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

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Chapter Two: GiCheon Basics

2.1 A short history of GiCheon

In 1980s Korea, industrial growth led to rising concerns with personal health and self-improvement. As noted by Foucault, practices of self-reflection, self-improvement and self-discovery are utilized as strategies of living the world by those who can afford to do so, people with more extensive life choices (2001: 109). In contemporary times this middle class trend to “better” living connects with the pursuit of “nature”, invented and constructed to counterpoise pollution and urbanization. The appropriation of this type of practice by the middle class of South Korea holds that in common with similar phenomena elsewhere in the world. In *ki suryŏn* the connection with “nature”, that is the connection with mountains, the dwelling place of mountain immortals, adds cultural depth to this middle class trend.³⁰ Mountain trips and hiking have always been popular in Korea. The hiking boom of the 1980s coincides in time with the rise of leisure culture, *sŏngin undong* (成人運動 sports for adults) and *ki suryŏn*. Their acclaim was made possible by the thriving economy of the 1980s, which contributed to the development of middle-class with sufficient means to fund self-perfection in the industrial setting (Dax 2015: 83, Moon-Kyum Kim 2005: 80). Mountain culture and mountain hiking were re-invented in a new context, and served to counterbalance “urbanization” (Dax 2015). *Ki suryŏn* groups rely on the mountain culture of Korea conceptually and practically. The terminology of *ki suryŏn* groups draws on the traditions of mountain immortality (U Hyeran 2006b: 75), and they often organize practical retreats in mountains centers. *Ki suryŏn* is also directly connected to mountain hiking, which I will further elaborate on in Chapter Seven.

³⁰ I elaborate on the notion of mountain immortality in the Introduction, and in Chapter Seven.

Similarly to other *ki suryŏn* groups, GiCheon achieved its maturity as a movement in the 1980s. However, the roots of this cultural phenomenon started appearing in the 1970s. Kouksundo (U Hyeran 2006b: 78) and GiCheon were among the first *ki suryŏn* groups which were established in South Korea in the early 1970s. *Ki suryŏn* groups often inter-twined, co-influencing each other. In the early 1970s, the first GiCheon teacher Pak Chŏngnyong (later called by his students Taeyang Chinin 大洋真人 “perfected man Taeyang”) trained and taught together with his “brother” Sŏ Inhyŏk, the leader of Kuksul (국술).³¹ Four of the seven founding members of Dahn (= Tan) World, originally called Tanhak Sŏnwŏn (丹學仙院 Tanhak Immortality Institute) were GiCheon practitioners, and instructors of Tanhak Sŏnwŏn used to attend GiCheon studios and practice there in the 1980s.³² Also in the 1980s, Kim Chŏngho and Na Hanil, two students of Taeyang Chinin, created Haidong Gumdo (海東劔道 Haedong Kŏmdo) on the basis of GiCheon sword art.

Taeyang Chinin first appeared in Pusan in the early 1970s and started teaching GiCheon positions and martial arts. We do not know when exactly he started using the word Kich’ŏn (or GiCheon 氣天) to identify his practice, but a picture taken in the year 1973 in Tonghwa-dong (동화동, nowadays Sindang-dong 신당동) shows the words Kich’ŏn Sŏnmujang (氣天禪武場 Kich’ŏn Chan Martial Arts School) (Kim Hŭisang and

³¹ *Chinin* (真人 Chinese: *zhenren*, perfected person) is a term from the vocabulary of East Asian practices of nourishing life and internal alchemy (See Introduction). GiCheon is one such contemporary practice. In GiCheon *chinin* is simultaneously a title and a formulation of a goal, toward which the trainees are instructed to aspire.

³² At the outset, Dahn World (Tanhak Sŏnwŏn) was also connected to Kouksundo (U Hyeran 2006b: 78). This is another example of the inter-connection and co-influence of various *ki suryŏn* groups.

Kich'ŏnmun Ponmun 1998: 6).³³ At later stages Taeyang Chinin also called his practice Kich'ŏndo (氣天道 Kich'on Way) and Kich'ŏnmun (氣天門 Kich'on Gate), finally settling for GiCheon (氣天 Kich'ŏn).

