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Chapter Seven: image of the mountain in the narrations of the practitioners

7.1 Mountains in East Asian and Korean culture

As we have seen in the previous chapter, one of the central notions in GiCheon, that of *ki* flow, is often connected to pain in the narrations of the practitioners. As Mr. Ha says, *when it hurts, it means that the [ki] does not pass, does not flow [...]*. According to the philosophy of the training, GiCheon positions generate pressure, which pushes *ki* through *ki* channels. As will be discussed in the current chapter, Mr. Ha likens *ki* channels in the body to mountain paths. The subject of this metaphor are the *ki* channels in a human body. In order to clarify the process of those channels opening, Mr. Ha brings up the image of a mountain path, the object of the metaphor. This way he ascribes the characteristics of a mountain to a human body, and qualities of a human body to a mountain, creating a new perception of both. In this metaphor *ki* movement through the channels is like the movement of people and animals along a mountain path.⁹⁴ This metaphor connotes the motif of communion with nature, providing a link with the universe.⁹⁵

As we relate in detail hereafter, Mr. Ha in his interview further develops the images connecting pain in the human body with mountain climbing. In the *naegasinjang* position, the pain appears and disappears in different locations inside the body. Chapter Six has explored how, according to GiCheon theory, pain appearing in various organs is a manifestation of *ki* attempting to flow. Once the working of *ki* is restored, the pain will surface in a different

⁹⁴ In the interviews, the language of GiCheon adepts is often metaphorical. A metaphor, drawing parallels between two objects or experiences, is a strong statement that alters our notion of the subject of metaphor so that we can make sense of what it means to identify the subject of the metaphor with the object of metaphor. This leads to new meanings and observations and new ways of interpreting life. Interaction between the terms of a metaphor changes our perception of each term, infusing the one with the attributes of the other – and vice versa (Bernbaum 1990: 213).

⁹⁵ In section 7.6 of the present chapter I introduce an extract from the interview with Kim Chehüi, who talks about *communion with nature* (*chayŏn kwa kyogam*) directly.

body part. Section 7.2 of the current chapter examines how Mr. Ha compares this process to mountain hiking.

Many GiCheon adepts liken walking in the mountains to the practice of GiCheon in a number of creative ways, some of which we explore in this chapter. Often the mountain imagery comes to signify a wider range of experiential content and connotations. When analysing the interviews, within them five conceptual themes which anchor mountain references become clear. All of them to various degrees rely on metaphor. The first of these themes is “mountain routes as *ki* channels in the human body”, the second is “mountain routes as paths of religious or spiritual progress leading to the summit”, the third is “mountains as *innun kōt* (something that is there)”, the fourth is “mountains as a hiking space”, a space of fresh air, nature and relaxation. The fifth motif is “mountains as a space of immortality”. These thematic motifs habitually intersect, and often more than one of them are activated in a particular narrative. Comparing mountain ascent to human body processes, to religious or spiritual progress and to nature are figures of speech often utilized by the adepts to describe their GiCheon practice. Mountain hiking figures in such descriptions as a metaphor. But also actual, not just metaphorical, mountain hiking is alluded to by the practitioners. The dynamics and processes occurring in a human body, in human life, and in mountain hiking are often conceptualized in similar ways. Sometimes they connect also to the ideas of mountain immortality, which I have outlined briefly in the Introduction and will discuss in greater detail in section 7.6 of the present chapter.

This chapter addresses the image of the mountain in the narrations of GiCheon practitioners according to the five thematic motifs I have traced. Their narrations build upon a vast East Asian lore with regard to mountains, and also connect with more widely held conceptions. In East Asian culture the mountain is a source of life, of renewal and a place of passage. Besides providing a shelter from political persecution, a mountain is a refuge from

civilization – a place of seclusion, liberation and transcendence. Adepts of alchemy seek herbs and minerals there, and encounter recluses and immortals (Verellen 1995: 268). East Asian paintings of mountains and rivers were traditionally believed to awaken the spirit and disclose the true nature of reality, and to be imbued with the power to transport and transform the person who views them (Bernbaum 1990: 226). In Korea, mountains are considered to be places of purity. Korean shamans pray in the mountains to renew their spiritual powers. Since ancient times till today mountains were considered tranquil places for personal cultivation, an antidote to the busy city-life (Jang-tae Keum 1996: 38). Buddhist temples, Christian *kidowŏn* (祈禱院 prayer centers) and various other shrines and establishments – including GiCheon centers – are found in the mountains. Most GiCheon flyers, books and web-sites abound with images of mountainous places and frequently bring up the term *sanjung suryŏn* (山中修練 training in the mountains), and retreats to GiCheon mountain centers are vital for the practice. This chapter considers many ways in which the adepts utilize the image of the mountain for the articulation of their experiences. I of course do not seek to throw light on the entirety of associations the mental image of the mountain evokes, nor aim to encompass Korean mountain culture in its totality. My purpose is simply to examine how the image of the mountains, employed literally and metaphorically, unfolds in the narrations of GiCheon adepts. The next section of the chapter starts with the image of the mountain routes as *ki* channels in the human body.

7.2 Mountain routes as *ki* channels in the human body

Mr. Ha compares the human body to a mountain in the context of discussing his practice of GiCheon in the following way: [...] *When people grow older or when the condition of the body is declining, we say that ki does not circulate well, right? That is according to the*

*following principle: when we walk in the mountains, if we don't [use the mountain path] often, [that] mountain path vanishes [...]. Similarly to this, we close the passages where ki flows [in our body]. If the passage through which [ki] flows is not [continuously utilized and] cleansed, it gets blocked, the ki cannot pass on [...] and we cannot use those muscles and joints.*⁹⁶

First Mr. Ha equates the *ki* channels in the body to the pathways in the mountain. Just like mountain pathways disappear when untrodden for a long time, so the *ki* passages might close in a body. When this happens, the related muscles and joints cannot be exercised properly. However, untrodden mountain trails can “re-open”. This happens if people or animals come back to tread them continuously. Gradually, mountain passages will appear again, become visible and functional. In similar fashion, *ki* passages in the body which are currently blocked, can be re-opened. As discussed in the previous chapter, in GiCheon this process is complex and painful. The pain, which signifies both a blockage of *ki* but also the “piercing”, or the “drilling” of *ki* channels, travels through the body, opening new perspectives in this bodily self-learning process. Mr. Ha compares this process also to mountain hiking:

[...] Long ago [Lee Sangwŏn] Sabunim told us to practice as if we go up the mountain [...], in the mountains you see each time a new peak, it means there is no end to GiCheon practice [...]. So I think [the pain] will emerge again. [...] weak body parts are continuously revealed [...].

