remain active and healthy, many of these able-bodied citizens, the majority of them middle-aged men, turned to hiking. With slogans

of "remain healthy for a comeback,"[2] broadcast in the news, hiking offered an inexpensive and uplifting pastime to the hopeful unemployed. A 1997 survey from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism captures the atmosphere well: hiking was ranked as the favorite sport among men, women, and the elderly population, with a quarter of all women and nearly half (46.2%) of the elderly selecting hiking as their favorite (Chang 2002, 158).

Into the 2000s, hiking persists in dominating mountain spaces in South Korea. One journalist recently reported that one out of every three Koreans goes hiking more than once a month.[3] The Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) recorded a total of twenty million hikers in 2012, a figure it expects to sustain given the country's current per capita income, expenditures on leisure, and an aging population looking to stay active and healthy.[4] Also taking into account the recent implementation of a five-day school week and the reduction of the average work week, it should come as no surprise that Bukhansan National Park, located just north of Seoul, holds the *Guinness World Record* for the national park with the most annual visitors relative to land area, drawing crowds considered ten times the park's proper capacity (Jeong 2003).

The unprecedented attendance rates of national parks like Bukhansan may signal the fulfillment of South Korea's thirty-year transition from a "work and production-centered" culture to a "leisure and consumption-centered" culture (M. Kim 2005, 82). The KCCI is animated by a similar impression: "In the history of developed countries," they report, "when a country's per capita income reached twenty-thousand dollars, the expenditure on leisure increased tremendously" (KCCI 2012). With South Korea now having attained the twenty thousand dollar mark, there truly is reason to believe that the nation's leisure habits have become quite serious, and in

2. Park Chan-Kyong, "Haute-Couture Hiking in South Korea," *Fox News*, August 14, 2013, http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/08/14/haute-couture-hiking-in-south-korea/.
3. Chico Harlan, "In South Korea, Hiking Has Become Almost a National Identity," *Washington Post*, July 28, 2014.
4. Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI), "Report on the Future Trend of the Leisure Industry," November 6, 2012, http://english.korcham.net/sub02/Report_view.asp?nKey=1527 & search field=&searchtext=.

no other sphere of leisure is this seriousness more apparent than in hiking.

Transforming the Body

Ritual, Renewal and Reinvention

Hiking is, foremost, an aerobic activity performed by a body. Thus, in order to make meaning of South Korea's hiking culture, approaching the body as a site of analysis is essential. Undertaking this analysis, I argue, one arrives at a recurring theme of transformation, a theme that becomes evident if we begin by adopting the framework of the ritual. In anthropological usage, "ritual" denotes the routinized, communal, symbolic, and performative aspects of an activity or cultural custom. By showing that hiking displays a large element of ritual and by acknowledging that at the core of ritual is transformation (Turner 1969), I can begin to demonstrate the transformative effects of hiking on the body.

The ritual elements of hiking emerge immediately out of the fact that the mountain is physically and ideologically separated from the urban and the everyday. It is a space, that is, of liminality, a space in opposition to the ordinary (Turner 1969; Moore 1980). For hikers, who are mostly urbanites accustomed to the speed and architecture of a metropolis, the mountain offers a wholly opposite environment of repose and greenery. From a slightly different angle, Lee Hongkyun suggests that the mountain's liminality arises from its escaping the competitive market space of the city (Lee 2004, 169), a view which echoes many hikers' tendency to distinguish between the city as commodified space and nature as an "anti-commodity" (Wigen 2005, 4).

The extent to which a space represents liminality, difference or anti-structure, is the extent to which it facilitates transformation (Gennep 1909; Turner 1969). What kind of transformation, we may ask, is entailed? "Forest bathing,"[5] "wellbeing" trails, and Therapy Forests offered by the Korean For-

5. The inhaling and exposing of the skin to fortifying, antimicrobial compounds emitted from trees.

est Service indicate that one level of transformation through hiking is healing. People, who spend time in the mountain exercising or simply resting under its trees, allow their bodies and minds to recover from the stresses of urban life. One journalist exclaims that the mountains allow you to both figuratively and literally rise "above the city and its choking air" (La Shure 2009). In this sense, like pilgrims transformed through a distant pilgrimage, the hiker returns to urban life "renewed, and even cured" (Moore 1980, 210).