Taeyang Chinin claimed that he was raised and taught GiCheon in the mountains, by Wŏnhye Sangin (元慧上人), an old man who possessed extraordinary powers.³⁴ According to Taeyang Chinin, Wŏnhye Sangin could run faster than the wind, created a magical boundary in the mountains from which Taeyang Chinin, as a child, could not stray, and, to some extent, communicated with birds and animals (Pak Taeyang and Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu, unpublished manuscript).³⁵ We can easily identify Wŏnhye Sangin as a traditional *sinsŏn*, an immortal mountain dweller, an exemplar of a perfected being, whom GiCheon practitioners are instructed to emulate. This origin myth of GiCheon demonstrates that GiCheon is a part of Korean mountain culture, and is the first among a series of contemporary GiCheon-related legends. These legends started emerging in the 1970s but were mainly composed in the 1980s,

³³ In the text of this dissertation I will refer to Chan (禪) pronounced as Zen in Japanese and as Sŏn in Korean, as “Chan”. Elements of Buddhism, Chan-Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism and mountain cults are plentiful in the mythology of GiCheon and other *ki suryŏn* groups (Kim Hŭisang and Kich'ŏn Ponmun 1998, Kim Hŭisang and Kich'ŏn Ponmun ed. 2000). So the word “Chan” in the name of the group is not surprising. Due to particular traditions and complex power relationships within the GiCheon hierarchy, the name of the author Kim Hŭisang does not appear on the covers or inside the books published in 1998 and 2000, and he is not even mentioned as an “editor”. Instead, the credit for the authorship and the edition is taken by the GiCheon organization Kich'ŏnmun Ponmun (GiCheon Headquarters) as a whole.

³⁴ *Sangin* (上人 a superior person) is higher in the GiCheon hierarchy than *chinin*.

³⁵ The manuscript was circulating among GiCheon practitioners, and I personally received it from the now deceased GiCheon teacher Kim Hŭisang. Kim Hŭisang heard that the writer Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu held a series of interviews with Taeyang Chinin which lasted for six months, and composed the manuscript on the basis of these interviews. Kim Hŭisang has received the manuscript from other GiCheon practitioners, and assumed that this manuscript was indeed composed by Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu. I later met the author Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu, who confirmed that he is the author, and gave me his belated permission to read and reference the manuscript. Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu has previously submitted the manuscript for consideration to the Han'gyŏre Publishing Company where the manuscript was rejected. However, some of the workers of the Han'gyŏre were GiCheon practitioners, they liked the manuscript and started circulating it within the GiCheon community. The manuscript describes the childhood of Taeyang Chinin in the mountains, his later descent into South Korean society and his adventures there.

and recorded by Kim Hŭisang in the years 1998 and 2000 (Kim Hŭisang and Kich'ŏn Ponmun 1998, Kim Hŭisang and Kich'ŏn Ponmun ed. 2000).

A significant body of contemporary mythology has been accumulated in GiCheon circles over the years, describing the circumstances of Taeyang Chinin's descent from the mountains, meeting his adoptive mother and transferring from Pusan to Seoul. This fascinating material focused on the interplay of such social and mythic actors as policemen, Buddhist monks and mountain spirits in the context of suspicions of espionage on behalf of North Korea, is not yet fully recorded and awaits further research.³⁶

Taeyang Chinin had numerous followers, of whom the best known among his direct students and friends are Kim Ohyŏng, Yuk Taeon, Lee Sangwŏn (Yi Sangwŏn), Pak Sŏngdae, Kim Hŭisang, Pak Sagyu, and Mu Nami. Besides their links to GiCheon, some followers of Taeyang Chinin had connections with “traditionalist” (reconstructed) practices, such as Korean dance (Pak Sŏngdae and Mu Nami), Korean philosophy (Kim Hŭisang), Korean fortunetelling and healing (Kim Ohyŏng), or the production of *hanbok*, Korean traditional clothes (Lee Sangwŏn).

Just as with other practices that stress the value of Koreanness, in GiCheon too *saenghwal hanbok* (生活韓服 Korean clothes for everyday use) is the preferred attire. Similarly to some practitioners of Korean traditional dance or music, or contemporary Confucian scholars, the followers of Taeyang Chinin wear this particular type of dress developed by contemporary designers on the basis of traditional attire. The trend to wear this in everyday life is shared by Korean urbanites who associate themselves with some kind of “traditional” or quasi-traditional practice. This way, they are placing themselves in obvious

³⁶ This material has partially been recorded by Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu during his interviews with Taeyang Chinin, but has never been published.

visual contrast to “regular” Koreans who are dressed in Western clothes, thus expressing ideological disagreement with Westernization and the loss of traditional values.

In the 1970s and the 1980s Taeyang Chinin taught GiCheon in an informal way, not insisting on the traditional teacher-disciple relationship, but rather treating his followers, mainly of similar age, as friends and comrades. Kang Oksŏn, the adoptive mother of Taeyang Chinin, and a professional Korean shaman specializing in *sinch'im* (神針 acupuncture directed by spirits) always welcomed his friends at their home. GiCheon teaching was unsystematic and the practitioners changed frequently. Mostly GiCheon was perceived as a martial art and practiced by people interested in combat.