Mr. Ha brings together GiCheon practice and walking in the mountains, showing the former as, or in terms, of the latter. In hiking, we walk up the mountain, but the moment we reach the top, a new peak is revealed. We can ascend it, and then still other summits will emerge in front of our eyes. Similarly to this, in *naegasinjang* the attention often focuses on

⁹⁶ In this and the following sections extracts from the interview of 26.11.2010, Pundang, South Korea, are quoted.

the body part that hurts, the left knee, for example. However, after the left knee is healed and the pain recedes, the right knee starts to throb. As discussed in Chapter Six, Mr. Ha sees this as a continuous healing process. Here, saying that *in the mountains you see each time a new peak* Mr. Ha discusses the gaze turned upward toward a new goal. In a similar fashion, after one organ is more or less healed, pain moves toward the next body part. Pain indicates a problem, but simultaneously it is a sign of healing. This is a progressive, forward-looking description of the restorative process, oriented toward the future, and directed at constructing a new, perfected self. This is the gaze toward a potential - the future self one wants and aspires to.

However, in the extract of his interview analyzed further in section 7.3 Mr. Ha also says that climbing a mountain allows one to *survey the surroundings when one arrives at the top*. This is a gaze downward, toward the path walked so far. *When one arrives at the top*, one can look down and gain awareness of the local topography. Similarly, GiCheon practice increases one's awareness of one's past, of oneself and of one's body. Pain reveals the weak body parts one by one, thus contributing to self-study and bodily self-knowledge. This is a learning processes oriented toward the past, toward studying the old self as it developed up to a present moment. This gaze toward the old, pre-modified self contributes to self-study. Metaphorically depicted as a gaze downward from a mountain peak, it could be contrasted with the gaze upward, toward the future, potential self. However, as I have argued in the Chapter Four, the moment of consideration and gaining awareness of the quality of the old self often occurs simultaneously with envisioning the new self in one's mind. This is evidenced by the story of GiCheon instructor Cho from Chapter Four, who realized what his motivation for the training was when he heard the words of his teacher. At this moment the new self of Cho came into being, and his new motivation for training formed. If awareness of the old self actually comes simultaneously with the birth of a new self, the gaze downward

from the mountain peak and the gaze upward toward the next mountain peak are metaphorical depictions of these two aspects of self-transformation which happen together. The mountain peak itself then can be interpreted as a point of self-realization, a point of deliberation and reflection in our mental landscape.

Mr. Ha compares mountaineering to the processes occurring in the body during GiCheon training. Despite the fact that the practice is hard and painful, it challenges you to continue, because you actually observe your progress. Progress increases the desire for further progress, like each new mountain ridge invites a climber to proceed. In the interview extract analysed in the next section Mr. Ha says *when we go to the mountains, we always want to reach the mountain top*. Similarly, Kim Hyōnt'ae, whose narration we examine in section 7.4 elaborates on mountains being a challenge.

7.3 Mountain routes as paths of religious or spiritual progress leading to the summit

In the narration of Mr. Ha, mountain routes relate not only to *ki* channels in the body, but also to different paths chosen in life: *[...]I think, everyone always aspires to a particular state. [...] When we go to the mountains, we always want to reach the mountain top. A human being longs for a feeling of happiness at the highest peak, people seek that. [...] There are many ways or methods to get to a mountain top. For example, there is a way up the mountain through GiCheon, there is a way up the mountain through Chinese qigong, there is a way up the mountain through Taekwondo. There are many ways; which way is a shortcut to the summit?*

Mr. Ha metaphorically depicts any project, any endeavor in life as directed at the summit, which he interprets as happiness. GiCheon, qigong and Taekwondo are examples of methods to achieve happiness. Ha Tongju sees the pursuit of happiness as competitive, and is searching for the most efficient technique.

[...] *We have to reach a mountain top we do not [yet, currently] see. After starting ascending, some people cannot make it [till the top]. Some others can find answers to life questions [when they reach the summit] or survey the surroundings when they arrive at the top. Or, they think they have arrived at the summit, their final destination, but then and there they might perceive yet another possible summit [above it]... [...] I call the people who arrive at the summit sŏngin (聖人 sages). People like them become Jesus Christ, Shakyamuni or Muhammed. [...]*

People aspire to future happiness which they *do not [yet currently] see*. What will this unknown happiness turn to be, when actualized? When arriving at the summit will they then discover another potential happiness as a new peak to conquer? Here Ha Tongju might be inspired by Korean expression *san nŏmŏ sanida* (after crossing a mountain you discover another mountain), despite the fact that he uses different wording.

Not everyone can *arrive at the summit*, those who do are rare. Ha Tongju calls them *sŏngin* (sages). *Sŏngin* is a general epithet Mr. Ha grants to those who arrive at the summit of a mountain, viewing Jesus Christ, Shakyamuni or Muhammed as particular examples of *sŏngin*. Who are these people who reach the summit? What kind of happiness do they discover at the mountain top? Do they *find answers to life questions*? Do they *survey the surroundings*? After *having arrived at the summit* do they *perceive yet another possible summit [above it]*? In any case, Ha Tongju compares them to himself, to other GiCheon practitioners, to hikers and to people in general.

