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

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Chapter Three: *Ki* in the narrations of the practitioners

3.1 Introduction to the concept of *ki*

The focus of this dissertation is *ki suryŏn*. This term is composed of two words that can be analysed separately. After dedicating the current chapter to the experiential modalities generated by the power word *ki*, I will focus attention on *suryŏn* in Chapter Four.

When asked about the subject of my PhD research, I usually answer “it is on *ki suryŏn*”. When my interlocutors are native speakers from South Korea, they immediately react by mentioning their mother/cousin/themselves and the type of *ki suryŏn* they engage in, or did in the past. Perceiving me as a “specialist” on *ki suryŏn*, sometimes they ask if I think that the particular kind of *ki suryŏn* their relatives or they themselves practice is “good”. However, when my collocutors are other than native Korean speakers, the question that follows my remark “I write on *ki suryŏn*” is “what is *ki suryŏn*?”. Is it gymnastics? medicine? religion? In the Introduction I have attempted to show that I conceive of *ki suryŏn* as a contemporary manifestation of age-old practices of inner alchemy and nourishing life. I would like to emphasize, though, that the word *ki* combined with the term *suryŏn* does not completely describe what *ki suryŏn* is. Due to particular historical, social and linguistic circumstances the term *ki suryŏn* got to denominate a distinct set of contemporary practices. However, the two parts of this term are still relevant to the combination *ki suryŏn*. The Sino-Korean words *ki* and *suryŏn* are both modern and ancient, each containing multiple connotations. They are words of vernacular Korean, familiar to everyone, yet every person infuses them with her or his own personal interpretation, drawing on an enormous cultural reservoir they connect to. The words *ki* and *suryŏn*, in combination but also separately, are in common, everyday usage in *ki suryŏn* studios and in the discourse of the adepts.

GiCheon practitioners often mention *ki* in the interviews. While listening to, transcribing and analyzing the interviews, I noticed that each practitioner has a unique perception of *ki*, connected in the discourse of each to a chain of particular associations. Each practitioner has her or his individual story, a specific vision in which conception of *ki* plays a different role. In the current chapter I provide two examples of *ki* perceptions from the accounts of two GiCheon practitioners, Kwŏn Kuho and Kim Yŏnghŭi. I will also briefly mention how a few other adepts talk about *ki*.

The central axis of the present chapter is “*ki* in the narrations of the adepts”. However, a few introductory remarks are necessary before we proceed. *Ki* is one of the basics of the East Asian view on life (Teiser 1996: 32), and as a key concept it organizes, regulates and tones experience and its expression. The character *ki* (氣) is variously translated as energy, spirit, breath, vigor, vitality, stamina or will-power. In philosophical translations from Chinese it has been rendered into English as “the vivifying principle or aura of Chinese cosmogony”, breath, vapor, air, steam, gas, ether, vital fluid, force, influence, vital force, vital energy, material force, configurative energy, temper, manner, demeanor, feelings, passion-nature, weather, life-giving principle, matter-energy, subtle spirits, or vital energizing field (Jung-Yeup Kim 2008: 1).

The character *ki* first appeared on the Shang oracle bones and on the Zhou bronze inscriptions as three horizontal lines, similar to modern character for three (三 Chinese: *san*, Korean: *sam*). *Shuemun* (說文), a Chinese dictionary of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), explains this character as representing rising mists, and defines it as “cloud vapors” (雲氣 Chinese: *yunqi*, Korean: *un’gi*) (Ames and Hall 2001: 72). *Ki* was developed as a philosophical concept by many East Asian scholars, one of them the Chosŏn Confucian

Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk (花潭 徐敬德 1489-1546) who elaborated on the ideas of the Song dynasty scholar Zhang Zai (張載 1020-1077). Based on the *Book of Changes*, Zhang Zai and Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk understood *ki* as a never-ending process of life and death. According to this view, all things are simultaneously processes constantly intermingling with each other. *Ki* assembling and dissolving may be observed in the appearance and disappearance of races and nations, of ideas and religions, of thoughts and images in a human mind. Humans forming armies, animals forming packs, molecules forming substances — all these are examples of *ki* flow and circulation (Ten 2011).

More mundanely, *ki* is a part of many words and expressions in vernacular Korean. *Ki ka makhida* (기가 막히다), literally “*ki* is blocked”, means being stunned, startled. *Ki ka chugŏtta* (기가 죽었다), literally “*ki* died”, stands for losing courage, becoming dispirited. It is close in meaning to *ki ka ppajyŏtta* (기가 빠졌다), literally “*ki* drained”, or “*ki* sunk”, which implies a decrease in courage. *Ki ka ch’ada* (기가 차다), literally “*ki* is full”, conveys the feeling of being overwhelmed, “this is more than I can bear”. *Ki ka nŏmch’inda* (기가 넘친다), literally “*ki* overflows, runs over” means being over-confident. *Ki ka saratta* (기가 살았다), literally “*ki* came to life” indicates liveliness and acting with boldness (in an ironic sense). *Ki ka seda* (기가 세다), literally “*ki* is strong”, indicates a strong will or stubbornness. *Ki rŭl ssŭda* (기를 쓰다), literally “to use *ki*”, is an expression for a zealous effort. *Ki rŭl p’yŏda* (기를 펴다), literally, “to unfold the *ki*”, stands for acting with freedom and courage.