As the years passed, the practice of Taeyang Chinin was identified in Korean society as martial arts, dance, magic/mysticism, a meditation technique and therapeutic gymnastics. Each of the major followers of Taeyang Chinin developed GiCheon in one of these directions. Lee Sangwŏn established GiCheon as a meditative self-healing discipline. Previously Taeyang Chinin taught GiCheon differently to different people, without order or system. Lee Sangwŏn systematized the teaching method to be applied to all the students more or less equally, though keeping in mind the particular characteristics of each person. Lee Sangwŏn has modified the main GiCheon position, *naegasinjang*, to fit the body constitution of contemporary Koreans. Besides, Lee Sangwŏn has realized the importance of prolonged standing in the *naegasinjang* position, and correcting the position of the student, and his method was later adopted by other GiCheon instructors in Korea. The followers of Lee Sangwŏn say that Lee Sangwŏn asked Taeyang Chinin countless questions, and made endless efforts to procure the answers from Taeyang Chinin, information that Taeyang Chinin never transmitted to anyone else.

In the 1980s Taeyang Hagwŏn (대양학원) was opened in Noryangjin (노량진), Seoul. It was an *ipsi hakwŏn* (입시학원 a private academy for students who have failed their university entrance exams, and are studying for next year's exams). GiCheon was a mandatory subject, studied and practiced at Taeyang Hagwŏn in order to maximize concentration and improve study results. Teachers such as Kim Ohyŏng, Yi Myŏngbok, Kim Hŭisang and others taught there; Yi Myŏngbok composed a textbook (1988). Taeyang Hagwŏn closed a few years later, though the students of Taeyang Hagwŏn continued to various Seoul universities, where they formed GiCheon clubs.

In the opinion of Kim Hŭisang, as he has written to me in the years 2010 and 2011, it was at Taeyang Hagwŏn that GiCheon teaching was systematized and classified into practices of warming-up, static discipline, dynamic discipline, breathing techniques and decorum training. The contribution of Kim Ohyŏng to GiCheon development is critical in this respect.

Kim Ohyŏng was a childhood friend of Taeyang Chinin, the son of a neighboring household. In his youth Kim Ohyŏng was an adherent of another discipline, which greatly enhanced what GiCheon calls *naegong* (內功 inner power) and facilitated his later GiCheon training with Taeyang Chinin.³⁷ Kim Ohyŏng prefers to keep secret the name of that other discipline and the circumstances of his discipleship there. Due to the efforts of Lee Sangwŏn

³⁷ GiCheon and other similar practices are contemporary manifestations of East Asian culture of nourishing life and inner alchemy. The vocabulary of GiCheon comes from this culture. In GiCheon *naegong* indicates power accumulated in the lower abdomen. This power is generated through improved circulation of *ki* in the body and mind, and shows as physical and moral strength and balance. The character *kong* can be also translated as “achievement” or “result”. I translate it a “power” in order to emphasize its accumulative character. In her article “Daoyin 導引 ‘guiding and pulling’; gymnastics” Catherine Despeux translates *naegong* (Chinese *neigong*) as “inner practices”, when she renders the title of a book *Neigong tushuo* (內攻圖說) of late Qing period as *Illustrated Explanations of Inner Practice* (Despeux 2008b: 336). Therapeutic exercises *daoyin* (Korean *toin*) is another term shared by contemporary GiCheon practice with ancient East Asian methods of nourishing life. But GiCheon distinguishes clearly between *toin* shared by many practices and the six basic positions which are unique to GiCheon. During the GiCheon classes taught by the followers of Lee Sangwŏn, stretching and pulling exercises called *toin* are performed in the beginning and in the end of the session.

and Lee Kit'ae, static postures taught by Kim Ohyŏng were incorporated into the body of GiCheon training, despite the fact that they did not originate with Taeyang Chinin.³⁸

Lee Sangwŏn met Taeyang Chinin in the early 1980s in Seoul. In 1996 he received the formal title *sabu*, or *sabunim* (사부, 사부님 master) from Taeyang Chinin, while Pak Sagyu, who started practicing at a similar time, received the formal title *munju*, or *munjunim* (문주, 문주님 director). This caused much controversy, as no one in the GiCheon community could determine which title, *sabu* or *munju*, indicated a higher hierarchical status.

In 2000, when I started practicing GiCheon, during official ceremonies Lee Sangwŏn and Pak Sagyu bowed to Taeyang Chinin together, demonstrating their equal status as his two most prominent followers. In later years Taeyang Chinin granted the titles of *sabu* and *munju* to many other instructors, thus emptying these titles of their supposed original meaning.

Pak Sŏngdae, the author of a number of books on GiCheon (2000a, 2000b), started Kich'ŏn Corporation (사단법인 기천) in 1992 in Seoul, together with Taeyang Chinin, Pak Sagyu, Lee Sangwŏn and other leaders. In October 1996 another organization, Minjok Sŏndo Kich'ŏn (민족선도 기천 Kich'on Way of Immortality of the (Korean) People), was formed by Taeyang Chinin, Pak Sagyu, Lee Sangwŏn, Kim Hŭisang, Kim Yŏnggi and others.