Together with *sinsŏn* (神仙 Chinese: *shenxian*, divine immortal) and *chinin* (真人 Chinese: *zhenren*, perfected man or woman), *sŏngin* embody perfection, often the goal of East Asian practices of inner alchemy and nourishing life. *Sŏngin* present a model of

complete humanity, their divine powers result from their practices; they actively and mystically participate in the natural workings of life (Robinet 2008b: 880-881). Not by chance the image of *sōngin* is evoked by Mr. Ha in the context of ascending mountains. *Sōngin*, *sinsōn* and *chinin* represent perfection and immortality of mountain dwellers, or “mountain immortality”, the notion I review in section 7.6 of this chapter.

Ascend the mountain through Christianity ... [...] Ascend the mountain through Buddhism ... [...] I think [...] that we have to do our best utilizing one of the methods, it does not matter which one, and we will succeed according to the amount of effort invested ... [...]. For example, a skilled practitioner of Chinese martial arts, or a well-trained Taekwondo adept [...] - we wonder, which of them will win in a sparring? But the answer [to this question] is, that the better fighter wins. [...]

An introduction of Jesus, Buddha and the prophet Mohammed into the narrative makes it focus on religious or spiritual progress, though it continues to relate to life and happiness in general.⁹⁷ Religious or spiritual progress here becomes a metaphor for life or a way for achieving happiness. And the discourse continues to focus on rivalry, or a confrontation of various practices of self-perfection. Mr. Ha compares the competition between the various climbers to sparring. Who wins the sparring between a Chinese martial artist and a Taekwondo adept? Which of these two martial arts is more efficient? Which way up the mountain is better, a Chinese martial art or Taekwondo? Concluding with the words *the better fighter wins*, Mr. Ha expresses his opinion that what matters is the amount of effort invested. The one who trained harder than others will win the sparring, she will ascend the mountain faster, she will beat the opponent. Generally speaking, what particular mountain

⁹⁷ In accordance with the methodology of this dissertation, which approaches GiCheon as technology of the self, I use the term “spiritual” in the meaning ascribed to it by Michel Foucault. While elaborating on different techniques of the self, Foucault defines “*spirituality*” as *the research, the practice, and the experience through which the subject carries out the transformations related to purification, asceticism and modification of existence* (2001: 16).

path or practice we choose, is of lesser importance, what is critical, is the dedication to training and exertion. That will decide who wins.

While ascending the mountain, something different fits each person. Some people think it is karma [...], [some] people who did GiCheon later quit, many people started yoga [...]. Other people got into Taekwondo. Because this [GiCheon] did not agree with them, it was hard and [...] frightening, so they decided to ascend [the mountain] from a different side.

GiCheon practice is for many people *hard and frightening*. GiCheon, as a path to spiritual perfection, to happiness or as a way of life does not fit everyone. So some students quit GiCheon and go for yoga or Taekwondo instead, whether to achieve happiness or to spiritually progress, or both. In a different part of the interview (not quoted here) Mr. Ha says that after leaving GiCheon some people start marathon running or hiking on a regular basis. These are the people who decided *to ascend the mountain from a different side*, preferring other practices to GiCheon.

Not everyone climbing to the top of the mountain [...] prevails. They stop in the middle [...], because they cannot go on without guidance. But there are people who ascend [the mountain] without guidance. They are extremely rare [...]. For example [...], long ago [...], [some people wondered] why they should come to the studio to practice. [They thought] “I will just practice at home”. To get to the studio [...] and back takes one or two hours, why waste time? [...] This person practiced at home for three months, and then came to the studio. [...] Would his level be similar to the [level of] those practicing for three months at the studio? [...]. Of course [people who practiced at the studio with the teacher achieved] a much higher level [than those practicing alone at home]. The teacher knows, but the beginners, do they know what went wrong? When you train alone, you don't know. The teacher has to correct [your postures]. [...] So since ancient times we look for masters like that. [...]

Sōngin in general, Jesus Christ, Shakyamuni or Muhammed in particular, are successful at arriving at a mountain summit. Some of them have themselves received guidance; others were the rare ones capable of *ascending [the mountain] without guidance*. But the merit of everyone who has reached the mountain top is her or his ability to show the way to others. Ha Tongju symbolically compares the mountain ascent to spiritual practice, to striving for happiness and to life. And the person who shows you the way is a mountain guide. Mr. Ha positions GiCheon in line with Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, qigong, Taekwondo, yoga, marathon running and mountain hiking. These various practices can help with spiritual progress, with obtaining happiness and in finding your way in life. This journey is in his opinion better effected under the leadership of a guide. Ascending the mountain is faster if you follow the shortcut indicated by the guide directly to the top.

[...] When we walk up the mountain [...], we have to follow the shortcut, but we cannot [find it], so we stray and stray and get more and more exhausted [...]. We have to get to the top of Sōraksan following the mountain ridge [...], but we don't know where the path lies, for that reason we continuously [slip] sideways [...]. So if someone leads us [...] we can ascend [the mountain] without trouble and without delay. [...] We have to advance [upwards] step by step [...], a leader can push us one step higher [...].

In this passage Mr. Ha utilizes the metaphor of mountain ascent to describe the relationship between a master and a disciple, in GiCheon and in other disciplines. The guide can show me the way, the instructor can push me up the mountain. Without a guide, the ascent is slow and difficult, if not impossible. In order to better communicate his message, Mr. Ha brings in an example of Sōraksan, the most celebrated and special of South Korean mountains. Sōraksan is most famous for its *tanp'ung* (autumn leaves). In fall, city dwellers haste to the mountains to gaze at the beautiful autumn colours. The sleeping facilities at

Sōraksan are so popular that they are booked months in advance. This is indeed a mass hiking culture, as described section 7.5 of this chapter, and Sōraksan is its embodiment and symbol.

By tying together such symbols as Sōraksan, *sōngin*, Jesus Christ, Buddha, Taekwondo and GiCheon, Mr. Ha is sketching a picture of modern South Korean life. Sōraksan and *sōngin* connote old and contemporary mountain culture. Christianity and Buddhism are the most popular South Korean religions. Taekwondo and GiCheon represent martial arts and *ki suryōn* practices. An essential characteristic of this South Korean life is its ever-present rush and competitiveness: we have to ascend the mountain without delay.