The curative aspect of hiking has especial importance for the demographic of hikers who are retired or aging. As noted previously, a large percentage of those whose schedules allow for regular hiking are over 50 years old (W. Kim 2004).[6] An underfunded and low-coverage national pension system, combined with shrinking family networks to provide informal care, means that many of these individuals are singlehandedly responsible for their old age health and wellbeing. With South Korea's population approaching "super-aging" proportions, the only certainty regarding the future of medical care costs is their immensity (Eun 2008). In such a context, hiking takes on prophylactic tones.

For other hikers, visits to the mountain provide healing of a more spiritual nature, a tradition that has roots that are centuries old. David Mason, a religious scholar of the Korean mountains, discerns that the worship of mountain spirits, or *sansin*, was historically at the very core of Korean society, infusing all aspects of daily life as well as each of Korea's principal religions, from Buddhism and Daoism to Confucianism and Christianity. In his words, compared to the *sansin*, "No other iconic symbol comes close to containing so many connections to other major vectors of 'traditional' Korean culture" (1999, 199). Though many traditional forms of mountain worship have disappeared, the spiritual status of Korea's mountains has not faded from view. Seasonal shamanic rituals continue to be practiced (D. Kim 2004; Mason 2011b, 37), mountain burial of the dead

6. South Korea has a very low average retirement age: retirement for public employees is mandatory at age 60. Among all workers with a regular employment contract, the average retirement age is in the mid-1950s (Howe 2007, 36).

remains commonplace, and a general association of the mountains with *bok* 福 (good fortune), protection, and *gi* 氣 (positive life forces) is widespread. Thus, for many hikers a trip to the mountains, while not explicitly religious in intent, is imbued with spirituality. Whether evoked by the temples and shrines dotting the landscape, by the myths and legends pervading each mountain, or by the symbolically loaded name of a mountain itself, one's senses are quickly attuned to the land's metaphysics.

A key component of ritual, notes Turner, is that before entering a liminal space one discards one's "secular" clothing in preparation for the body to be refashioned ceremonially (1969, 108). The inward transformation of the body through ritual, in other words, is accompanied by an outward transformation of the body. Recreational hiking, for its part, displays such a ritual tendency. As all newcomers to the South Korean hiking scene observe, attire is everything. One journalist's jeer pushes the point well: "While jeans and a T-shirt will draw attention—mainly in the form of thinly-disguised pity—a US$650 North Face jacket . . . will barely merit a second glance."[7] In the same vein, a *New York Times* reporter's casual observation that Korean hikers wear their gear as "a type of modern religious raiment"[8] gestures towards the level of ritualization that dressing for hiking has acquired.

South Korean hikers' enormous investment in outfits and gear is reflected by the sales figures of the outdoor apparel market, which, valued at approximately US$6 billion, is currently the fastest growing segment of the fashion industry.[9] Before the leisure and outdoor recreation boom in the 1980s, there was very little domestic market for sporting goods. As noted, hikers relied on old military equipment, or otherwise looked to expensive imports.[10] Since then, hiking has buoyed South Korean fashion along with

7. Park Chan-Kyong, "Haute-Couture Hiking in South Korea," *Fox News*, August 14, 2013, http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/08/14/haute-couture-hiking-in-south-korea/.
8. Elizabeth Eaves, "Along the Trail of Korea's Mountain Spirits," *New York Times*, November 30, 2012.
9. "Korean Outdoor Fashion Market on Rise," *Korea Textile World* 3.3 (August 2013): 18-20.
10. Choi Ji-young, "From a Few Hiking Clubs to a National Sensation," *Korea JungAng Daily*, April 13, 2010.