These common *ki*-related expressions create a frame of reference of emotional or intentional states, which are directly linked to the state of *ki* in the body. The term at the same time summons undertones of flow, or movement.

In this vein, many GiCheon trainees identify *ki* with ability, whether it is physical or mental-emotional, rising or falling. This layer of associations connects to notions of power, courage, and self-confidence, and is related to self-transformation. Bank manager Pak Kyōngae, who is in her early fifties, explains *ki* as mental strength and patience in dynamic interaction: *When we negotiate, in order to make the other party agree to our terms, we push and pull. ... And whose ki is stronger? I really feel it. That is the fight of ki. And impatient people, they lose [in this fight].*⁴⁵ Ms. Pak uses here an expression *ki ssaum* (기 싸움 fight of *ki*), a general concept frequently used to indicate the imposition of one's will on another or the convincing of someone about something.

GiCheon instructors often talk about *ki* flow (循環 *sunhwan*, circulation) and *ki* blockage (막히다 *makhida*, to get stopped or blocked).⁴⁶ For *ki* flow also the word *p'ullida* (풀리다), the antonym of *makhida*, is utilized, which means “untie, get loose”, “be released”, which is positive. These notions, common in the culture of *ki suryōn* in Korea, are shared by *hanŭihak* (韓醫學 Korean traditional medicine) which is part of the broader framework of

⁴⁵ Interview of 17.01.2011, Seoul, South Korea. Here and in the text below quoted phrases are in Italics. Elision points indicate pauses in the talk of the interviewed person. Elision points in square brackets - [...] - mean that I omit some part of text as repetitious or because it is not important for the flow of the argument.

⁴⁶ The “circulatory system” is a Western notion linked to William Harvey, a co-creator of the “circulation concept”. The circulation concept established itself in European thought around 1750, and emerged simultaneously in medicine, economics, natural sciences and journalism. Circulation is a movement in a circle or circuit, and is an idea that, in medicine, developed with the “discovery” of blood circulating through the entire body's vessels as a result of the heart's pumping action. Barbara Gerke discusses the circulation notion in her article “On the ‘subtle body’ and ‘circulation’ in Tibetan medicine”. She notes that in Tibetan medicine, for example, most channels appear to be open-ended, not circular. Some run straight from top to bottom as open-ended ducts, or just branch out like a tree (2013: 90).

East Asian medicine. Korean traditional medicine coexists today in South Korea with biomedicine, as two officially recognized medical systems. It shares East Asian classics such as the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* (黃帝內經 *Huangdi Neijing*) with Chinese medicine in China and Taiwan and *kampō* medicine in Japan (Taewoo Kim 2010: 12, 30; Scheid 2002). Korean and East Asian medicine focus on preventive practices and nurturing life (養生, Chinese: *yangsheng*, Korean *yangsaeng*), and in it the term *ki* refers to the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual life of the person. The worldview based on the *Book of Changes* ascertains the vitality of life and supports an inclination towards a balanced state in bodily, medical and social contexts. The various forms of usage of the term *ki* in East Asian medicine and philosophy attempt to grasp the moments of changes and transformation of liveliness in self and society (Taewoo Kim 2010: 76, 80, 119-120, 168). East Asian acupuncture theory views the body as a network of *ki* movements, organized in channels (meridians) and acupoints. Since *ki* is not visible, the only way to know it is to experience it, according to doctor and scholar Taewoo Kim. So Korean medical doctors research *ki* using their own bodies (Ibid 140, 169).

Ha Tongju, a GiCheon practitioner and a doctor of Korean Traditional Medicine in his early fifties, talks about *ki* circulation as follows.⁴⁷ *If we practice in a more efficient way [...] [we perceive] “how ki circulates”. [...] [We realize] that the reason for practice is making this kiun circulate [through the body].*⁴⁸ *[...] For example, we stand in the naegasinjang position until we realize the cosmic ki (天氣). [...] Some people, their ki circulates well, this is so if they are young and healthy. Children [have their ki] well circulating. Children [sense*

⁴⁷ Interview of 26.11.2010, Pundang, South Korea.

⁴⁸ Ha Tongju and others use the terms *ki* and *kiun* (기운 energy, strength) interchangeably.

the ki] immediately [...], the younger – the better. [...] Elderly people cannot feel it. [...] If you train and advance continuously [...], then you perceive it.

The idea of *ki* circulation is widely discussed by GiCheon practitioners and teachers, and in GiCheon-related texts. In Chapters Five, Six and Seven I will examine different contexts in which such debates arise. However, the adepts do not necessarily connect *ki* to *ki* circulation and *ki* blockage. Below I provide examples of diverse frames of reference associated by the trainees with the idea of *ki*.