Mr. Ha utilizes walking in the mountains as a complex metaphor with multiple meanings. As I have argued, this metaphor works on a number of levels. The mountain routes are like *ki* channels in the human body and walking in the mountains is similar to GiCheon practice. But a human body is much more than a human body. Following the analysis of the interviews, in this dissertation I have conceptualized self-transformation in GiCheon as working on multiple levels simultaneously, and the self as the site of complex multi-layered dynamics. The bodily self extends into a social self and then into a universal self. Yet, an extended analysis of the interviews has yielded the existence of an additional self – that of a mountain. The body of a mountain is an additional body, or an additional self, upon, within or with the help of which the process of self-cultivation occurs. The mountain makes up an additional space of the self and for the self, within which a core of the self progresses. The core of the self can be a bodily self, but also a spiritual-religious self, or a happiness-searching self, as evidenced by the narration of Mr. Ha.

In the current chapter I argue that the mountain appears in the narrations of the practitioners as a metaphor for life. In the narration of Mr. Ha the mountain is like a human body, a space within which the movement of *ki* can be traced through the medium of pain.

Pain stirring within the body indicates the manner and degree of a healing process. The mountain is also a religious or spiritual space, or a space of life where one looks for happiness. An individual progresses within this space, carefully choosing her or his path, searching for shortcuts to reach the summit. In the set of interview extracts we now proceed to analyse, mountains still symbolize life, but in a less concrete, and more abstract sense. Here mountains stand for *what is - innŭn kŏt*.

7.4 Mountains as *innŭn kŏt* (있는 것)

In the narration of Kwŏn Kuho, hiking is again a metaphor for GiCheon practice: *In Korean, we say “there are mountains, so I go into the mountains (sani issŏsŏ sanŭl kanda)” [...]. Once Sabunim asked me: “Mr. Kwŏn, why do you practice GiCheon?” [...]. In suryŏn, the sense of purpose can be lacking – and it might be good ... [...]. So you just have people walking in the mountains ... Nowadays there are lots of people hiking in the mountains ... In our time there were barely [people strolling in the mountains]... [...]. If we ask “why do you go to the mountains?” ... It is expressed like that, actually you cannot express it otherwise [...]. There are mountains, so you go there ... [...]. It is better if you don’t have a specific sense of purpose ... [when you train] [...].⁹⁸*

Seventy percent of Korean peninsula is occupied by mountains. Mountains therefore are the background against which the spectacle of life is played out, and also symbolic of life itself. You walk in the mountains because the mountains are there, in front of your eyes, nearby your home. There is no specific reason for hiking, and not everything needs a rational reason. GiCheon practice is, or should be, like walking in the mountains. Mr. Kwŏn thinks that an absence of a particular goal in training is desirable. In a spirit very different from the competitiveness of Mr. Ha above, Mr. Kwŏn says that in *suryŏn the sense of purpose can be*

⁹⁸ Interview of 07.11.2010, Seoul, South Korea.

lacking – and it might be good. Just as I go hiking “without reason”, so I should practice GiCheon “without reason”. Mountains stand for something that is there, the unquestioned, given background against which human life unfolds. The image of mountains as something that is there and the parallels between GiCheon training and hiking come across in the interviews of many practitioners. This is how GiCheon instructor Kim Hyōnt’ae develops these themes.⁹⁹

Physical pain, after you overstep it once, can be overstepped twice, three times [and so on]. If you go beyond the limit, beyond the mountain pass (kogae)...¹⁰⁰ Now, famous alpinists, mountain climbers, [if you ask them] "why do you go to the mountains?" [they answer] "there are mountains so I go there" (kōgi sani issōsō kanda) [...].¹⁰¹ If we ask “until which point should we study? Until when should we do suryōn?” [...] [The answer is] until we stop perceiving suryōn, the mountains, as mountains. [...] Up to the moment when this mountain passage would seem as nothing to me, up to the moment when it would not seem a mountain pass for me [anymore]. Until [the moment when] this [mountain passage] becomes something self-evident for me. When we achieve this target state of the mind-heart, that is the end of suryōn. Why? Because we already know everything.

In the narrative of Kim Hyōnt’ae the very existence of mountains expresses a challenge. Mountains are not just there. They are not just a background. Instead, they provoke us. I can cross the mountain pass. After I cross the mountain pass, I can overcome this challenge two times, three times and more. Then, it ceases being a challenge. For Mr. Kim, in a narrow sense, the mountain is an analogy for physical pain. Being sustained once, the pain

⁹⁹ Interview of 04.12.2010, Puch’ōn, South Korea.

¹⁰⁰ In ordinary speech *kogae* is a metaphor for a difficult period of obstacles in one’s life.

¹⁰¹ It is possible that the comments *there are mountains, so I go into the mountains* of Kwōn Kuho and *there are mountains so I go there* of Kim Hyōnt’ae are inspired by the English mountaineer George Mallory (1886-1924). When asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, Mallory answered “Because it is there” (Bernbaum 1990: 238).

can be contained. Here, Mr. Kim echoes the narration of Mr. Ha. Both Mr. Ha and Mr. Kim connect pain experienced in the *naegasinjang* position with ascending the mountain. Mr. Ha links pain emerging anew in a different body part to a revelation of a new mountain peak while hiking. Mr. Kim likens pain to a mountain pass. Mountain passes can be crossed, and so the pain can be overcome. It is hard the first time, but the second, the third, the fourth time are easier. Mr. Kim continues his metaphor toward overcoming larger obstacles and difficulties in life and in study. Crossing the mountain pass is an allegory of mastering the pain of the body. Yet both the image of a mountain pass and of physical pain point toward different, deeper symbolism. Not just the pain of the body, but the pain and difficulty of existence in general and of *suryŏn* in particular could, and should be overcome.

