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**Author**

Stiller, Maya

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IN KOREA**

*by Maya Stiller*



# HOLY MOTHER OF CHIRI MOUNTAIN

## A FEMALE MOUNTAIN SPIRIT IN KOREA

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IN HIS CASE STUDY of female mountain spirits in Korea, James Grayson argues that an authoritative male, grandfatherly mountain spirit called “Sansin” guards all mountains in Korea, while minor, localized female spirits called “Söngmo” protect a specific mountain or hill.<sup>1</sup> I agree with Grayson in so far as there are male and female mountain spirits in Korea. However, the idea of a grandfatherly mountain spirit appears to be a rather late Chosön development.<sup>2</sup> I did not come across any authoritative figure of Sansin in early and mid-Chosön dynasty (1392-1910) sources.

In this article, I will focus on one of the female mountain spirits in Korea, the Holy Mother of Chiri Mountain (plate 1). Thus far, Korean ethnologists such as Son Chin-'ae and Yi Yong-böm have focused primarily on studying the Holy Mother's role as the only protective deity of Chiri Mountain.<sup>3</sup> I believe that one needs to look beyond the veneration of a singular male or female deity. My argument is that Chiri Mountain is occupied by

1. Grayson 1996: 121-122.

2. Interestingly, in Korean Buddhist temples there are no Sansin pictures extant that date prior to the early 19th century. This is just a sophisticated guess, but I believe that the popularity of Daoism during the late Chosön period, and the T'angun myth, may have had an impact on the depiction of a grandfatherly Sansin figure with a tiger.

3. Chiri mountain is located in the South-West of the Korean peninsula.



**Plate 1: Sculpture of the Holy Mother at a Buddhist temple in Chungsan village, Chiri Mountain, South Korea.**

**Plate 2: Candles for the Holy Mother left by pilgrims at a Buddhist temple in Chungsan village, Chiri Mountain, South Korea.**



several mountain spirits, among which the female spirit has the highest rank. Furthermore, the Holy Mother shrine needs to be seen as part of a popular pilgrimage route that commoners and literati travelled along.

I will first talk about the Holy Mother's shrine on Heavenly King Peak in the early and mid-Chosŏn dynasty, when specific features of this shrine are first described in extant sources. Based on a survey of travel diaries from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, I will then highlight the different identities of the Holy Mother, which contributed to her popularity among all social strata,

and how the veneration of the Holy Mother was firmly embedded in the spiritual landscape of Chiri Mountain.

### **WHO VENERATED THE HOLY MOTHER OF CHIRI MOUNTAIN DURING THE FIFTEENTH TO EIGHTEENTH CENTURY (AND WHY)?**

In their travel diaries to Chiri Mountain from the fifteenth to eighteenth century, Confucian scholars vividly describe the colorful adornments of the Holy Mother's shrine and the substantial amount of paper money left by the visitors (plate 2). Confucian officials also observed the perfor-

mance of rituals which included loud music and dance, which indicates that rituals for the Holy Mother could have been very similar in shape to a contemporary shamanic ritual, a *kut*.

Many references to the Holy Mother shrine in travel diaries from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries indicate that this shrine was highly popular with pilgrims throughout the Chosŏn dynasty. Indeed, the shrine of the Holy Mother was not the only shrine that the Confucian scholars visited. According to the diaries by Yang Tae-bak (1544-1592, visited Chiri in 1586), Yu Mong-in (1559-1623, visited Chiri in 1611), and Pak Chang-wŏn (1612-1672, visited in 1641), travellers used to rest at shrines such as the Indra shrine,<sup>4</sup> the Western Heaven shrine,<sup>5</sup> the Dragon-King shrine<sup>6</sup> which were all in the vicinity of the Holy Mother shrine (plate 3).<sup>7</sup> The eighteenth-century scholar Yi Tong-hang (1736-1804, went in 1790) further writes that, in every spring and autumn, male and female travellers would come from the Southern regions of the peninsula for a pilgrimage to these shrines. At this time of year, the courtyards in front of the shrines were loaded with donations.<sup>8</sup> With reference to the large number of donations, these shrines appear to have been highly popular among the people living in the vicinity of Chiri Mountain. Climbing the highest mountain

4. Śakra-devānām Indra, a tutelary deity of Buddhism.

5. presumably linked to Amitabha, lord of the Western paradise.