To the question “what is *ki*?” my interlocutors gave diverse answers. Some GiCheon trainees defined *ki* as “*saengmyōng ūi wōnch’ōn* (생명의 원천 the root of life), *saengmyōng ūl yujihanŭn ponjiljōgin kōt* (생명을 유지하는 본질적인 것 an essential thing that sustains life)”⁴⁹, “*saengch’e enōji* (생체 에너지 life energy)”⁵⁰, “*mom esō ūi chindong ūi p’adong* (몸에서의 진동의 파동 the waves of the vibrations inside the body)”⁵¹, “*uju enōji* (우주 에너지 cosmic energy)”⁵², abstract terms that might not relate to their personal experience. Others said that every person has *ki*, that plants and stones have *ki*.⁵³ Many did not reply what *ki* is, but explained instead what kinds of *ki* we have or should have. One example is “*t’aeōnal ttae pumo hant’e pannŭn kiun* (태어날 때 부모한테 받는 기운 the *ki* we are

⁴⁹ Interview with Ch’oe Hyōngsu, 10.11.2010, Seoul, South Korea. Ch’oe Hyōngsu gave me explicit permission to use his real name.

⁵⁰ Interview with Che Hyōnuk, 07.12.2010, Pusan, South Korea. Che Hyōnuk gave me explicit permission to use his real name.

⁵¹ Interview with Kwōn Kuho, 07.11.2010, Seoul, South Korea. Kwōn Kuho gave me explicit permission to use his real name.

⁵² Interview with Kim Chaehŭi, 11.01.2011, Seoul, South Korea. Kim Chaehŭi gave me an explicit permission to use his real name.

⁵³ Interview with Kim Yōnghŭi (not a real name), 05.11.2010, Seoul, South Korea.

endowed with by the parents at birth)” and “*chagi sŭsŭro mandŭro kanŭn kiun* (자기 스스로 만들어 가는 기운 the *ki* we build up ourselves [throughout our lifetime])”.⁵⁴

For GiCheon adepts, *ki* is at the outset not a foreign concept, but a word of their spoken language. Yet, many of them report that their awareness of *ki* has been modified through the practice. As a power word that generates culturally recommended experiential modalities, the word *ki* opens a range of meanings which are in constant flux, coming to signify new or different scopes of experience. For example, for Ms. Sin Hyŏnju it has become an experiential reality, no longer a figure of speech: *I never thought about ki. I do not know about that kind of thing. ... I belong to the kind of people who do not believe in what is not seen [by the eye]. ... Before [starting GiCheon] I thought that ki is something unreal, non-existing ... that people just talk about... . But now it seems to me that it exists. ... It seems that every person has it. And ... there is such a thing in nature. I do not know what it is, but it seems that it exists.*⁵⁵

3.2 *Ki* as waves coming from the vibrations in the body

As I have mentioned previously, Kwŏn Kuho is critical of the “Westernization” of Korea. He returns again and again to the idea of “Oriental thought,” which constitutes an important part of his explanation of what *ki* is. The word *ki* itself, though one of the cornerstones sustaining traditional East Asian thought, is, in his opinion, also Westernized and approached from a Western perspective. This is how Kwŏn Kuho talks about Korean words that have lost their “original” meaning.

⁵⁴ Interview with Ha Tongju, 26.11.2010, Pundang, South Korea.

⁵⁵ Ms. Sin gave me explicit permission to use her real name.

So all [Korean] words now ... the word “East” came into being [because it is at the East] when viewed from the perspective of Western people. [...] We forgot our language. [...] The East was entirely dominated by the West so we have to use only [Western] words. [...] The words become understandable only when we explain them from a Western perspective. [...] I got Western education [...], in order to lead a conversation, we have to use the words in the Western manner.

Mr. Kwŏn complains about the Westernization of the whole system of thought and expression in the East, and in fact it denotes even the Westernization of experience itself. Though having grown up and attended school in South Korea, Mr. Kwŏn sees himself as having received an education governed and directed by Western ideas and a Western worldview; he finds himself incapable of stepping out of this frame of mind. He believes that this limitation is shared by other Koreans and other people of the East. Though he speaks Korean, he feels that he is forced to use Western notions, otherwise the words and concepts do not make sense. This is how he explains what is *ki*:

I think ki is waves, [...] vibrations in the body. [...] What comes from vibrations, are waves, right? [...] A wave is a thing that cannot go in a straight line. [...] A wave is undetermined ... the general movement of a wave [...] is shaped [...] and moves like a screw. The earth circles the sun [...], but this movement is not circular. It is elliptical [...]. When we talk about “[the earth] circling [the sun]”, we always think that it should be a circular movement [not an elliptical one]... But it is inclined, curved [...]. However, this is just one example. [...] On earth [...] everything moves in curves. Everything is waves [...] the heart-rhythm [...], sound waves [...]. Actually, any movement can only be represented by a curve [...], as some waves.

Mr. Kwŏn defines *ki* as waves created by vibrations, which can be observed in any movement. These waves go in curved lines, like a screw. But he is not satisfied with this explanation, as he clarifies in the next extract from his interview, referring again to Western concepts.

Now when we talk this way, [...] we talk in a partial way, does it really help? [...] That is the Western way. [...] In my opinion, the fact that we have to keep talking about that using the concepts of the West ... [...]. This part is explained like this, that part is that. We talk about this part, but do we see the whole? In my opinion we are not seeing the whole.

Mr. Kwŏn considers his own explanation of *ki* to be partial, bound to the Western way of thinking and articulation. He thinks that the modality of *ki* should be broader and include a wider assortment of experiences and connotations. Kwŏn Kuho is a scientist, and Western scientific knowledge is based on rationality. Rational thinking is highly reductive and ignores other forms of experience (and how these are articulated) as forms of knowledge. Mr. Kwŏn finds himself limited by Western concepts and can only explain *ki* as waves.