In a wider sense, the mountain presents an allegory for *suryŏn*. As long as the mountain confronts me, I have to overcome it, I have to climb it. But when the mountain becomes nothing to me, it stops being a trial for me, and it is not a challenge for me anymore. Mr. Kim articulates this as “not being a mountain” any longer. *Until when should we do suryŏn?* [...] *[The answer is] until we stop perceiving suryŏn, the mountains, as mountains.* The mountain here is a symbol of *suryŏn*, of the study. When the training becomes too easy, it is not training for me anymore, and there is no need to continue the practice or the study. When that level of difficulty is overcome by the student, it is incorporated into her knowledge and ability: *we already know everything.*

Mountains are mentioned by the adepts not necessarily in direct connection with their GiCheon practice. Yet, even in those cases analysis of mountain concepts in their narrations is helpful for understanding the place of mountains in Korean culture in general, which of course impacts directly on the meaning of mountains in GiCheon. The following is an extract from the interview with Yi Ch’angu, the owner of a health products business, in his early

sixties. I have talked with Mr. Yi about different religions, and this is how he summarized our conversation.¹⁰²

- *The best religion is chayŏn (自然 nature).*¹⁰³

- *So, what is chayŏn?*

- *Chayŏn, as it is (innŭn kūdaero).*

- *What is "as it is"?*

- *Simply as it is. There are the clouds in the sky, there are trees on the mountains, the water is flowing in the valley. Chayŏnsŭrŏun (natural) [...]*

- *The concept of chayŏn [was translated as] "nature" into English [...]*

- *It is a bit different [from "nature"].*

- *People say it is very different. It was translated as "nature" in the past, nowadays many people disagree with that [translation].*

- *That's right. [...] The meaning [I talk about] is a little different from that "nature". [...] As it is, as it flows, that is the meaning. Nature which is visible [to an eye], like a landscape, is not that.*

Mr. Yi talks about religions, and for him, the best religion is *chayŏn*. And what is *chayŏn*? *Chayŏn* is as it is: there are the clouds in the sky, there are trees on the mountains, water is flowing in the valleys. Mountains, alongside with the sky and the valleys, figure in this description of the best religion. This definition of *chayŏn* presents a cosmological, ordered picture of the universe, in which mountains hold an important place. The sky is above, mountains and valleys are below. In the sky are clouds, on the mountains are trees, and in the valleys the water flows.

¹⁰² Interview of 05.10.2010, Seoul, South Korea. Mr. Yi gave me explicit permission to use his real name.

¹⁰³ The word *chayŏn* was translated as "nature" in the past, but in recent philosophical translations is rendered as "so of its own" or "so of itself" (Robinet 2008c: 1302). In normal daily conversation, as opposed to philosophical texts, it just means "nature".

We have considered the extracts from the interviews with three GiCheon practitioners that allude to mountains as *innŭn kŏt* (what is). For Kim Hyŏnt’ae mountains stand for pain, difficulties and obstacles in GiCheon *suryŏn* in particular, and study in general. The term study he uses in a rather wide sense, pointing toward overall progress and development of life. Mr. Kim contrasts the existence of mountains in space with the possible or theoretical absence of mountains in space. A mountain is there, but it is possible to conceive of the mountain not being there. This approach differentiates between the presence of mountains (*sani innŭn kŏt*) and the absence of mountains (*sani ōmnŭn kŏt*). Mountains are a provocation, a test. As long as mountains defy us, we should go to the mountains and accept the challenge they pose by their mere existence. This should be done until the presence of a mountain becomes like the absence of a mountain. When the mountains cease being mountains, stop provoking us, when ascending them becomes just nothing – at that moment the need to go the mountains disappear. The test was passed, the challenge conquered. Mountains disappear, not physically, but metaphorically. They are not mountains anymore.

Contrary to Kim Hyŏnt’ae, Kwŏn Kuho and Yi Ch’angu see mountains as ever-present. They do not conceive of mountains as “not being there”. Particularly Yi Ch’angu sees mountains as an almost cosmological element of the universe.

7.5 Mountains as a hiking space

When Mr. Kwŏn compares hiking to GiCheon practice in the previous section, he mentions also the contemporary development of the hiking industry. *Nowadays there are lots of people hiking in the mountains ... In our time there were hardly [any people strolling in the mountains]*. Besides utilising hiking as a metaphor, he alludes to factual hiking in a literal sense. Many adepts mention actual hiking in association with their GiCheon training. And yet, the figurative usage of mountain imagery usually accompanies their recollection of their real

hiking trips. And ascending the mountain in the narrations of the adepts repeatedly pertains to the transformative process of the self.

In this section I analyse mountain imagery in the accounts of GiCheon adepts in connection with the hiking culture of South Korea. Korean and Japanese hiking culture is an example of how mountainous spaces are utilized for the hiking industry in East Asia, following the urbanization of the society (Knight 2005). “Nature”, a concept brought into wider usage after industrialization, in the modern age is objectified, romanticized, commodified and consumed. There is no “nature” without industrialization, and “mountains” in contemporary East Asia are envisioned and established as an extension, neutralizer and cure for the “city,” which is seen as the epitome of modernization and industrialization. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the industrialization of the South Korean society brought with it the rise of health awareness and of hiking, which were always parts of Korean cultural landscape, but came to the fore since the 1980s.

Health-consciousness in contemporary Korea is very high. A strong idea that you have to keep doing something for preserving or re-gaining health is a part of the general tendency for self-improvement, which, as I argue, is characteristic of the East Asian way of life. As I have mentioned in Chapter Six, the tendency to perfect whatever you do or whoever you are manifest in modern times as *yangsheng* practices in Beijing, as *ki suryŏn* in South Korea and as Japanese asceticism. Hiking activities based on health concerns are one part of this.

Hiking culture is booming in Korea today. In spring and autumn walks in the mountains, with portable radios and picnicking, are a favourite leisure activity. The mountains are crowded with families, couples, groups of friends and the members of various hiking clubs in colorful mountain gear. Hiking trips vary from a fifteen minute stroll in a nearby park to a day-long excursion for which food and drinks are packed.