recreation equipment designers and retailers, spurring new brands, new trends in casual street fashion, and new forms of outdoor adventure (Y. Kim 2013).[11] Statistics show that even during recent recessions, the sale of mountain hiking goods continued to rise (La Shure 2009). Consider—for a *summer* hike—that South Koreans wear an average of US$1,000 worth of gear per person.[12]

Explaining why South Korean hikers put so much money and effort into their dress may not rely solely on theories of ritual. Another explanation may lie in theories of consumption, specifically within the idea that as religious life becomes more secularized, secular life becomes more sacred (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). In this way, the sentiments and devotions that have historically been directed toward religion are finding a surrogate in leisure pursuits. Where religion may once have administered the avenue of spiritual transformation, consumer purchases are now enlisted (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989, 9). Therefore, what many outsiders to South Korean hiking regard as excessive dress,[13] and what some Koreans take for conspicuous consumption is perhaps best viewed as a display of the transformative power of consumption.

Without question, clothing has the power to transform. The very alteration of appearance lends a sense of seriousness and commitment to an undertaking, while simultaneously allowing for an element of make-believe and play. Dressing the part of the hiker is not merely a question of practicality, but of identity recreation, of "creating a more significant, noble, exciting, and confident self" (Belk and Costa 1998, 234). Clothing is at the front line of self-presentation and is therefore essential to giving the body new "public meaning" (Yarnal, Son, and Liechty 2011, 52), or a reconstructed identity to replace one's "day-to-day role, rank, and status"

11. Shin Hyon-hee, "Korea's Outdoor Clothing Climbing to Fashion Heights," *Korea Herald*, December 22, 2010.
12. Chico Harlan, "In South Korea, Hiking Has Become Almost a National Identity," *Washington Post*, July 28, 2014.
13. For one angle on how the Korean hiking uniform is viewed internationally, see the article "'Deungsanbok = yeohaengbok inga . . . yureopseon biuseum daesang" (Europeans Mock Korean Tourists in Hiking Outfits), *Kookmin Ilbo*, October 28, 2014.

(Moore 1980, 211).

For older hikers, dress is doubly vital in that it forces others to "reevaluate the aging body" (Yarnal et al. 2011, 53). Confronted with cultural scripts that equate old age with feebleness, invisibility, inactivity, and illness, many aging South Koreans don the hiking outfit and turn to the mountains as a means of "resisting and destabilizing" the dominant discourse (Mansvelt 1997, 293; Chung 2008, 140), for rather than suggesting blunted strength and muted activity, the hiking outfit is an outward sign of vigor and rejuvenation.

The power of hiking to transform its devotees through play and the fanciful reinvention of self is equally matched by a power to transform through its strains and its rigor. Dating to the country's unparalleled economic growth in the 1960s, one national narrative South Korea has prided itself on is that of the industriousness of its people. This narrative continues to drive the economy as well as orient the lives of citizens, who negotiate notoriously competitive structures of education and job training. With this narrative in mind, what role does hiking play in the real or imagined industriousness of South Koreans? For one, hiking cultivates a body that feels both empowered and committed to the idea of self-improvement. The very act of summiting a mountain—at which the majority of trails in Korea are aimed—is an apt metaphor and rehearsal for the trials of a workday demanding sustained effort. Svarstad's research on hiker motivation confirms this observation in describing how participants connect the positive effects of hiking to "their abilities to meet performance requirements in work and daily life" (Svarstad 2010, 98). Hence, though hiking may serve as a reprieve from work, in fundamental ways it not only exhibits the ethics of work but also reaffirms those very ethics.

Further evidence that South Korean industriousness finds a companion in hiking culture surfaces in the popularity that hiking enjoys among citizens over 50 years of age. Since within this age group the lack of a demonstrated work ethic carries connotations of dependency and being a burden on family (Mansvelt 1997, 292; Katz 2000), the opportunity to demonstrate one's worth through hiking is compelling. Hiking, after all, demands fitness and vitality, which, in a work-oriented society that cele-

brates the young, ambitious, active body, are important assets to generating a feeling of self-worth.