Though they tried to work together as one unit, many GiCheon leaders had their own followers and supporters, who constituted separate collectives. In 1997 when an economic crisis struck South Korea, Pak Sagyu had to leave Seoul. He settled down at Kyeryong mountain (계룡산) in 1998 and established the Kyeryong Kich'ŏn (계룡기천) organization there. Mt. Kyeryong was considered to be one of the five sacred mountains of Silla (Ch'oe Chin'gu 2013). Its spiritual significance can be seen in the rituals of *sansinje* (山神祭 festive

³⁸ Lee Kit'ae, personal communication.

sacrifice to mountain gods) that have been regularly held there in the Chosŏn era up until today. Mt. Kyeryong has also been important for a number of new Korean religions (Jai-Sok Choi 1967, Han'guk chŏngsin munhwa yŏn'guwŏn 1988: 238-242), so its choice as a GiCheon center is not surprising in this context.

After Pak Sagyu left, Lee Sangwŏn was asked to assume the leadership. Lee Sangwŏn continuously attempted to bring a new unity into GiCheon, working together with Taeyang Chinin, Pak Sagyu, Pak Sŏngdae, Kim Hŭisang and Chŏn Ch'anuk. Lee Sangwŏn changed the name of the organization into Kich'ŏn Chungang Hyŏphoe (기천중앙협회 Kich'ŏn Central Association), of which he became a chairman in 1998.

By the year 2001 GiCheon leaders were already realizing that their attempts to “unite under one banner” were failing. At the meeting in 2001 they agreed to split. In 2001 Pak Sŏngdae changed the name of his own organization to Kukcharang (國子郎, 국가의 아들과 딸들, Sons and Daughters of the (Korean) Nation). Kukcharang has been organizing dance performances on stage in various Korean theaters and outdoors and also given GiCheon classes. Kukcharang is still an active organization.

The word 기천 (Kich'ŏn) was transcribed into English as Kichun by Kich'ŏn Chungang Hyŏphoe in 1998. The website <http://www.kichun.co.kr> was opened and managed by Pak P'yŏngsu on behalf of the Kich'ŏn Chungang Hyŏphoe. In 2001 Lee Kit'ae (Yi Kit'ae), a disciple of Lee Sangwŏn, transcribed *Kich'ŏn* as GiCheon, in order to differentiate the lineage of Lee Sangwŏn from other branches of the practice. In 2001 Kich'ŏn Chungang Hyŏphoe opened the website <http://www.gicheon.com>. Lee Kit'ae managed this web-site on behalf of the organization.

Since 2004 Lee Kit'ae has been teaching GiCheon outside Korea, and the term GiCheon has become known within the international community of *ki*-training, gaining some social capital. As a result, the followers of other leaders, not only of Lee Sangwŏn, nowadays use GiCheon for transcribing *Kich'ŏn*.

In the year 2002 Kim Sanghwan, the owner of Turtle Press and a professional maker of DVDs on Korean martial arts, contacted Lee Sangwŏn, and informed him that he would like to shoot a commercial DVD on GiCheon in Korea. Though GiCheon had been shown on Korean TV and radio every few years, no commercial DVD was in circulation. By then Lee Sangwŏn had been long experiencing difficulties in managing Kich'ŏn Chungang Hyŏphoe, and the decision to split had already been taken by GiCheon leaders.

In May 2002 Lee Sangwŏn called his major followers to Puch'ŏn for a meeting, where he announced the foundation of a new organization, Kich'ŏn Sangmuwŏn (기천상무원), and distributed new titles to his own followers.³⁹ Kim Hyŏnt'ae and Lee Kit'ae were granted the titles of *wŏnjang* (원장 director), while Kim Mansŏng got the title of *pŏmsa* (범사 instructor). In 2006 Lee Sangwŏn also gave me the title of *pŏmsa*.

Lee Sangwŏn was the most loyal and committed champion of Taeyang Chinin, to whom Taeyang Chinin always turned in times of trouble. Lee Sangwŏn always supported Taeyang Chinin emotionally and economically until the death of Lee Sangwŏn in June 2007. My research is based on the interviews with practitioners from different GiCheon lineages, but mainly with the students and followers of Lee Sangwŏn.

³⁹ The word Sangmuwŏn could be translated as a “General Directorate” (*sangmu* 常務), or “Academy for the Advancement of the Martial Arts” (*sangmu* 尙武), but the exact translation is uncertain.