Hiking trails can be generally divided into two kinds. The less arduous trails are frequented by many senior citizens walking in the mountains every day. Older people in their 60s, 70s and 80s with their rucksacks and hiking shoes, practice hiking in connection with health, which is emphasized by the ubiquity of exercise equipment at various spots in the mountains. Harder hiking trails are explored by younger people. Sörak mountain trails, for example, referred to by Pak Kyöngae below, are quite difficult, long and steep. Also due to the lack of enough safety measures implemented on the mountain, a few people drop from the cliffs and die every year.

This is how Ms. Pak, a bank team manager in her early 50s, talks about walking in the Sörak mountains.¹⁰⁴ In her narrative focused on the ascent of a mountain she associates hiking with GiCheon practice: *At that time I had personal difficulties, it was really hard for me at the department where I worked. I got much stress from relationships with people. The more I got angry, the more I did GiCheon. [...] I used GiCheon as a stress relieving method. When I stood in naegasinjang [position], [...] I realized that those things are not as big as they seem.*

Many of my interviewees reported turning to GiCheon as they were searching for a stress-relieving method. They needed to find peace of mind, outbalance the hectic urbanism of their lives. Similarly to Ms. Pak, many students report that after encountering conflicts, performing GiCheon exercises helps them to put things in correct proportion and realize how small their worries really are.

[...] In my head [thoughts] were coming and going. [...] Long ago [...] when I was in my 20s, I went [...] to the Sörak mountains. [...] At dawn it was very cold, it was hard and difficult. [...] I just walked one step [at the time]. I did not have any thoughts at that moment, really. I just knew that I had to take one more step [...] If I go [to Söraksan] like that [...] I

¹⁰⁴ Interview of 17.01.2011, Seoul, South Korea.

really feel that I come back with an empty, clear head. Different affairs of this world, small insignificant things of everyday life drop off completely.

The mountain escapade referred to by Ms. Pak is a one- or two-day long journey to Söraksan. Not just for Ms. Pak, but for many people a yearly pilgrimage to Söraksan is a way to relieve accumulated stress by disconnecting from the usual worries. However, in the comparison of Ms. Pak the effects of mountain hiking are extended toward the effects of GiCheon training. These effects were a result of the Söraksan trip and this is the reason for Ms. Pak to continue practicing the *naegasinjang* position.

[...] It is just one day that I was away, but I felt that I stayed there for a whole week [...]. Each time I stand in naegasinjang I have this feeling. I do not have to go [to the mountains] every year. [...] My body gets into [...] an almost extreme state, I feel [...] this hardship. And at that moment I see in my mind snow-covered Söraksan, [I recall that] cold, hard [...] moment. [...] So trivial things like relationships worries ... – I feel that I am distanced from them. Then again, when I come back to the everyday [...] I confront new conflicts, and again I can recover.

Ms. Pak says that she does not have to go *[to the mountains] every year* because she can relieve her stress through GiCheon practice. She compares her training to mountain hiking by way of explanation: referring to something very usual and well known (a yearly expedition to the mountains for one or two days) in order to interpret something unusual and unknown (GiCheon practice). Thus Ms. Pak compares standing in *naegasinjang* position to ascending Söraksan.

Each time Ms. Pak stands in *naegasinjang*, in her mind-heart she goes back to Söraksan. Why? What is it that connects her *naegasinjang* experience with her Söraksan travel? Söraksan excursion and GiCheon practice are united in the mind of Ms. Pak by the hardship and dramatic nature of these experiences. *Naegasinjang* is hard and painful to

sustain. It is difficult to maintain the position, just as it was difficult for Ms. Pak to keep walking up the mountain at night, in winter, under freezing weather conditions.¹⁰⁵ The only way to keep up was to concentrate on the next step: *just think about one more step*. A similar mental attitude of endurance and persistence in the “here and now” is essential for sustaining GiCheon positions. Ms. Pak calls it an extreme state: maximal exertion of bending the joints in *naegasinjang*, an application of the *yökkūn* principle discussed in the previous chapter, coming together with the mental effort to carry on.

If I go to the mountain [...] only if I practice GiCheon in the end, my body can really relax. [...] On the day I practice GiCheon really well, I feel as if I have disassembled my whole body with a screw-driver, washed it well and then assembled it back. A really light feeling as if I could fly. When I do GiCheon for just one hour, I get a feeling as if I went hiking to the mountains for the whole day [...]. When we go hiking [...] we get such a feeling, as if we take the body apart [cleanse it and then assemble it back]. GiCheon is like that. After we do GiCheon [...] our faces become bright like the sun. A clean and transparent feeling. Your skin becomes clear, so you don't need cosmetics [...].

Though Pak Kyōngae sees ascending the mountain and GiCheon practice as parallel processes, she connects the two also in a literal sense. Hiking is not enough anymore. Each time she hikes, she has to practice GiCheon in the end otherwise she cannot really relax.

Mr. Ha in section 7.3 likens ascending the mountain with a spiritual path and with GiCheon practice. Ms. Pak, comparing walking in the mountains with GiCheon practice, describes in detail the process of spiritual purification and cleansing.¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, she utilizes engineering-related metaphors from contemporary life and culture: *disassembled my whole body with a screw-driver*.

¹⁰⁵ Ms. Pak told me that she started ascending around 2 or 3 AM and reached the summit around 7 or 8 AM.

¹⁰⁶ See note 97 on use the term “spirituality” in this text.

The sense of a light and clean body can be easily associated with spending time in the nature – in the mountains. Figures of speech like a *face bright like the sun, clean and transparent feeling* and *clear skin* evoke the images of lucid and fresh mountain air and an actual mountain sunrise – Ms. Pak started ascending at night and probably met the sunrise at the summit. As pointed out in the Chapter Six, a similar sense of lightness and cleansing is experienced by many adepts in *naegasinjang* position, or after its completion. In terms of personally colored experiential modalities reviewed in Chapter Five, a feeling of lightness and cleansing might be defined as constituting one of the major experiential modalities in Ms. Pak’s account.