The unconscious project of developing oneself for work while disengaged from work is reminiscent of South Korean hiking actualities in the 1990s, when the crisis-laden government presented hiking as training for reemployment and a means of combatting the stresses of an economic slowdown (Chang 2002, 169). The association of physical fitness and worker productivity was not without precedent in South Korea. The nationwide program for modernization initiated in the 1970s, known as Saemaul Undong (New Community Movement), saw the popularization of sports as a key to economic and military might. Guided by a motto of "physical strength is national strength," the government founded Health Sports Week, enacted physical ability tests in school, and allocated money to finance sporting events (Chang 2002, 165). Today, the massive popularity of mountain recreation ensures that much of this emphasis on fitness has been channeled into hiking. The formation of employee hiking clubs as well as regular company hiking outings attest to the perceived coherence of the hiker and the worker, and the ongoing role of the mountain as the expressive terrain of the working body, a place where the body is not only refreshed but where it is ethically transformed.

Transforming the Land

Material and Ideological Shifts

Korean poet Lee Sung-boo, describing the inspiration he derives from Seoul's nearby mountains, remarks "it is possible to cross over from the mundane world to a divine realm of the gods in a mere 60 minutes" (Lee 2004, 24). While the sheer geographical abundance of mountains in Korea makes their accessibility undeniable, Lee's comment betrays an attitude towards nature that is neither individually nor culturally universal. Many Koreans, long relying on the mountains for harvesting and foraging, natural resource acquisition and livestock grazing, consider the mountains as

much a part of their mundane, material livelihoods as reserves for contemplation and religious observance. Therefore, obscured by Lee's comment, which utters a complacent belief in the artistic and spiritual privileging of Korea's mountains, are alternative views that favor much different uses of the mountain, whether agricultural, economic, ecological, or purely recreational.

Although various attitudes toward mountain spaces coexist, so does the tension between parties whose visions are vying for currency. Sixteenth century Neo-Confucian scholars competed with Buddhist monks over the right to name and claim mountain ranges (Jung 2012, 31). Modern-day monks residing in mountain temples recognize that hikers present an opportunity to raise awareness for Buddhism but are not ignorant of the threat posed by constant visitors "trampling sacred ground" (Wigen 2005, 6; Kaplan 2010). Even among hiking enthusiasts, priorities differ between those who favor more restrictive mountain access and those who argue the benefits of popular, high-density use (Mormont 1987, 10; Ryu and Won 2013, 113).

As competing claims on nature circulate, businesses, scholars, the media, community organizations, and government bodies exercise power to ensure that specific claims prevail over others. Those with the power to best mobilize resources and disseminate information are those whose environmental claims will predominate (Greider and Garkovitch 1994). Through such power, one might say, a model of nature becomes naturalized (Mormont 1987, 10). The naturalization—or accepted normalization—of hiking in South Korea is evident in the country's integrated system of national and regional parks, as well as its vast networks of hiking trails. These stand as testaments to the success of hikers' claims for a protected, unsullied, public wilderness over and against opposing environmental ideals, especially those posited by farmers, miners, land developers, and strict environmental protectionists (O'Neill 1996, 526). Winning the status of "Protected Area" or "National Park" for sections of Korea's mountains, for example, is a defeat for many local farmers who rely on high elevation land for cultivation (Ryu and Won 2013, 121). What is the significance now that a recreational model of nature is becoming widespread and legitimized? Aside from the material

changes—the infrastructure of roadways, national parks, shops, and restaurants for hiking—how is the land being transformed *ideologically*? To answer this query, we must uncover some of the ideological narratives that articulate with hiking and spread through its popularity.

One of the ideological narratives hiking has helped advance is that which sees in the geographical unity of the Korean peninsula a claim for its political unity. This narrative is rooted in the mythical origins of the Korean nation. As related in the tale of Dangun, Korean ethnicity can be traced to the descent of ancient heavenly rulers to Baekdusan mountain.[14] While the myth has earned Baekdusan mountain a sacred place in Korean culture, it has also indelibly inscribed the topography of the peninsula onto a race of people, conjoining the geo-body with the ethnic body. Whatever social, cultural, or political divisions may arise, the Korean national imaginary remains informed by a narrative of inherited geographical oneness.