2.2 The setting for practice: what, where, how

Since its origination in the 1970s, various instructors have taught GiCheon at mountain centers, rented studios, police stations, schools, universities, academies and colleges, private companies and banks, hospitals, clinics and health centers in South Korea. The wide range of GiCheon practitioners includes different occupations, various ages and health conditions, diverse social and economic status (but mainly middle-class and upwards). In Korea, I have met schoolchildren, university students, company workers, sales-persons, taxi-drivers, construction workers, school teachers, university professors, owners of small businesses and big corporations, bank employees, housewives, news-reporters and other professionals among GiCheon adepts.

GiCheon studios in Seoul, Pusan, Puch'ŏn, Kyŏngju, Taejŏn and other cities usually operate from morning till evening. There are a few classes per day taught by instructors, and trainees are free to attend as many classes as they wish for a fixed monthly fee. Trainees can also come to the studio any time to practice by themselves. The monthly fee does not depend on the number of times you attend. Most people train a few times a week, although some “devotees” attend the studio daily, or even twice a day. Many practitioners, however, fail to continue GiCheon after starting. This is usually attributed to the fact that the practice is hard and painful.

A GiCheon session usually runs from one to one-and-a-half hours. In many studios the floor is washed before and after the training. Newcomers and advanced students practice together. New students repeat the positions observing the teacher and the experienced trainees, who are often positioned by the instructor in the front line of the practice group. While training in the studio “meditation music” is commonly turned on during the session, as

the practice is considered a form of meditation, and incense is burned.⁴⁰ Before and after class the students and the teacher bow to each other in a special way, which is called the “GiCheon greeting”.

The training starts with a warming up, which usually consist of slow rotation movement of various joints in the body (knees, waist, shoulders, wrists and neck). After that static positions are performed, followed by dynamic ones. The vocabulary that the GiCheon practitioners used in their interviews with me when describing the practice, and the concepts they related to, often came from the lexicon of the GiCheon studio. These terms and notions situate GiCheon within the East Asian tradition of inner alchemy and nourishing life (Pregadio 2008). Having briefly described the GiCheon session, I will presently clarify the meaning of some basic words and expressions from Gicheon terminology.

GiCheon dynamic positions, including martial and sword arts, arise from six static basic positions called *yukhap tan’gong* (六合 丹功). *Yukhap* (六合) means “six positions unified”. *Tan’gong* means “cinnabar [field] practices” or “strengthening cinnabar [field]”. As mentioned in the Introduction, *tan* (丹 Chinese: *dan*, cinnabar) is an important element in East Asian alchemy. In inner alchemy of the human body it is usually mentioned in the context of “cinnabar fields”. The upper cinnabar field is located in the forehead, the middle – in the chest, while the lower and the most important one - in the lower abdomen. Though the Sino-Korean word *tanjŏn* (丹田 Chinese: *dantian*) could refer to any of the three cinnabar fields, GiCheon practitioners mostly use it as indicating the lower cinnabar field. *Tan’gong* (丹功) in GiCheon and other contemporary East Asian practices is understood as the

⁴⁰ “Korean music for meditation” (명상 국악) is sold in South Korean shops. It is usually produced by modern composers on the basis of traditional music.

strengthening of the lower cinnabar field, and accumulating more *kong* (功 power), or *naegong* (內功 inner power) there. *Yukhap tan'gong* are believed to heal the body and mind, and improve *ki* circulation, resulting in growing and strengthening *naegong*. Later *naegong* can be utilized in dynamic GiCheon positions, directed toward martial arts. *Naegong* is also believed to develop the moral maturity of the person, clear vision and judgment.

Of the six basic positions, *naegasinjang* (內家神掌) is the first, and it is the heart of the practice, believed to suffice for achievement of perfect health, immortality and final enlightenment.⁴¹ *Naegasinjang* is considered to be the most efficient for improving the flow of *ki* and developing *naegong*. Most of my interviewees often talked about this position and the pain it brings. In South Korean studios it is maintained by the students for long periods of time, sometimes for 40 minutes or more. *Naegasinjang* is performed as follows: the legs are spread shoulder-length, the ankles are turned outward, the knees are bent down and inward, the back is arched, the buttocks are pushed out, the shoulders are pulled back, the arms are stretched out in the front above shoulder-height and finally the palms are pressed outward (see picture 2). In *naegasinjang*, the backbone is stretched from the neck to the coccyx, while the weight is directed downwards, toward the ground. GiCheon instructors comment that this contributes to the centering of the lumbar and pelvis area, supporting the whole body and balancing right and left hip joints, knees, ankles and shoulders.

⁴¹ The exact meaning of the combination of these Chinese characters is unknown.



picture 2 (copyright to Sangmuwŏn, reproduced with permission)

Naegasinjang position is explained by the instructors to be reminiscent of a “phoenix which is about to lay an egg”. The “egg” here is a metaphor for the new self of the practitioner, an outcome of the painful practice. The metaphor of the egg is one of the popular motifs in East Asian inner alchemy (Schipper 1993: 189).⁴² This position is described as a perfect application of *yŏkkŭn*, the principle of the maximal bending of the joints. Ankles, knees, waist, elbows, wrists and finger joints have to bend to the maximum. Joints in GiCheon are believed to be passages, or gateways (門 *mun*), through which *ki* flows. Maximal bending of the joints in *yŏkkŭn* opens the passages to allow the flow of *ki*.

