

Encoding visual imagery of *Ki Suryŏn* exported to the West

This essay examines the iconography of an instructional DVD of GiCheon, a contemporary Korean mind-body discipline.¹ Cultural practices such as these, commonly referred to as qigong in China and *ki suryŏn* (氣修練 cultivating life energy) in Korea,² are often reconstructed in East-Asian modernity on the basis of ancient traditions. The DVD was produced to support GiCheon adepts and to advertise the practice to potential newcomers. As a practitioner myself, I am familiar with theories of self-cultivation in GiCheon; within this theoretical context I suggest interpreting the video as a 'decoding' of the call for self-development within a visual narrative located in the mountains, particularly through the images of water, wood and stone.

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Banished, now rediscovered

In the West, practices of self-cultivation are reemerging, after having been banished to the fringes about four centuries ago. Michel Foucault categorized these and similar practices as *epimeleia heautou*, 'the care of the self'. He held that self-care (implying intellectual, moral and physical transformation) was a common ethical axis of Greek, Hellenistic and Roman philosophy. However, within the narratives of Western subjectivity Foucault also identified a 'Cartesian moment', climaxing in the 17th century with the relegation of self-care to the periphery of Western intellect, where it survived mainly in the occult realm.³

Self-care is rooted in archaic techniques of purification, concentration of the spirit/breath, interiority through abstinence from the external, and practices based on the endurance of pain and hardship. These techniques were shared by a number of civilizations and, having travelled through a number of avatars, are visible in the contemporary era in practices characterized as 'internal alchemy'. East-Asian and European civilizations share 'operational (external)' and 'spiritual (internal)' alchemical practices and principles. European alchemical knowledge arises from ancient Greek and Arabic alchemy, which, there is evidence to suggest, developed under East-Asian influences.⁴ If the declared endeavor of external alchemy is the creation of an elixir that turns any metal into gold and gives eternal life, internal alchemy achieves perfection and immortality through transformative processes in the body and mind of the adept. In practice, external and internal alchemy often intersect and merge.

Alchemists strived to discover vital cosmologic and cosmogonic principles through which they hoped to effect transformation of matter as well as heal disease and prolong life. In contemporary times, internal alchemical practices have reemerged as traditions reinvented, rediscovered and

exported from East Asia westwards. These practices have merged with the remnants of ancient Western occult arts. Self-cultivation as 'alternative medicine' has fought its way into academia; technologies of self-transformation have thus been rediscovered by Western science.

Iconography

GiCheon, 'a school of internal alchemy' (in the language of Don Baker, the only other scholar who mentions the existence of GiCheon in an English language academic work⁵), is one example of Korean *ki suryŏn*. As an expression of the vast mind-body culture in East-Asia, GiCheon favors verbal articulations even less than other similar practices. In fact, the motto of GiCheon is 말과 글에 집착하지 말고 몸으로만 수행하라 [Do not cling to words and letters just practice with your own body]. The wish to communicate GiCheon in a manuscript thus presents a problem. In accordance with this sentiment, the 'GiCheon Instructional DVD Volume One' was produced in June 2002, by GiCheon teacher and practitioner Lee Ki-tae. The target audience are English-speakers, even though there is only music and no one actually talks in this DVD. Nevertheless, the visual narrative is rich with imagery, 'speaking without words'. I argue that in producing this visual aid, Lee paid special attention to maintaining the dignity of the practice, not compromising its integrity, while 'selling' it to the general public. Below, I discuss the choice of images used in the video. Asking what meaning the images might have for the maker and the viewer, I suggest interpreting them as an explication of an alchemical transmutation of the self.

In 2014, an encounter with academic discourses on art and craft marked for me the beginning of the process of articulating my GiCheon experiences. Particularly important in this respect was reading Pamela Smith on the connection between crafts

and alchemy⁶ and Rebecca Brown on the deployment of visual symbolism in nationalist movements.⁷ I do not elaborate here on the nationalistic aspect of GiCheon – despite it being strongly present in GiCheon narrative – yet there is much in common between Gandhi's use of a spinning wheel image for his anticolonial struggle, discussed by Brown, and the deployment of iconography in GiCheon internal alchemy and other mind-body practices. Instead, I focus on the simple semi-abstract images of mountain landscapes (including streams, lakes, trees), which anchor the conscious and unconscious perceptions of the viewer.⁸ These images carry extensive meanings; GiCheon flyers, books and websites abound with such visuals, most often focusing on mountains and mountain streams.