Given the narrative that Korean land and Korean ethnicity are indivisible and given hiking's inherent intimacy with the land, it follows that hiking could be read as a gesture for the unification of the Korean people. In fact, some of the most vociferous support for the unification of the Koreas, or at least their cooperation, is raised from hiking quarters (Mason 1999).[15] Unsatisfied with visiting Baekdusan mountain along the Chinese border, many hikers request permission to cross into North Korea in order to continue their journey along Korea's mountain ridges (Ryu and Won 2013, 113), while others assume activist roles in debates on unification, aiming to influence policy makers in the Korea Forest Service and related government ministries.

Claims for a union of the two Koreas are backed by more than mythology, for the Korean peninsula is observably united by a single, uninterrupted mountain range. Stretching 1,600 kilometers from Baekdusan mountain in the north to Jirisan mountain in the south, the Baekdudaegan and its off-

14. As Pai and Tangherlini (1998, 2) argue, this narrative owes its legitimacy to the "collective historical imaginations" of recent "nationalist historians."

15. Choe Sang-Hun, "New Zealander Hopes to Hike North and South Korea," *New York Times*, July 29, 2013.

shooting ridges form the "nervous system" of the peninsular body. Unsurprisingly, it was hikers "who made the greatest contribution to the broad diffusion of popular knowledge concerning Baekdudaegan" (Ryu and Won 2013, 108). Publishing in magazines and newspaper columns throughout the 1980s and 1990s, members of the hiking community urged against the cutting off of the Baekdudaegan at its mid-section, an act tantamount to severing a living organism. In the words of hiking enthusiast and promotional ambassador of the Baekdudaegan, the range is "the primary symbol of the Korean nation and its aspirations for peaceful reunification" (Mason 2011b, 6). The successful transformation of the Baekdudaegan ridge into hiking trails and conservation areas over the last decade in some ways can be seen as a small step in the direction of these aspirations. In all cases, the ideological transformation of the mountains is clear: though hiking is not necessarily an overt political act, its relationship to an ancestral narrative of place-bound Korean identity has brought the politics of Korea's land to the fore.

Leaving the city and breaching the trailhead, the hiker ineluctably encounters evidence of another ideological transformation of the mountain space. As the mountains are the birthplace of the Korean people, they too comprise the seat of an authentic, stable tradition, or so the narrative reads. Though admittedly Korea's mountains are home to numerous historical shrines, temples, and battle sites, and though the nation remained agricultural for much of its history, the positioning of rural, mountainous Korea as the hallowed incubator of Korea's proud past is a narrative that has only recently emerged. Glimpses of this narrative, which ignore the constant volatility of rural life and the heterogeneity constituting "tradition," surface in the rural site marketing of the Korean Tourism Organization and in the designated cultural properties of the Cultural Heritage Administration. Many of the Korean mountains' most committed activists similarly espouse the narrative of an authentic Korea that can only be encountered by hiking the rural mountainside. A public relations ambassador for the Korea Tourism Organization mystifies the Baekdudaegan as a place "infused with a mysterious energy emitted by a living, superhuman presence," as well as containing "the origin of the transcendental perceptions of the Korean peo-

ple" (J. Park 2011, 62). Mason spoke of the hiking experience by saying that "stopping off in remote rural villages for recuperation, hikers will meet many of Korea's friendliest, wisest and hospitable people," which, in his estimation are "the mountain-system's greatest treasures" (Mason 2011b, 35). What this discourse amounts to is an enchantment with and conflation of Korea's mountains and its past or, as Creighton argues, the substitution of "a temporal distance" for "a geographical one" (Creighton 1997, 252). Although this narrative does not originate with hiking, hiking and the attitudes accompanying it do much to swathe the mountains in a reverential mystique of wholesomeness and immortal purity.