The other central posture in GiCheon is *tanbaegong*, a bow, which involves bending of the main joints of the body: knees, waist, elbows and wrists. In Chinese characters it is sometimes spelled as 丹拜功, where *tan* (丹) is cinnabar, *pae* (拜) is to bow, and *kong* (功) is power. This spelling stresses the function of the exercise as gaining inner power and storing it

⁴² Schipper talks about the metaphor of an egg in the context of natural perfection and inner harmony, the goals of nourishing life and inner alchemy practices. The egg here is also a belly, a seat of intuitive perception. This is idealized inaction, the universe before Heaven and Earth came into being. For a human being, it means the peaceful uncorrupted state of a baby but also the potentiality of a later outburst in martial arts, in nature - a quiet moment before the storm.

in the lower cinnabar field, the abdomen. 檀拜功 is an alternative spelling, where *tan* (檀) indicates Tan'gun, the legendary founder of Korean nation. My GiCheon teachers mentioned that maybe this type of ritual bow was performed in front of Tan'gun, and the term *tan'gun* could be interpreted as a title for ancient Korean chiefs. This interpretation connects to nationalist views in GiCheon, projecting this practice back in time toward the legendary Korean past (Kim Hui-sang and Kich'ŏnmun Ponmun ed. 2000: 11). As explained in the Introduction, GiCheon is not alone in its nationalist views on Tan'gun and immortality, but forms a part of contemporary *sŏndo* culture.

Nationalist sentiment also surfaces in the interviews of some practitioners and colors their narratives. The next section will introduce the interviewees central to the current study and identify the leading experiential modalities of their accounts. I have already introduced the notion of experiential modalities in the previous chapter. Experiential modalities allow me classify the narratives the practitioners use to describe their experiences. As a narrative direction, experiential modality serves to identify the way in which an informant communicates her or his perception. I hope that from the moment my interviewees start speaking through my text my differentiation of the various experiential modalities used by the interviewees could help the reader to better understand what they say and how the information is communicated.

2.3 The practitioners

As already mentioned, the narratives of the practitioners make sense in the context of their concrete life stories. Each life story is narrated as having a direction, a goal, or a pitch, a tonality, to which I refer as its experiential modality. Here I am talking about personally colored experiential modalities, not about culturally recommended ones. GiCheon practice is bodily, and the experiential modalities are rooted in bodily experience. The way GiCheon

practice is lived and understood modulates the texture and temper of a particular life story retold. GiCheon training becomes a part of the direction the life flow takes, and the ideas and concepts that anchor the meaning of the practice are inter-woven into the fabric of life, and the social landscape within which it unfolds. As the lives of my interviewees talking about their GiCheon experiences take place in contemporary Korea, images of Korean social life pervade their conversation. They talk about Korea old and new, and about “being Korean”, which often has a specific connection to their GiCheon practice. This way the conversations I had with my informants, and the research analysis that follows, provides in a way a window into contemporary South Korean life. Some chapters of this dissertation involve the same protagonists, and I will now briefly introduce the major ones, and the circumstances of our acquaintance. Hopefully, this will provide the reader with a setting or a background, facilitating understanding and contextualization of the interview extracts I present in the following chapters.

The main actor of Chapter Three is Kim Yŏnghŭi (not a real name), a university student in her early twenties at the time of the interview in 2010.⁴³ We return to Kim Yŏnghŭi’s rich narrative in Chapters Four, Five and Six. I first met Kim Yŏnghŭi in 2001. Her father had asked GiCheon instructor Lee Kit’ae to teach his two daughters sword art. I joined the practice, and trained for a few months together with Kim Yŏnghŭi, then fourteen years old and her sister Kim Pohŭi (not a real name), aged thirteen. Pohŭi was an animated rebellious teenager, while her sister was quieter and had a tendency to do what she was told, or so I thought. Almost ten years later when I met the sisters again in order to interview them for this GiCheon research, I received very different impressions. Pohŭi had become, to my eyes at least, a typical Korean female student, dressed and made up following the prevailing social codes. She expressed anger and resentment about being forced, ten years ago, into

⁴³ Interview of 05.11.2010, Seoul, South Korea.

boring and painful GiCheon practice together with old people. She considered it as generally wrong on the part of her father. As a child, she felt she was supposed to spend time with other children, not with grandfathers and grandmothers in a GiCheon studio. I discuss her interview in greater detail in Chapter Five, and the experiential modality central to her account I identify as “pain and discomfort”.