For Mr. Kwŏn, talking about *ki* is a chance to articulate what he perceives as the domination by the Western way of thought of the Eastern way of thought. He hopes, however, that the Eastern way of thought can be recovered, and with that a better understanding of what *ki* really is can be reached: *In Korea ... In order to talk about the East, it is like a thread, [...] we have to unite it like that, [...] continuously [...]. Untie more and more [...] the words of our tongue one by one... [...]*

Kwŏn Kuho assumes that words and concepts are like threads that have become entangled during the long span of history. These threads should be untied, taking words and conceptions one by one. This might result in a broadening of our understanding *ki* and restoring its “original” content. Differently from a scientist Kwŏn Kuho, who is dissatisfied by his own explanation of *ki* and considers it only partial, Kim Yŏnghŭi, a university student

in her early twenties and a Catholic believer, provides a more comprehensive interpretation. For her, *ki* is related to “help”, and the connection between things and beings of the universe. The universe of Kim is living and sentient, the dwellers of which mutually stimulate and foster each other.

3.3 *Ki* as help

We now proceed to analyse in detail a few extracts from the accounts of Kim Yŏnghŭi that relate to her perception of *ki*.⁵⁶ Kim talks about *ki* in the context of her GiCheon practice, which is connected to her relationship with faith. Kim comes from a Catholic family. The themes of her Catholic faith and her development as a Catholic believer permeate her discussion on GiCheon and also her sense of “being Korean”.

*Since I was born, my family, my grandmother and everyone [in my family] is Catholic, my father is also Catholic. [...] But I am not as committed, do not have as deep religious feelings as the others [...]. Simply, when I pray [...] now, also in the church, I am not that hard-praying style. But now, what [...] I think about Catholicism, is not that a deity (神 sin) would do something for me, nor wishing for that, while sitting still [without doing anything], but I have to make an effort myself.*⁵⁷

Kim Yŏnghŭi ascribes great importance to her Catholicism, which she sees as one of Korea’s religions. Being Catholic for her is an attribute of being Korean. She remarked that *religion has a vital significance for Koreans* in the context of explaining to me the

⁵⁶ Interview of 05.11.2010, Seoul, South Korea.

⁵⁷ Korean Catholics officially employ the word *hanŭnim* (하느님) to indicate God, but not the Sino-Korean word *sin* (神), indicating gods and spirits in East Asian tradition. However, Kim uses both words *hanŭnim* and *sin*. When translating the narrative of Kim into English, I render *hanŭnim* as “God” and *sin* as “deity”.

importance of Catholicism to Koreans in general: [...] *Since ancient times Koreans have believed in religions like Buddhism, or Confucianism, or things like that. Nowadays there are also non-religious people though. There are many people without religion, yet I think that religion has a vital significance for Koreans.*

Being Catholic holds a great deal of personal meaning for Kim, and she explains her perception of GiCheon concepts and experiences through Catholicism – and vice versa. Being Catholic is an important experiential modality for Kim, which, together with GiCheon concepts, establishes and configures her experience of life and the way this experience is voiced. This is how Kim answered my questions about *ki*:

- *In GiCheon we talk about ki. What is ki, in your opinion?*

- *Invisible force.*

- [...] *If it is invisible, how can we know if it is there or not?*

- *So, mostly, I guess, it is ambiguous. [...] Because it is invisible, because we do not know if it is there or not, I cannot say anything for sure. But [...] I can get conscious of it through feeling ... [...]... In hancha, ki is air or a kind of energy [...]. But in GiCheon we undergo physical and mental training [...] in order to know this invisible force, in order to feel it. [...]*

Kim Yŏnghŭi is hesitant when talking about the existence of *ki*, because it is not seen by the eye. She *cannot say anything for sure*, she explains, *because we do not know if it is there or not*. Yet, her GiCheon training heightens her sensitivity to *ki*, opening and developing it as an accessible experiential modality. Her account echoes that of Mr. Ha above, who claims that *if you train and advance continuously [...], then you perceive it*. Ms. Kim further clarifies that *ki* is recognized during the practice as *the feeling of arising strength*. Like Kwŏn Kuho, she mentions Oriental thought in this context.

This is mostly Oriental thought, it seems. [...] Through this training, physical and [mental], when we perform tanbaegong or naegasinjang or similar positions, [...] despite the

fact that [these positions] are hard, [I have] the feeling of arising strength. [...] The power that helps me to maintain [these difficult positions]? Or [...] [it makes me] capable of developing a better way of thinking, more positive thoughts. [...] I think someone is helping me [to achieve that]. [...] Someone [...] unknown.

Kim Yŏnghŭi notes that *ki* is invisible, and its presence is therefore difficult to ascertain. Yet, *ki* can be known *through feeling*. This *feeling of arising strength* is simultaneously the *power that helps [...] to maintain [these difficult positions]*. It also contributes toward *more positive thoughts*. These three aspects of GiCheon experience, *arising strength*, *maintaining [difficult positions]* and *developing [...] more positive thoughts* are key points around which the narrative of Kim evolves, as I point out also in Chapters Four and Five. In the present extract from her interview these three aspects are characteristic of her *ki* perception. *Arising strength* is the help Kim receives. *Maintaining [difficult positions]* constitutes the effort she sees herself as obliged to make. And *developing [...] more positive thoughts* is clarified later in her narration as a moral stance for “aspiring to the good and avoiding the bad”.