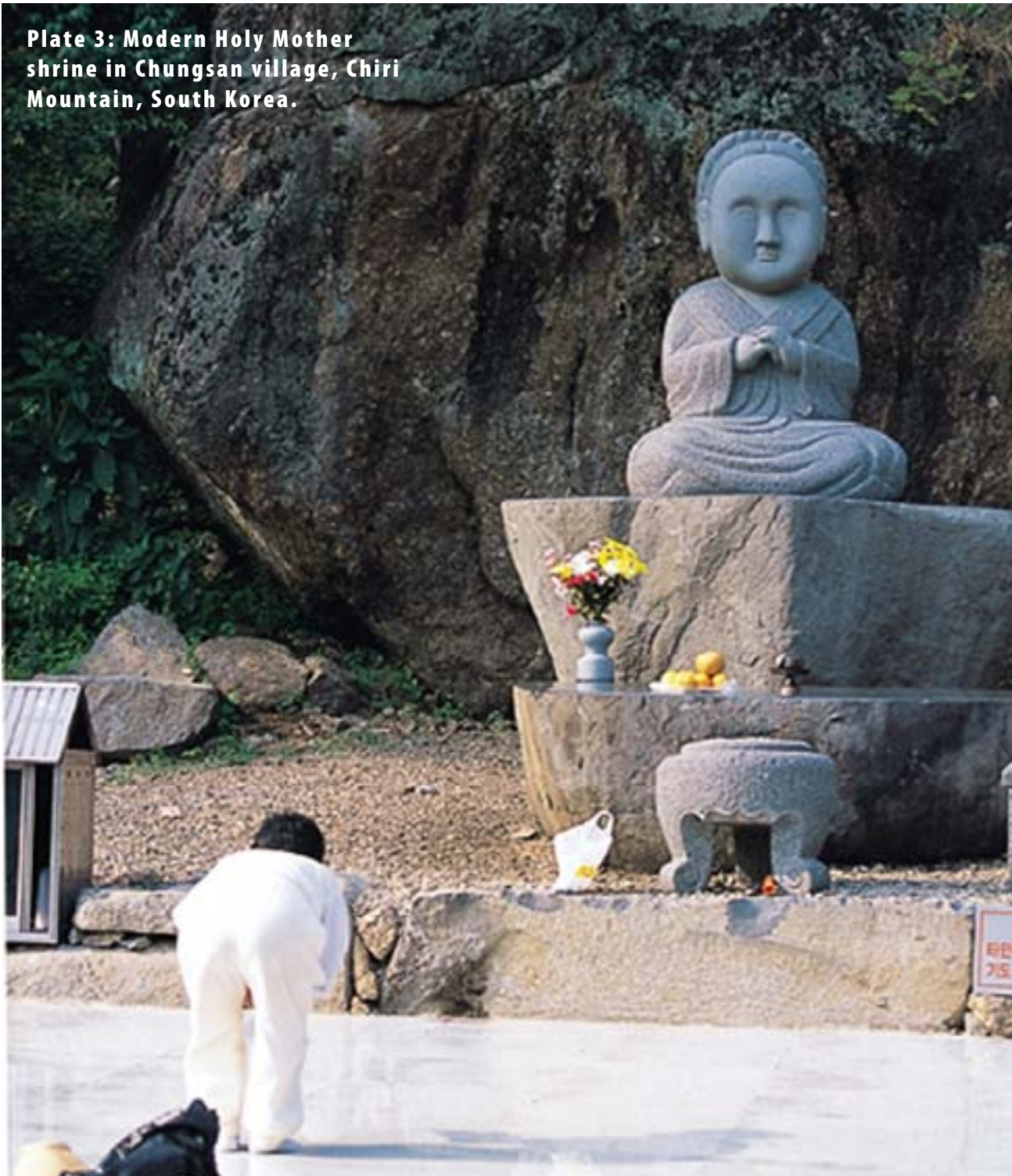
6. tutelary deity of the Dragon pond in Chiri Mountain; Buddhist guardian deity.