In many instances, this ideological image of mountain spaces disguises the material reality. As national parks and local trails experience record levels of usage, the tranquility and simplicity projected onto the land is called into question. Bottlenecked foot and auto traffic are hardly idyllic, not to mention being environmentally unfriendly. Recreational hiking also draws in its wake a tremendous consumer infrastructure. At the base of every major mountain are clothing and equipment retailers along with numerous restaurants. For those who see hiking as an escape from the consumption patterns prevailing in city life, the culture of South Korean hiking deserves a second look.

Nonetheless, in spite of all the consumption, congestion and distraction, hikers maintain an ideology of the land that conceptually negates its modernizing surface and transforms it into a premodern paradise. Truly, "in order for nature tourism to work at all," Wigen muses, outdoor recreationalists "have to fool themselves about what they are really up to" (Wigen 2005, 4). Predictably, South Korean urbanites today, many who feel a lack of community and rootedness, indulge in portrayals of the mountains as Arcadias of simpler and less turbulent times. The narrative that roots authentic national heritage in the mountains should also be seen in the context of an era characterized by the international flow of data, goods, and people typically referred to as globalization. Within this context, when individual and national identities are thought to be highly fragmented and contested, the premodern past illusorily stands out as a period of cultural wholeness and integrity. As individuals and nations look to

make sense of themselves amidst the often-destabilizing forces of globalization, narratives that infuse the land with ideals of the enduring, the traditional and the authentic become important ideological tools. Through a process that Robertson refers to as "remembering" (Robertson 1988, 514), these narratives stabilize what are deemed unstable times by providing a sense of continuity and integrity.

Though many hiking spokesmen and cultural ministers consciously invoke such narratives, hiking's contribution to South Korean *remembering* is, to a greater degree, unconscious. Simply by bringing masses of people into contact with the mountains, hiking is able to generate affection for the past that is essential to fortifying a sense of nationhood. To account for this affection, one must observe that in their physical permanence, the mountains seem to remain as they always were—"immortal mementos" (H. Park 2009, 183)—while the rest of the country undergoes accelerated change. Accordingly, even though ideology is responsible for constructing the mountains as *cultural* anchors, one cannot deny their role as *geographical* anchors, a role for which the land becomes facilely equated with the past, affection for one blurring with affection for the other.

Also worth noting, as Wigen's work on Japanese mountaineering ascertains, altitude in itself is pedagogical (Wigen 2005, 25). Climbing into the heights of a mountain, a hiker acquires the geographical knowledge necessary for a refined national sensibility (Wigen 2005, 25). Understandably, says Wigen, hiking and native-place pride throughout the world have gone hand-in-hand (Wigen 2005, 4). Consider, for example, the renewed criticisms of the Japanese colonial era that arose with the explosion of hiking in the 1980s and 1990s, when discussions evolved as to how to revise Japanese geographical (mis)conceptions of the mountains (Ryu and Won 2013, 108). Effectively, the sentiments that spring from hiking ideologically transform the mountains into national symbols. Contact with the land breeds appreciation, and appreciation readily bleeds into national pride, a pride compounded, in the case of South Korea, by the angst of historical subjugation.

The importance of the project of national *remembering* should not be underestimated. Cultivating widespread affection for the past, via the land,

is fundamental to South Korea's economic and political pull in the present period of globalization. A nation that wants to prove that it is modern, remarks Mitchell (2001), must prove that it was ancient. It must, that is, "produce a past" (as cited in Pretes 2003). By producing a past, nations not only foster a coherent national identity, they wield an attractive commodity in the form of cultural heritage. With tourism mushrooming across the globe, heritage attracts. For this reason, as much as the mountains have become politically transformed by hiking's involvement in national remembering, they have likewise become economically transformed.