The next extract from Kim’s interview explains what she means by Oriental thought. It is a discussion of the East Asian conception of the mutual interconnectedness of the cosmos, where things and beings help and sustain each other: *In the East [we believe that] the earth, the sky, the stones, all the things co-exist with us and live together with us, and interact with each other. I believe that they help each other. Because I believe that, when I train this way, things around me, forces around me, I think they help each other, so I think that all these things together are called ki.*

As we have discussed in the Introduction, contemporary practices of *ki suryŏn* integrate older East Asian ideas of mutual connections and inner harmony between things and

beings. Things and beings in the universe talk to each other, nourish and foster each other's life. These connections between earth, sky, stones and all phenomena, and the help they provide to each other and to humans, are called *ki*. An additional basic point Kim touches on is belief: *because I believe that*. I will return to this point later in this section. Meanwhile, I will continue reviewing the idea of help: Kim receives help not from *the earth, the sky, the stones* alone, but also from her fellow GiCheon practitioners. In the following extract she describes the support she receives from other adepts during the practice, as well as the invisible source of help, which connects to her on-going effort to continue holding the positions.

[...] [When I stand in naegasinjang position] in my head, mentally, in the beginning [I think] "Oh, it is hard, I hate that!", but after a while [I say to myself] "still, I ought to do that, I can do that". [...] An ability to go on, [a feeling of] doing it together [with someone] ... "The gentlemen and ladies [practicing at my side], all of them are doing it, I have to do it as well!" - when I think that, my body holds out, it seems. Though it is hard, I never put my arms down, I keep on. It is really hard, how can I continue doing that? I also wonder about that, because I have not seen [that invisible someone], but I think that [someone invisible] is continuously helping me to endure [the difficulty].

In the previous extracts we have seen that Kim links her understanding of *ki* to help. But the things and beings that grant mutual help include not only *the earth, the sky, the stones*. When Kim practices with other gentlemen and ladies in a GiCheon studio, the feeling of togetherness strengthens her own resolution: *all of them are doing it, I have to do it as well!* This is a concrete example of how the GiCheon community helps Kim Yǒnghŭi to cultivate her strength. The connection between *arising strength* and *sustaining difficult positions* Kim mentioned in the previous extract in relation to *ki* is elucidated here in very concrete detail.

The strength arises on a path of hardship and doubt, *it is really hard, how can I continue doing that?*, as a result of painstaking effort of enduring the difficulty.

The content of the help Kim receives, though, is not limited to the support she receives from her fellow trainees, who practice diligently at her side thus inspiring her with their example. She also gets help from someone or something she *has not seen*. Who or what is that additional factor continuously helping Kim that she *has not seen*? Kim has previously called it *ki*, but she has an important comparison to make in this respect. This is a point where the connections Kim Yŏnghŭi draws between Catholic and GiCheon practices in her narration come to the fore. [...] *When I pray as a Catholic, when I ask God or a deity to help me [...], in a similar way, similarly to thinking that somebody is helping me when I practice GiCheon, it is something I do [myself], but I think that around me invisible things help me, like a deity. I think there is a similarity between my religion and GiCheon in that respect. [...]* *Not taking the wrong way, and a desire to maintain my original intention, or something I want to do, a goal. I ask for help to be able to go straight to the goal, without wavering [...].*

Kim suggests that the being she asks for help when she prays as a Catholic is similar to the invisible things that help her when she practices GiCheon. These *invisible things* she associated with *ki*, they are *like a deity*. The key words *ki*, emphasised in GiCheon, and God, emphasised in the institution of Catholicism, intertwine. The connection of the *ki* concept to gods and spirits is well-known in traditional East Asian thought.⁵⁸ But Kim gives her own

⁵⁸ The Chinese Neo-Confucian scholar Zhang Zai (張載 1020–1077) says: “Scattering and differentiating, capable of achieving form, is *qi* [*ki*]. Clear and penetrating, incapable of achieving form, is *shen* (神 Korean: *sin*, god, spirit) (散殊而可象為氣 清通而不可象為神)”. I explore the connection between *ki* and spirits in East Asian thought in greater detail in my article “The notions of Ki 氣 and Great Void 太虛 in the philosophy of Chinese scholar Zhang Zai (張載 1020-1077) and Korean scholar Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngdŏk (花潭 徐敬德 1489-1546)” (Ten 2011).

explanation to the relationship between *ki* and the divine, placing them in a hierarchical order, as we will see from other extracts from her interview later in the text of this section.

Ki and God in Kim's narration are in a way interchangeable: the function of both is *to help*. *Because I believe that, when I train this way, [...], forces around me [...] help each other*, she says. The operation of *ki* comes with faith. Kim is a practicing Catholic, which might explain the importance of belief for her, as faith is one of the central precepts of Christianity. *When I pray as a Catholic, when I ask the deity to help me*: the function of *ki*, the divine and help are connected not only to belief, but also to prayer. Christian terms "belief" and "prayer" come up often in the accounts of Christian GiCheon adepts, though rarely appearing in the narratives of non-Christian GiCheon trainees.