7. See Yang Tae-bak, *Turyusan kihaeng rok*; Yu Mong-in, *Yu Turyusan rok*; Pak Chang-wŏn, *Yu Turyusan ki*.

8. Yi Tong-hang, *Chiam munjip*, vol. 3, *Pangjang yurok*.



**Plate 3: Modern Holy Mother shrine in Chungsan village, Chiri Mountain, South Korea.**



***THE STUDY OF PRE-MODERN AND MODERN SOURCES HOWEVER SHOWS THAT THE CHIRI MOUNTAIN IN KOREA IS OCCUPIED BY SEVERAL SPIRITS, AMONG WHICH THE HOLY MOTHER HAS THE HIGHEST RANK. MOREOVER, THIS FEMALE MOUNTAIN SPIRIT WAS VENERATED BY THE ELITE AND COMMONERS ALIKE.***

of Chirisan, Heavenly King Peak, and offering prayers to the Holy Mother appears to have been the climax of this pilgrimage. The pilgrimage route seems to have existed until the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1930's, a Korean ethnologist named Kim Yŏng-su witnessed several groups of pilgrims travelling to the aforementioned shrines.<sup>9, 10</sup>

### THE HOLY MOTHER AND HER IDENTITIES

The Confucian scholars usually attribute two discrete identities to the Holy Mother. One is referred to as the commoners' interpretation, according to which this deity is Māya, Buddha Śākyamuni's mother, who married to a Buddhist monk. According to lore, the couple had eight children who became shamans in the eight provinces of Korea and who return to Chiri Mountain every year to venerate their parents. This lore seems to be based on the custom of local pilgrimages to Chiri Mountain and indicates a mixed belief in mountain spirits and Buddhism.<sup>11</sup>

9. Kim Yŏng-su 1939: 26.

10. James Grayson argues that in contrast to Japan, mountain spirits in Korea were not linked to the agricultural cycle (Grayson 1996: 125). Kim Yŏng-su's research could be colored by the narrative of the colonial authority, but according to his observations, the pilgrimages of female travelers to the Holy Mother shrine seem to have taken place especially during spring and autumn (Kim 1939: 26). Pak Yong-guk supports Kim's argument (Pak Yong-guk 2010: 256). A study of contemporary practices is needed to verify the probable link of the mountain spirit to the agricultural cycle in Korea.

11. The Western mountain of Silla, the Holy Mother of Fairy Peach Mountain (Sŏndosan), could have been, according to Peter Lee, a composite of a belief in the mountain spirit and a Daoist immortality cult. The tales related to the Holy Mother of Chiri Mountain, on the other hand, indicate a composite belief of indigenous beliefs in the mountain spirit and Buddhism.

On the other hand, scholars also mention that this Holy Mother is the mother of Wang Kŏn (877-943), the founder of the Koryŏ dynasty (910-1392). However, this is a unique interpretation by Kim Chong-jik (1431-1492). Kim Chong-jik writes that Yi Sŭng-hyu, the author of the *Chewang un'gi*, created this story in an attempt to strengthen the Koryŏ court's spiritual power and control over the country. However, when looking at the original text, it turns out that Yi never mentions that Wang Kŏn's mother became the Holy Mother of Chiri Mountain. Kim Chong-jik's new interpretation was later on repeatedly mentioned by other Chosŏn literati travelers, presumably because this narrative fit the Confucian ideal of a virtuous mother, and legitimized their veneration of a popular female deity.

Kim Chong-jik (1431-1492) himself is a good example of a Confucian scholar who prayed to the Holy Mother. He did so together with his two guides who were Buddhist monks. Further extant prayer texts by Han Ch'i-yun (1765-1814) and others indicate that commoners, Buddhist monks and literati travelers frequently prayed to the Holy Mother for a change in the weather.

### CONCLUSION

My preliminary research results can be summarized as follows. Firstly, travel diaries from the Chosŏn period indicate that there existed a highly popular pilgrimage route in Chiri mountain. The

shrine of the Holy Mother was part of this route, which was visited by Confucian scholars, Buddhist monks and commoners. Confucian travelers created tales about the identity of the Holy Mother that fit their worldview and legitimized the veneration of the deity.

Secondly, ethnologists and scholars of religious studies have hitherto assumed that female mountain spirits are popular, minor spirits. The study of pre-modern and modern sources however shows that the Chiri Mountain in Korea is occupied by several spirits, among which the Holy Mother has the highest rank. Moreover, this female mountain spirit was venerated by the elite and commoners alike.

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**MAYA STILLER is a graduate student in Buddhist Studies at the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures. She currently lives in Japan, where she researches actual and virtual pilgrimages through the examination of material culture (maps, prints, and pictures, for example) as well as written sources (such as travel diaries, and legends). Through this work, she hopes to contribute to scholarly understanding of the ways in which pilgrimage-related visual and written images have informed cultural identity.**