Remarkable is her relation to time. Ms. Pak practices GiCheon exercises today, but the vision she has in her mind is ascending Söraksan when she was in her twenties, that is thirty years ago. Holding the *naegasinjang* position for one hour is like a hiking trip that lasted a whole day. And the mountain excursion of one day was so absorbing and effective *as if I stayed there a whole week*. This perception of time may be to some degree also be inspired by GiCheon ideology. Similarly to Buddhism, GiCheon has a notion that “everything is in your mind” – but to this the teachers add “and the mind is in the body”. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, the painful *naegasinjang* stance makes the time stretch and shrink. Two minutes in this hard position often seems to an adept as an unendurably long time, but the teachers advise to make it even longer “into the length of two lives”, in order to heighten the effects of the practice. The perception of time by Ms. Pak is one example of how the pain makes time dissolve, as we have discussed in the preceding chapter.

This feeling that I go up the mountain, it includes everything. It seems that my ability to control my emotions grew. We gather strength in our tanjŏn (丹田 cinnabar field) and pull

*the breathing down.*¹⁰⁷ *Like pulling the ki down, we pull our emotional center down. These effects come together [...] So while my tolerance for stress increased, I could maintain continuously what was important for me and my strength to go forward grew...*

Tolerance, endurance, and the ability to keep climbing under harsh conditions are connected in the narration of Ms. Pak to her desired and achieved emotional stability. She could ascend Sōraksan and stand in *naegasinjang* without giving up – and similarly she can maintain what is important for her and bear emotional pressure, because her strength has grown. The strength here has a double meaning of physical and mental-emotional power, it is the power to endure suffering, an ability to bend without breaking. Ms. Pak refers to it as *pulling the ki, breathing, and emotional center down*. In the *naegasinjang* position the gravity center of the body, *hadanjōn*, must go as low as possible. According to the theories of “correct *ki* flow” in Chinese and Korean traditional medicine, Daoist alchemy and GiCheon, *ki* bursting up toward the head in the state of anger is wrong and should be prevented. Ms. Pak implies that she is now better prepared to do this than before, so she can more effectively *ch’amta* (bear with things) in her relationships with people, with less angry explosions.¹⁰⁸ Her proficiency in governing *ki*, breathing, emotions and stress as well as the potential to *retain what she wants* and the *strength to go forward* are all included by Ms. Pak in this *one feeling of ascending the mountain*. These are not multiple elements united together, but rather one feeling, one consciousness that manifests simultaneously on different planes.

Also the comparison of the body of the mountain, or a body of nature to the human body is implicated in the account of Ms. Pak. She mentions a *face bright like the sun, clear*

¹⁰⁷ As briefly mentioned in Chapter Two, *tanjōn* (丹田 Chinese *dantian*, cinnabar field) refers to three loci playing a key role in East Asian practices of internal alchemy and nourishing life. The three *tanjōn* are located in the regions of abdomen, heart and brain (Pregadio 2008: 302). Korean *ki suryōn* discourse relates to the three *tanjōn* as *hadanjōn* (下丹田 lower *tanjōn*), *chungdanjōn* (中丹田 middle *tanjōn*) and *sangdanjōn* (上丹田 upper *tanjōn*). In GiCheon practice the lower *tanjōn* is emphasized, and considered as a storage of *ki* and a center of a human body. Ms. Pak and most other practitioners refer to *hadanjōn*, the lower *tanjōn*, just as *tanjōn*.

¹⁰⁸ I have discussed the term *ch’amta* in Chapter Two.

skin and clean transparent feeling, which reminds us of fresh mountain air and a clear mountain sunrise. In the account of Mr. Ha, the mountain paths are a metaphor for the *ki* channels in a human body. A mountain is brought into the narrative in order to illustrate the processes occurring in the body. But in the narrative of Ms. Pak it is the other way around: a human body is a metaphor for the body of a mountain. If the body of Ms. Pak was the core of her self when she was climbing Sōraksan, then the mountain, the air and the sunrise were the space within which the self functioned. But a certain degree of identification of her own body with the body of the mountain, posits the mountain, nature and the universe as an additional self of Ms. Pak.

The self exists simultaneously on multiple planes, which following Confucian terminology I have portrayed schematically as intentions, feelings, thoughts, physical/personal actions and activities, familial and social involvement, and existence in the universal. In the narrative of Ms. Pak ascending the mountain is a metaphor for the transformative process of the self. This metaphor connects to intentional self (retain what one wants, strength to go forward), emotional self (stress, release), cognitive self (thoughts come and go), bodily self (walking), social self (relationships with others) and existence in the universe (comparing the body of nature with the human body). Although the selves are separate in their discursive representation, they are experienced and transformed as one, at the same time: *this feeling that I go up the mountain, it includes everything*. This feeling is articulated through the medium of *ki*. The key phrase here is *we gather strength in our tanjōn and pull the breathing down. Like pulling the ki down, we pull our emotional center down. These effects come together*.

Though the account of Ms. Pak is full of metaphors, it is also very literal. Ms. Pak talks about her actual, real hiking trip to Sōraksan which took place about thirty years before her interview. We will now turn toward another interview extract, that of Sin Hyōnju, a

trading company employee in her early 40s.¹⁰⁹ Ms. Sin, similarly to Ms. Pak, talks about hiking in both literal and metaphorical ways, in connection with her GiCheon experience.

The thing I felt the fastest, is that my physical strength had [...] grown. Let's suppose I went hiking, and could reach only half-way up the mountain. A few months after starting GiCheon [practice], reaching the summit was all right for me [...].

Later in her narrative Ms. Sin does associate GiCheon exercises with her actual hiking experience. But first she relates to the mountain image by way of example: her strength has grown. If supposedly she could reach only half-way before, now she can get to the mountain top. Similarly to the narrative of Ms. Pak, this metaphor creates the frame of reference of improving, advancing, progressing toward the goal. Ascending the mountain is a symbol of growing strength, and of transformation in a very literal way: you are not who you were anymore, because you are not where you were. The image of mountain hiking is employed by Ms. Sin both in a metaphorical way, and also literally.