I have referred previously to the *better way of thinking, more positive thoughts* Kim develops through the help that she receives. The value judgments of right versus wrong, of better versus worse figure significantly in her narrative. In the last extract Kim talks about *the wrong way*, which she links to *wavering*. It is implied that the *right way* is *going straight to the goal*, according to her *original intention*. The *right way* connects in Kim's narrative to a *better way of thinking* and *more positive thoughts*. As Kim Yŏnghŭi clarifies again later, this is a part of her Catholic prayer, which she also calls meditation:

This is also a part of my meditation, I ask for help so that I won't take the wrong way, and beware, [...] without getting deflected [...] this is how I pray about the state of my mind-heart. Similarly to this, when I practice GiCheon, [I think] that [...] I ought to practice hard, to retain [a difficult position] a bit longer, [...]. When I train [GiCheon] while maintaining these kinds of thoughts, [...] things around me [...] that are called ki [...] help me. In religion they are the things that [help] me [...] to make an effort on a daily basis.

Effort (노력 *noryŏk*) is one of the key words of Korean social life. Constant effort at school and work is expected and demanded, and the term *noryŏk* serves as a subject of academic study and in the titles of articles (Song Mano 2012, Im Sŭngt'aek 2010). *Noryŏk* refers to a constant need for self-perfection or self-improvement, characteristic of Korean, or maybe even of East Asian culture, of which *ki suryŏn* in general and GiCheon in particular is one expression.

For Kim *noryŏk* is one of the central concepts of her narrative. Previously she had already described the effort of *sustaining difficult positions* resulting in *arising strength*. Application of effort accompanied by *these kinds of thoughts* results in receiving help. *These kinds of thoughts* she describes now relate to previously mentioned *more positive thoughts*. But the structure of the constellation between the four elements of *help*, *sustaining difficult positions*, *more positive thoughts* and *arising strength* is different in the current extract.

Previously, *arising strength* was another name for the *help* in *sustaining difficult positions* and developing *more positive thoughts*. Help was something that made *sustaining difficult positions* and developing *more positive thoughts* possible. But in the current extract *retaining difficult positions longer* and *maintaining these kinds of thoughts* precede receiving help. Help is a result of an effort, but help, in turn, also contributes toward better and stronger effort, thus closing the circle: *things that [help] me [...] to make an effort on a daily basis*. Help, the notion Kim connects to *ki* and God, precedes and follows her effort, both in daily life and in her practice in the GiCheon studio, bringing about more effort, as Kim confirms again:

[...] I live my life, so if I try harder, God or the deity will at any rate protect me and help me [...]. I think so, and also in GiCheon, somebody else cannot do that instead of me,

and if I practice nobody gives me anything [for that], but if I by myself, alone, still pray, and practice [GiCheon], they will help me [...] and I always pray [...] like this.

God or the deity, says Kim, will protect her and help her if she tries harder. Kim connects help and prayer to *ki* and to God. And this is how she compares the two: [...] *I think that a deity is different from the concept of ki. It is similar, but not identical. [...] The concept of the deity is much bigger, broader, the range is wider, but ki is something I can [...] feel only when I practice GiCheon. And the concept of deity in religion is anywhere anytime, I think.*

Kim Yŏnghŭi experiences God as bigger, wider and broader than *ki*. This echoes her relationship with GiCheon, which she associates with *ki*, and Catholicism, connected in her narration to deity. Catholicism and deity are primary for Kim, while GiCheon and *ki* are secondary. Though the terms *ki* and God are intersecting, and at times parallel each other, the experience of God is absolute, while the experience of *ki* is limited. Also experiencing the divine stretches over a longer period of time than experiencing *ki*, due to the difference in the starting date of her Catholic and GiCheon practices:

-What is more important for you, Catholicism or GiCheon? And why?

-Catholicism is a bit more important to me [...]. Because, since birth, before I became aware of myself, I was already a Catholic, [and] I am still a Catholic now. [...] [For me Catholicism] has been longer than practicing GiCheon. And because [...] I started [praying] before [beginning] GiCheon [practice] [...] I feel [Catholicism] as closer to me. [...]

Kim mentioned that her whole family, including her grandmother and father, are Catholics. Having practiced Catholicism longer than GiCheon, Catholicism is closer to her

heart, and holds more personal meaning, and this may explain her placing God hierarchically higher than *ki*. But there is another reason for her preferring Catholicism to GiCheon.

Even before I started thinking about it, I was already a Catholic, so it came to me so naturally, it is really a part of myself. But GiCheon – simply one day father said "let's go!", so we went [...], so at the outset I was somewhat reluctant. However in relation to Catholicism there was nothing like that, no one ever forced me, well, I could go or not go [...]. So [...] I respect Catholicism as much as [my family] respected me.