The interview with Yǒnghŭi lasted about three times longer than the interview with her sister. Compared with 2001 the roles had switched. In their youth, it was the younger sister who talked. Now that they had matured, the older sister had much more to say. During our long conversation Kim Yǒnghŭi talked about her life and the place of GiCheon practice in it. She drew lots of parallels between Catholic and GiCheon practices – a motif I discuss in Chapter Three. Like many other of my interviewees she talked about “being Korean”. She considers both Catholicism and GiCheon linked to being Korean – but for different reasons. Catholicism connects to being Korean because *since ancient times [...] religion has a great significance for Koreans*, while *GiCheon is consistent with Korean sensibilities*.

I decided to call the experiential modality of Kim Yǒnghŭi “self-confidence and self-discovery stemming from the ability to withstand hardship”, a theme I develop in Chapters Four, Five and Six based on the extracts from her interview. The main motif of her narrative is the realization of her own wishes and goals, distinct from those of her family, overcoming self-alienation and finding her own way in life. Yǒnghŭi discovers herself as a young female student in South Korea. She complains about social pressure to marry, which is different in her opinion for boys and girls. A daughter to a middle-class family, Yǒnghŭi is a target of complex expectations. Her mother wants her to get a job, while the father encourages her to continue studying, as Kim strives to find herself and form her own decisions. In talking about her life and life-challenges, she voices criticism toward the competitiveness of the society –

she feels compelled to compete with *the daughters of my mother's friends whom I don't even know*.

Other female protagonists of this dissertation, Pak Kyöngae (not a real name) and Sin Hyönju (real name) also air complaints of gender discrimination in South Korean society. I discuss the extracts of their interviews in Chapters Four, Five and Six. Pak Kyöngae, a team manager of a bank in her early fifties at the time of the interview, is among the few female workers of her generation at the bank. Pak expresses interest in social responsibility toward other women as a class – she wants her junior female colleagues to practice GiCheon – but they do not listen. In her interview Pak talks about the difficulty and stress of managing the family and concurrently maintaining a successful career. Combining these two projects requires special techniques and strategies – and for her, GiCheon practice is such a strategy. I describe Pak's experiential modality as “bearing hardship” – in her account Pak emphasizes the importance of patience and forbearance. The tonality and temper of *ch'amta* (참다 bearing with things), as Nancy Abelman has noted, often colors the discourse of women in contemporary South Korea, in particular when talking about family life (Abelman 2003: 74-77, 82-86, 172). In the case of Pak Kyöngae, *ch'amta* relates not only to family life, or life in general. It is rooted in the physical experience of maintaining the hard and painful positions of GiCheon, particularly *naegasinjang*. I discuss the narrative of Pak in detail in Chapter Four. Pak Kyöngae also returns to the pages of this dissertation in Chapter Seven.

Sin Hyönju was equally concerned about the welfare of her family – her natal family, with which she lived at the moment of our interview. She was a worker of a trading company in her early forties, temporarily unemployed. The concern of Sin for the welfare of her parents shows consistently in her interview. She even avoided practicing *tanbaegong* at home, worrying that the parents might see that and imagine that she had fallen prey to some strange cult – *tanbaegong* practice looks like a ritual bow, only it is a bow to “nothing” – there is no

cultic or other object in front of the practitioner performing this exercise. The experiential modalities of Sin could be named “better *ki* flow”, or “warmness-softness” and “smooth and effortless passage”, as I explain further in Chapter Five. The narrative of Ms. Sin demonstrates their unfolding as manifest along the first vector of progression. “Smoothness” works progressively at various levels of the self. For the physical embodied self “smooth and effortless passage” is manifested in the fast emergence of sweat, for the emotional self this is direct realization and expression of feelings, for the physical and social self it means words pronounced and actions accomplished with greater ease. For Sin, GiCheon practice was a means to restore her health, but it also helped her to *become a better daughter*, contributing to better communication with her parents and other people in her life.

I met Ms. Sin only once, in a Pusan GiCheon studio, and when I was listening to her account, I identified with it. By 2010, the time of our interview, I had already appropriated and interiorized an East Asian understanding that people belong to “types” or “groups”, defined mostly by their physical constitution. Ms. Sin had a body structure similar to mine, and as I listened to her, I realized that she also had a similar personality and her GiCheon experiences were very similar to mine. Only, as many other Koreans practitioners, she could register and articulate what I could not. Short but focused and informative, her interview became an important resource for my study on GiCheon and contributed to my own self-understanding.

Kwŏn Kuho is another protagonist who returns again and again in the text of this dissertation, in Chapters Three, Four and Seven. A scientist and an owner of a trading company in his late fifties, he was one of the close followers and supporters of the late Lee Sangwŏn, who usually was called Sabunim by his students. Kwŏn Kuho once told me half-jokingly that *GiCheon practice is not good for business, because it decreases your greed for money*. Kwŏn is the owner of an archery club, where he also teaches GiCheon to the archers.