The DVD opens with a scene of streaming water. The viewer faces the stream from the front, seeing it cascade between two rocky slopes, down into a little lake, formed and bordered by large stones. The viewer appears to be standing in the lake, with the water streaming at and through him/her. The slopes are covered with greenery, the tree branches stretch out over the water, the passage is flecked by dappled sunlight. The camera then zooms in on the gushing water; splashing and splattering over the rocks. This visual narrative focuses on the lively, dynamic, crude but graceful vigor of the water. We see the current circulating in a little basin, contouring the protruding boulders, which have clearly been rounded and weathered by the water.

Turning for a moment to the theory of GiCheon, we could decode the visual message of the opening scene as follows. In GiCheon, human beings are compared to a lake that is connected to other lakes by routes or channels. A certain amount of water ('*ki*-life energy', manifesting as blood and lymph, awareness, consciousness, sensibility and other kinds



Left and right:
Series of stills
from the GiCheon
Instructional DVD
Volume One.



of information) circulates within the lake, new water constantly comes in, and some water leaves. As the new 'water' – food, sensations, experiences, perceived words and actions of others, etc. – comes in, there is a constant need to 'purify' the water. There will always be 'bad water' left and some stagnation cannot be avoided. But the relative amount of 'bad and stagnant water' can be reduced, in an attempt to achieve 'better flow', which is the primary goal of GiCheon practice.

GiCheon stances are supposed to facilitate smooth passage of 'information' through the body and mind-heart; food and liquids are absorbed easily, sweat and excrements leave the body comfortably, thoughts and emotions are perceived and realized efficiently, words are said and actions performed with greater honesty and simplicity. In GiCheon this 'flow of information' is addressed as 'ki flow' and is metaphorically compared to the circulation of water, visually represented in the video.

The camera's focus moves from the small waterfall towards the stone basin. This is a separate section of the stream, with a clearly marked beginning and an end. We can interpret this as a human lifespan. Every thing has a beginning and an end, and every form will be 'unformed' in the course of time. The flow of life occurring within an individual as a microcosm, and in the universe as a macrocosm, is exemplified in the visual narrative as a mountain stream, a little 'world in itself' illustrating an alchemical transmutation.

The view shifts towards the smooth slopes of tree-covered mountains. The camera zooms in on multi-colored wooden pavilions built in a traditional Korean style, Buddhist pagodas and bells, and then a Buddhist monk striking a big drum in one of the pavilions. In a sense, this progression from a natural mountain panorama towards wooden buildings, metal structures, and the display of culturally engaged humans, is significant. This is the advancement from nature to culture, whereby nature is not discounted, but continues to coexist harmoniously with culture. This is typical for an East-Asian worldview, usually categorized as Daoist. In one scene the viewer is shown a red and green wooden roof of a pavilion, set against the backdrop of trees with red and green leaves; culture and nature are not contradictory, but supplementary, they echo and support each other. Images of water, mountains, trees, wooden and metal structures, and humans, presented with the sounds of 'Korean mediation music', connote the motifs of alchemical transformation and everlasting transmutation of life. Through these themes, a wide range of meanings is attributed to GiCheon. Besides an obvious connection to mountainous immortality and the invigorating, cleansing and penetrating quality of water, the visual narrative claims an 'ancient and traditional' status for GiCheon, placing it in the same line with Korean Buddhism and Korean architecture. The bells and drum-playing hint at GiCheon artistic and creative aspects, supporting the

notions of awakening and self-actualization. GiCheon practice is a conscious and directed attempt at self-transformation.

The practitioner in the video (demonstrating the specific postures and moves of the practice) stands near a tree, a stone pagoda, and water. Water, wood and stone, are symbolic representations: stones are bones; trunk, branches, leaves and roots are organs and soft tissues; water is blood and other bodily fluids. In nature, the elements transform, and so does the human body. Water, wood and stone frame the practitioner; he is like a precious jewel in a royal crown surrounded by lesser gems. And still, he bears the most intimate connection with them – they are of the same nature, they are him, his parts, companions and followers. And he is silent – just like them. They are also his teachers. The GiCheon adept has to be silent like trees, but unquestionably alive and present; his movements must be smooth and natural, like the flow of the water, but also defined and powerful, stable as a mountain, and if needed, hard like stone.