Kim and her younger sister, aged twelve and thirteen at the outset, were forced into GiCheon training by their father irrespective of what they themselves wanted, as I have previously mentioned, and will discuss in detail in Chapters Four and Five. To Catholicism, however, Kim Yŏnghŭi was introduced in a natural, gradual fashion, and was never forced: *no one ever forced me, well, I could go or not go [to church]*. Kim feels that in her relationship with Catholicism her free will and her own person were respected by her family. Therefore, Kim feels equal respect toward Catholicism. As to GiCheon practice, she was compelled to do it by her father. As a result, she was *reluctant* to perform it, and now she rates it lower than Catholicism in her own personal evaluative framework. The following extract from Kim's interview confirms again that she sees Catholicism as larger and more meaningful than GiCheon:

I think that religion has great significance for Koreans. But GiCheon, for Koreans ... [...] ... rather than a religious concept ... [...], [it is] not something I cannot reach, something I cannot sense, like a deity ... GiCheon is merely just my own suryŏn (修練 training). [It is something] very personal. Both [Catholicism and GiCheon] are [...] ... very personal, but in religion I think there is something spiritual, something like a soul. [...] ... But GiCheon, as compared with a religion, is looking for myself [...]. I see it as a martial art. It

*is one among [different] martial arts, but a religion is everything. The concept of religion is bigger, it contains a notion of the almighty [...], it is total.*⁵⁹ *GiCheon is not as big as that, is it?*

Kim sees the divine as bigger than *ki*, and Catholicism as bigger than GiCheon. God is *anywhere anytime*, Catholicism is total, while *ki* and GiCheon are more limited in scope and more personal. Kim relates to GiCheon as to *suryŏn* (修練 training) which helps her to be a better Catholic.

Despite the fact that Kim Yŏnghŭi was pressured into GiCheon practice against her will, her account of her GiCheon experience is generally very favourable. Only occasionally she acknowledges her initial reluctance to practice. In the case of her sister Kim Pohŭi, though, the account of GiCheon experience is rather grim and dreary, a point to which I return in Chapter Five.

To summarize, there are three important themes in the way Kim narrates the experiential modalities generated by the power word *ki*. The first theme is developing sensitivity to *ki*: *in GiCheon we undergo [...] training [...] in order to know this invisible force, in order to feel it*. As I have mentioned previously, this point comes up also in the account of Mr. Ha. The second theme is the connection of *ki* to help and to the divine. As I have pointed out before, the content of this help includes *arising strength* and the ability to *sustain difficult positions* and *develop more positive thoughts*. The hard effort involved in maintaining difficult positions brings about receiving more help and support. Through this effort the *strength arises*. The help, connected in Kim's narrative to *ki* and to the divine, also propels her to pick the right way, to maintain *an original intention* and *not to be deflected*.

⁵⁹ Kim uses here the English term “almighty”.

Kim mainly talks about *ki* as help. The notion of help in her narrative is interconnected with the idea of the effort that she herself has to make. Her concept of effort fits within the first vector as originating in the self and moving outward from the center. The help Kim receives is part of the second vector, as it is coming from outside herself. However, help comes to Kim both previously to effort, but also following the effort. So in this element of her narrative a connection is established between the first vector – Kim’s own effort and desire – and the second vector, the reaction of the world around her to her action, her wishes and her prayer. The way she expresses her understanding of *ki* and the divine shows how her conceptualization of GiCheon and Catholic practices form a logically consistent whole. GiCheon and Catholicism are routes through which her effort is exercised. They are not the only routes. Other aspects of Kim’s life are also described by her as routes for exercising her effort, accompanied by a sense of direction and purpose. She relates it in detail while talking about *suryŏn*.

The third theme is the connection of the concept of *ki* to Oriental thought. This theme echoes the account of Mr. Kwŏn, who also mentions Oriental thought. Kim also connects GiCheon practice more directly to Korean culture: *In Korean, no, in hancha there is this saying. [...] Susin ch’ega ch’iguk p’yŏngch’ŏnha* (修身齊家治國平天下 *cultivate the body, regulate the family, govern the country, bring peace to the world*).⁶⁰ What does it mean? Susin (修身) - *if I discipline my body well*, ch’ega (齊家) - *I can govern the household*, ch’iguk (治國) – *if I can rule the country*, p’yŏngch’ŏnha (平天下) *I can pacify the world*. The most basic here is susin (修身) - *if I cultivate myself, if I practice correctly, then I can govern the family, the country, even the world. All these things I can equally regulate, if only*

⁶⁰ These words are from *The Great Learning*, one of the four books of the Confucian canon, as I have mentioned in the Introduction.

I develop myself, take good care of myself, control myself well. Viewed from that perspective, GiCheon is consistent with Korean sensibilities well enough.

Here Kim refers to the Confucian scheme of self-cultivation which I have outlined in the Introduction. She indicates that this scheme agrees with *Korean sensibilities* (한국 정서 *Han'guk chŏngsŏ*). In this extract in particular and in her narrative in general Kim Yŏnghŭi emphasizes self-development, self-realization and self-control. This notion of self-discovery developing into self-confidence I identify as her leading experiential modality. This personally colored experiential modality is articulated alongside the culturally suggested experiential modalities connected to *ki* and *suryŏn*. Kim's personally colored experiential modality surfaces more and is voiced more clearly in the extracts of her interview I present in Chapter Four. In that chapter Kim will again be one of the main protagonists.

3.4 Ki as explained through modern Western science, Oriental thought, and Christianity

In this chapter I have shown that Oriental thought, modern Western science and Christianity are all actively engaged by the practitioners in their explanations of what *ki* is. As I have mentioned, *ki* is one of the key concepts in GiCheon, and the construction of *ki* constitutes also the construction of GiCheon. The way practitioners variously describe *ki* demonstrates the different individual constructions of the practice. These different understandings correspond to different points on the opinions spectrum of GiCheon, and the inner subdivisions of the practitioners.