My teachers Lee Kit'ae and Kim Hyōnt'ae rarely refer to Lee Sangwōn when they talk about GiCheon. They prefer to articulate their own insights. However, Kwōn Kuho and other close followers of Lee Sangwōn who did not become officially acknowledged GiCheon leaders, mention and quote Lee Sangwōn almost in every sentence they pronounce about GiCheon. And of course these practitioners have supplemented the explanations with their own understanding. As I discuss in the next chapter, Kwōn Kuho expresses regrets on the Westernization of Korean society and wishes for the development of Korean identity.

Similarly to Kwōn Kuho, Ha Tongju is another GiCheon practitioner who was very close to Lee Sangwōn. Ha Tongju is a *hanŭisa* (韓醫師 doctor of Korean Medicine) in his fifties.⁴⁴ He supported Lee Sangwōn economically on numerous occasions, and remains his devoted follower. In my conversations with him, Ha mainly talked about the connections between Korean medicine and GiCheon, providing complex data that mostly did not find their way into the present dissertation. Ha Tongju mentioned that previously he knew about *ki* flow in the human body only theoretically. Practicing GiCheon made him aware of the *ki* circulation in his body also practically. He thinks that each of the six basic positions encourages *ki* movement in a different *ki* channel of the body. I mainly present the extracts of my interviews with him in Chapter Seven, which focuses on the image of the mountain. The language of the *hanŭisa* Ha Tongju is figurative and concrete at the same time, and his metaphor of the mountain both poetic and practical.

Ch'oe Hyōngsu, the owner of a small business in his early 50s, also talks about mountain climbing in Chapter Seven. Ch'oe was the first GiCheon student in the studio of Lee Sangwōn in Puch'ōn in 1995. That was a difficult time for Lee Sangwōn; he lived in his studio and did not even have hot water. Ch'oe Hyōngsu installed a water boiler for him. Later other students came, including Kim Hyōnt'ae, who became one of GiCheon leaders. Ch'oe

⁴⁴ I briefly review the notion of "Korean traditional medicine" in Chapter Three below.

Hyöngsu had a special talent for GiCheon, and under different circumstances he also would have liked to become a GiCheon instructor. Ch'oe Hyöngsu thinks that Korean tradition, religion, philosophy and manners are blended inside GiCheon. He notes with sorrow, however, that GiCheon does not fare well in contemporary Korea. Like Kwön Kuho, Ch'oe expresses sadness about the Westernization and computerization of Korean society. He connects GiCheon directly to mountain dwellers and immortality practices, which I discuss in Chapter Seven.

Kim Wön'gyu (not a real name) is another follower of Lee Sangwön. I first met him in the year 2001 at the GiCheon Munmak Mountain Center, when I had been practicing GiCheon for a few months only. Kim Wön'gyu took part in a GiCheon teachers' course at Munmak. Due to my limited knowledge of Korean language at a time, we barely spoke to each other. In the year 2011, when I was interviewing practitioners from a different lineage, I suddenly met him again, and we talked. Between the years 2001 and 2011 Kim Wön'gyu had studied with a few GiCheon teachers. The experiential modality dominating his account is lack, disappointment and unfulfilled expectations, as I elaborate in Chapter Five.

I belong to the lineage of Lee Sangwön, and so do most of my informants, as it was easier to approach the GiCheon followers from my own branch for the interviews. But there are a few exceptions to this rule. One of them is Cho Chinsik, a GiCheon instructor who appears in Chapter Four. Cho Chinsik is a student of Kim Hŭisang, a well-known GiCheon leader who, as already briefly mentioned, composed a number of books on GiCheon (Kim Hŭisang and Kich'önmun Ponmun 1998, Kim Hŭisang and Kich'önmun Ponmun ed. 2000). I had the honor of being Kim Hŭisang's friend for a short while before his death, even though we communicated with letters only. When I started interviewing GiCheon practitioners for this research, I met a few people who knew Kim Hŭisang and had studied with him personally. This gave me a chance to know more about this remarkable person, a significant

figure in GiCheon history. In the narration of Cho Chinsik, Kim Hŭisang appears as a teacher whose intervention was critical for inducing an inner change in Cho. After becoming a teacher himself, Cho attempted to generate similar transformations in other people. When describing contemporary South Korean society, Cho talks about the people who are focused on impressing others – and among these people he counts himself, or rather he maintains he was like that before the transformation. Cho sees GiCheon as a method for “subjectivation” – that is living for yourself, rather than to impress others. I discuss the details of Cho’s narrative in Chapter Four.

Now, after briefly introducing the main informants who described their experiences and contributed their insights for the present research, I will proceed to analyzing the meaning of *ki* in the narrations of the trainees.