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Body and Ki in Gicheon : practices of self-cultivation in contemporary Korea

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BODY AND *KI* IN GICHEON:
PRACTICES OF SELF-CULTIVATION IN CONTEMPORARY KOREA

Yeonhwa Jeon

BODY AND *KI* IN GICHEON:
PRACTICES OF SELF-CULTIVATION IN CONTEMPORARY KOREA

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Preface

In early 2001 I had been living in South Korea for three months. Growing up as a child in Soviet Russia, I had heard a lot about East Asian *ki* (“breath energy”) practices from my older brother. When I was thirteen, at the outbreak of *perestroika*, I learned Chinese kung-fu from some Chinese masters who were visiting Russia. Now I was in South Korea for the first time in my life. Although ethnically partially Korean, I knew very little about the country of my grandfather, but I wanted to learn more. I waited for a chance to experience Korean *ki* practices.

In March 2001 when I saw an ad in the Korea Herald, an English Internet newspaper inviting foreigners to try “GiCheon, a Korean mind-body discipline for lifelong mental and spiritual health”, I realised that my wish was coming true. This GiCheon (Kich’ŏn) ad mentioned regular retreats in a mountain center, as well as training in a downtown Seoul studio. I contacted the instructor, Lee Kit’ae (Yi Kit’ae), by phone and came to the studio.

I had expected to meet a white-bearded old master like those you see in the movies. Instead, a young man of about my age greeted me. We started by watching a couple of videos on GiCheon in the office and then went to the studio. The studio was really big. On the cream-colored walls a few panels showed six basic GiCheon positions. The floor was covered with square green plastic mats, connected like a puzzle. The movements were unusual and hard to remember. As I kept practicing, I learned that the movements it took me so long to master are actually different variations of one circular movement called *wŏnbanjang* (원반장). The main position, “*naegasinjang*, the heart of GiCheon practice” was a static one.

It was difficult and painful to sustain. When I stood in the *naegasinjang* position, the instructor Lee Kit’ae told me that an old lady who was eighty years old performed it for forty minutes during her first training session. My first *naegasinjang* experience lasted only five

minutes, but I immediately felt how effective it was. After completing the position I felt satisfied, calm and balanced. I instantly realized that this was the practice I had been seeking for years.

The instructor explained that there are regular training sessions, usually three times a day. Later I sometimes participated in the evening sessions, together with about twenty or thirty other practitioners, both experienced trainees and novices. However, any student could also attend outside of scheduled training hours and practice under the guidance of the instructor, or by her or himself. At least one of the three or four instructors were always present in the studio. The monthly fee was one hundred thousand Korean Won (equivalent to about a hundred dollars), but discounts were available for those in tight economic circumstances.

I started to come to practice about three or four times a week. Within a few months I was already teaching GiCheon to beginners. First I talked to other students and to teachers in English, but as my Korean improved I switched to Korean. Though verbal communication was difficult in the beginning due to the language barrier, I was unquestionably accepted as a member of GiCheon community. Together with other practitioners, we often went to the Munmak GiCheon Mountain Center, to practice GiCheon in the forest, to hike, to plant vegetables, to cook, to drink and to talk.

In the year 2007 the Korean artist and a neo-shaman Mu Sejung told me “go study, and write about GiCheon.” Mu Sejung used to give similar guidance to younger people, and I followed his advice. However, while I was studying for an MA degree in Korean philosophy, I almost forgot this advice. I remembered it again when contemplating a subject for a PhD and so in 2010 I started writing a dissertation on GiCheon at Leiden University. It was ten years since I had started the practice.

Interviewing practitioners for the purpose of writing a PhD helped me to connect to the sensations of my own body. After these sensations were verbalized and articulated by others, I “recognized” them – these were my feelings as well. However, I had not been capable of registering and expressing them myself, a fact which might be connected to my Russian-European upbringing. Korean culture and the Korean language encourage openness to a precise and meticulous awareness of the body, as my informants demonstrated to me in the interviews. I would like my study to contribute to the development of this awareness inside and outside of academia, as we continue to enrich and develop our awareness of bodily experience.