GiCheon practitioners I have interviewed come from diverse backgrounds, and the articulation of their experiences is very personal. Nevertheless, studying their narratives made me classify them into “groups” according to various criteria. The key variable in my

classification was the degree of their acceptance of and identification with official GiCheon ideology, which usually follows the degree of their personal connection to Lee Sangwŏn and other GiCheon leaders. People who are closer to the “core” of GiCheon community tend to identify the practice as *suryŏn*, while those closer to the “periphery” prefer to classify it as *undong*. According to this criterion, the protagonists of Chapter Four are representatives of the first group, while Kim Wŏn’gyu from Chapter Five stands for the second group. Yet these groups of more devoted and less devoted GiCheon practitioners sub-divide also into sub-groups. The group of trainees who are closer to the core of GiCheon community can again be divided into “sub-groups” according to their attitude toward modern Western science and modernity in general. Kim Hŭisang, an important GiCheon leader and an author of a number books on GiCheon, upholds a very positive view on modern science and modernity, maintaining that GiCheon is a hidden treasure of Korean society, which can help Korea to claim its place among the world nations (Kim Hŭisang and Kich’ŏnmun Ponmun ed. 2000: 11, 28, 38-39, 242). An opposing view is represented by Ch’oe Hyŏngsu from Chapter Seven. He and the practitioners of older generation link GiCheon to an idealized image of “old Korea”, associated with childhood fairy tales and traditional images of mountain immortals. Mr. Ch’oe maintains that GiCheon practice made him change his way of thinking. His way of thinking became *pigwahakchŏk* (비과학적 unscientific), as he mentions in an extract from an interview not quoted in the text of the present dissertation. It should be noted that he uses the term *pigwahakchŏk* in a positive sense. By unscientific he means deeper way of contemplation and seeing things within a context.

Between these two positions, one “pro-“ another “against” modern Western science, Kwŏn Kuho from the present chapter finds himself somewhere in the middle. As a scientist himself, he identifies with science and explains *ki* through modern Western scientific

concepts, such as *heart-rhythm* and *sound waves*. Yet, he is critical of his own explanation and considers it incomplete. Mr. Kwŏn's explanation of *ki* represents a conflict shared to a certain degree by many GiCheon practitioners and their contemporaries. It is a conflict between Korea old and new, between the way of life gone forever, yet reconstructed, reproduced and idealized within contemporary discourse, and the modernity, associated with the West, science and globalization. In the context of this relationship with the past, the present is promising, as Kim Hŭisang suggests in his books, but also limiting, as Kwŏn Kuho explains in his interview. In order to reach the resolution of this conflict by "reconnecting" to the "lost tradition", or the lost understanding of *ki*, Kwŏn Kuho proposes a historico-linguistic analysis: *In order to talk about the East, it is like a thread, [...] we have to unite it like that, [...] the words of our tongue one by one... [...]*.

Not all practitioners perceive GiCheon or *ki* as contradictory to or conflicting with other worldviews or value systems. GiCheon practitioners who are Christian mostly describe harmony between their GiCheon and Christian practices. In the interviews, they articulate deep Christian insights reached via GiCheon practice, or voice GiCheon experiences by using Christian terminology. Kim Yŏnghŭi from the current chapter is a representative of this group. Other members of this group are, for example, GiCheon teacher Kim Hyŏnt'ae, a follower of Lee Sangwŏn, and Yi Sŏngdo from Pusan, a student of Ch'oe Kwangbok, whom I have briefly mentioned in the Introduction. Also Yi Pyŏngil is Christian, a GiCheon leader from the group of Chŏn Ch'anuk. Yi Pyŏngil, a creative and inspiring personality, told me that the way God breathed life into Adam and Eve in the Bible shows the centrality of breath and breathing (one of the meanings of *ki*) for creation and sustention of life, an understanding we actualize through GiCheon exercises. He also said that the creation of the world in the Bible starts with God's words. This shows us the importance of words and sounds for the origin of life, therefore we exercise *ŭmp'agong* (음파공) in GiCheon, a practice in which separate

syllables are to be pronounced slowly and in a low tone, for the development of abdominal breathing.⁶¹ The insights of Yi Pyŏngil, Kim Yŏnghŭi and other Christian practitioners demonstrate their perception of GiCheon and Christianity as organically complementary.

The organic unity of Oriental thought and Christian understanding in the narration of Kim Yŏnghŭi demonstrates one aspect of the new living practice, the new living tradition, that GiCheon is. The narrative of Kwŏn Kuho and his struggles with contradicting trends of thought exemplify another aspect of the formation of the GiCheon tradition in local and global contexts. An ambivalent attitude toward modern Western science and modernity is connected to attempts of defining GiCheon as Korean, but also as East Asian. I return to this problem in Chapter Seven, where I will briefly analyze a few GiCheon legends and their nationalistic character. As for now, in the next chapter we will proceed to examine another important aspect of GiCheon as a constructed tradition: its definition as *suryŏn*.

⁶¹ Interview of 30.01.2011, Seoul, South Korea. Yi Pyŏngil gave me explicit permission to use his real name.