For its part, the South Korean government has not failed to capitalize on the economic viability of its mountains and the popularity of hiking to build a heritage marketable to tourists. Contemporary projects of heritage building tend to focus on the "branding" of mountains and natural parks around their unique histories and geographic features, a process in which even local governments have been active since the election of municipal assemblies was revived in 1991 (Moon 2008, 170). Not wanting to miss an opportunity to attract visitors who can boost the local economy, no South Korean province is without "at least one walking trail that makes the most of its natural resources."[16] The Baekdudaegan offers a prime example, as its sheer extensiveness has allowed a number of cities and towns to take advantage of the rich spiritual and cultural meanings attached to the range. Similar "place-marketing" through mountain hiking occurs throughout the country (Ryu and Won 2013, 126), most recently in the creation of Jeju Island's heritage trails, the Jirisan *dulle gil* (circular trails), and the Demilitarized Zone Trekking Course.

Under the influence of an ideological shift driven by the increasing marketability of space, religious-pilgrimage hikers and eco-tourists are indeed transforming the Korean landscape (OECD 2009; Mason 2011a). *The Korea Herald* reports that 1.1 million people are estimated to have visited the Jeju Olle Heritage Hiking Trail in 2012. With each visitor to the island spending an average of 394,132 won (approx. US$390), the effects of

16. Lee Woo-young, "Korea's Best Walking Trails," *Korea Herald*, May 16, 2013.

the trail on the local economy are far from insignificant.[17] As domestic and international tourism in South Korea continue to intensify, hiking is valued for its ability to balance ideals of environmental conservation and economic development, sustainability and profit.[18] No wonder that it enters into national and local visions for sustainable growth,[19] for without question, hiking brings attention to Korea's natural beauty, its religious relics cloaked in the mountains, and many of the country's designated traditions, all without leaving a large footprint on the environment. Hiking has thus become fundamental to a globalizing South Korea, which seeks a reaffirmed national identity at home and a singular, "green" reputation to market abroad.

Conclusion

Seeking to promote the value of a lifelong, harmonious relationship between the body and the land, the Korea Forest Service since 2003 has organized a project called "From Cradle to Grave."[20] The project is as extensive as its name implies, outlining programs ranging from prenatal therapy courses to tree burial services, all operating under the conviction that recreation in the mountains is a transformative experience, no matter one's stage in their life.

Of course, the transformative experience works dynamically in both directions. The land is as much affected by the bodies that traverse it as

17. Lee Woo-young, "Korea's Best Walking Trails," *Korea Herald*, May 16, 2013.
18. "Experts of Global Sustainable Tourism Gather in Seoul," (February 29, 2012), Ministry of Environment, Republic of Korea, accessed March 7, 2014, http://eng.me.go.kr/eng/web/board/read.do?men uId=20&boardMasterId=521&boardId=99.
19. "The Fifth National Forest Plan," Korea Forest Service, accessed March 5, 2014, http://english.forest.go.kr/newkfsweb/html/EngHtmlPage.do?pg=/esh/policy/UI_KFS_0102_010500.html&mn=ENG_02_01_05.
20. Mark Ellison, "An Interview with Republic of Korea Secretary of Forestry Won Sop Shin," *Hiking Research*, last modified July 21, 2013, http://hikingresearch.wordpress.com/2013/07/21/an-interview-with-republic-of-korea-secretary-of-forestry-won-sop-shin/.

these bodies are affected by the land they traverse. If hikers in South Korea continue to seek the transformational experiences that hiking can provide, they must ensure that their ideological model of the mountains is normalized. Against voices of protest, whether originating from farmers, loggers, religious sects, or ecologists, the mountains must be transformed into spaces of recreation. For evidence that winning the ideological battle over the land is never simple, one need only look to the Baekdudaegan. In spite of the mountain range's venerated status, trail development resulted only from hard-fought compromise (Ryu and Won 2013). And, no matter how great the demands from South Korean hikers yearning to reach Baekdusan mountain through the North, political leaders are unlikely to casually accede to traditional visions of a unified geo-body. Notwithstanding the opposition, hiking has already imposed a commanding claim on the country's land while proving through its popularity to have a successful claim on the country's bodies as well.

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