Conclusion

By analyzing the images used in the instructional video, this paper has examined the routes by which Eastern internal alchemy finds its way within Western societies. I explored how various visual images subsumed within overarching symbols of water, wood and stone, correlate with the 'self' placed at the center of the visual narrative, creating the dynamics of interactive knowledge and mutual transformation, thus continuing an alchemical tradition and the 'care of the self'.

This paper looked at the two layers of knowledge involved in the alchemical process of GiCheon. The first is the alchemical operation in the body and mind of the adept, which are related in GiCheon theory, and the second is its visual representation on the screen. But the two layers are connected: visual images direct and shape the alchemical process inside the 'self', thus encouraging the transformation of the self. This is how visual depiction on the screen becomes a technique, a medium for self-transformation, a 'technology self' in Foucauldian terms.

The instructional DVD portrays a practitioner performing static and dynamic stances. He is always in the center of the screen – a site of subjectivity, authenticity and personal power. The icons enveloping the performer include water, wood/trees and stone/rocks; these are not only symbolic manifestations of the physical body, but also of the 'cosmic' body, which is nature, surrounding, containing, supporting, and nourishing the physical body. As the practitioner's *ki* (氣) grows stronger, s/he reverses the process and starts, in turn, to nourish the cosmos – to carry, embody and transform it, thus effecting an alchemical transmutation on the levels of the microcosm and the macrocosm.

The visual/digital representation of GiCheon theory and practice on the screen, revealing dialectic connections

between microcosm and macrocosm, allows a glimpse into the reinvented Korean traditions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries currently exported to the West. GiCheon finds its inspiration and its power in the wilderness and mountainous landscapes of Korea and the alchemic traditions of past and present – traditions which continue to shape the topographical, physical, spiritual and moral lives of the Korean peninsula. The GiCheon instructional DVD is one medium through which East-Asian internal alchemy claims its place in Western or modern society, helping to maintain the global circulation of knowledge and practice.

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References

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- 2 Other forms of Korean *ki suryŏn* include Kouksundo (國仙道 *Kuksŏndo*), Dahn World (단월드 *tanwŏldŭ*), Maum meditation (마음수련 *maŭm suryŏn*), and Seok Mun Breathing (석문호흡 *sŏkmun hohŭp*).
- 3 Foucault, M. 2001. *L'Hermeneutique du sujet : Cours au Collège de France (1981-1982)*, Paris: Gallimard, pp.10,16-18,296-297
- 4 Smith, P. 2014. 'Knowledge in Motion', in D. Rodgers, B. Raman & H. Reimitz (eds.) *Cultures in Motion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.126
- 5 Baker, D. 2007. 'Internal Alchemy in the Dahn World School', in R.E. Buswell, Jr. (ed.) *Religions of Korea in Practice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.508. See also Ten, V. 2015. 'Technologies of Self in Contemporary Korea: the Notion of *Suryŏn* (修練) in GiCheon (氣天)', *Papers of the British Association for Korean Studies (BAKS papers)*, Vol. 16, Forthcoming.
- 6 Smith, P. 2002. *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in Scientific Revolution*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- 7 Brown, R. 2010. *Gandhi's Spinning Wheel and the Making of India*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- 8 Mountain worship in Korea is still vibrantly alive today (see Mason, D. 1999. *Spirit of the Mountains: Korea's San-Shin and Traditions of Mountain-Worship*, Seoul: Hollym). The notion is intimately connected to the idea of *sinsŏn* (神仙 mountain immortal gods) from whom GiCheon allegedly originates. The instructors and some adepts of older generations identify GiCheon as techniques of immortality, *sŏnpŏp* (仙法), another name for 'internal alchemy'. Understanding this aspect is vital for grasping the significance of mountains in GiCheon imagery and narration; in East-Asian tradition a retreat into the mountains, the space of 'anti-civilization', is essential for a successful alchemical transmutation of the self.

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