In naegasinjang I felt angry. [...] This anger, it was tickling in my whole body. I was very annoyed, and felt strong irritation. [...] In the beginning it was just pain. [...] In my legs, back, arms, shoulders, but at some point, probably six months after starting the practice, I started feeling angry. [...] Itching inside the body, where I cannot scratch. [...] I often went to the mountains then, I was so angry [...] During that period I walked much. [...] My home is near the mountains. After finishing [GiCheon session at the studio] I went home through the mountains. I became really strong. [...] This angry feeling, if I did that, was released, dissolved.

Ms. Sin felt anger, itching and tickling in *naegasinjang*, the point we have discussed in Chapter Five. To release this anger and to calm down she employed the method of *walking through the mountains* towards her home. Walking through the mountains was a method of a

¹⁰⁹ Interview of 08.12.2010, Pusan, South Korea.

relief from unpleasant sensations, a problem-solving technique. In this part of her narrative hiking is literal, not metaphorical.

This part of Ms. Sin's narration is the opposite of the account of Ms. Pak. Ms. Pak felt that there was no more need to go to the mountains, because GiCheon practice brought results similar to the effects of hiking. For Ms. Sin, on the other hand, going to the mountains was needed in order to get rid of the unpleasant feelings GiCheon practice produced. Ms. Sin mentions mountains hiking in relation to GiCheon practice not by associating the two, as does Ms. Pak, but by contrasting them. Yet, in the narrations of both Ms. Pak and Ms. Sin GiCheon practice is linked to walking in the mountains. In the beginning of the interview extract Ms. Sin explicitly compares the two, stating later that walking in the mountains has healing effects. For Ms. Pak, both the *naegasinjang* position and hiking cause similar outcomes: they cleanse and purify the body-mind. For Ms. Sin, on the contrary, walking in the mountains soothes the feelings of annoyance and unrest caused by *naegasinjang*.

Trying to escape from the noises and smells of the city, urban South Koreans seek refuge in mountain hiking. These Korean hikers are not necessarily GiCheon practitioners. The life and death experiences of climbing the slippery rocks, culminating in reaching spaces high up, are expressed metaphorically by some Korean hikers of contemporary times as meeting the *sansin* (山神 mountain gods). People connect this emotional cathartic experience to enlightenment and spiritual growth. Besides, boasting that you have ascended Tobong peak the hard way heightens your social status (Pak Chŏngwŏn 2011). Similarly to GiCheon, hiking is a social practice, and achievement of difficult enterprises is conducive toward higher position within and without the practicing community.

7.6 Mountains as a space of immortality

Throughout Korean history, residents of the mountainous peninsula have believed that the peaks and slopes are spiritually alive, inhabited by *sansin*.¹¹⁰ *Sansin* and *sinsŏn* exist in contemporary Korea also in the form of *sŏndo* culture, as explained in the Introduction. As mountain dwellers, *sansin* and *sinsŏn* have direct connection with hiking and mountain climbing. This section considers how the mountain immortality motifs unfold in the narrations of GiCheon practitioners. I will also briefly examine the importance of mountain immortality for GiCheon lore and legends.

This is how Mr. Ch'oe Hyŏngsu, the owner of a small business in his early 50s, evokes the concept of mountain immortality while talking about his GiCheon experience.¹¹¹

- *How did you know about GiCheon training, and when did you start practicing?*

- *[...] since I was small [...] as we, Koreans, grow up [...] obscure (magyŏnhan) ideas of traditional martial arts, sanjung suryŏn (山中修練 training in the mountains) ...¹¹² More than this vague idea of martial arts, how should I call it, toga (道家 Daoism) ... the stories we hear from elders, what we feel when we read books ... there is this kind of yearning. [...] People of my age mostly have it [...] during our childhood we heard many stories about stepping on clouds and flying. These stories are unscientific (pigwahakchŏk), but we always*

¹¹⁰ Mason 2015.

¹¹¹ Interview of 10.11.2010, Puch'ŏn, South Korea.

¹¹² Mr. Ch'oe makes a connection between GiCheon and martial arts. As mentioned in the introduction, Lee Sangwŏn, the head of Kichŏn Sangmuwŏn, has developed GiCheon as mind-body meditative discipline, and later other GiCheon instructors followed his example. However, up to the mid-1980s, GiCheon was taught and practiced mainly as martial art. This image of GiCheon is promoted also in GiCheon lore. The books insist that GiCheon is the oldest and truest of Korean self-cultivation practices and martial arts. The tale of a young Taeyang Chinin being the best martial artist ever and always winning in combat in the 1970s is presented as a proof (Kim Hŭisang and Kich'ŏnmun Ponmun ed. 2000: 76-77). Besides, according to legends, GiCheon is a basis and foundation on which Chinese and Japanese martial arts grew and flourished (Pak Taeyang, Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu, unpublished manuscript).

had this longing, our generation [...]. So, when I heard that there is such a thing, immediately [...] I thought that I have to study this. [...]

Mr. Ch'oe called the stories about *stepping on clouds and flying* “unscientific,” while alluding to *sinsŏn*, a concept I have briefly reviewed in the Introduction. In another part of his narrative (not quoted here) he relates also to GiCheon and to traditional acupuncture methods as *pigwahakchŏk*. Mr. Ch'oe mentioned with bitterness, that acupuncture was made illegal in the 1920s, that is during Japanese occupation of Korea, as it was considered *pigwahakchŏk*. In South Korea today only the doctors of Traditional Korean Medicine are legally allowed to practice acupuncture, though many people do it without permission. Mr. Ch'oe complains that in Japan acupuncture is currently licensed and practiced legally. It is not limited to medical doctors only. However, in order to practice acupuncture in Korea you have to receive a title of a Traditional Korean Medical Doctor, an expensive and complicated project, almost unattainable for ordinary people.

The term *pigwahakchŏk* was actively utilized in the discourse on nation building implemented in the era of Pak Chŏnghŭi (朴正熙 1917–1979), the South Korean military dictator from 1961 till 1979. This discourse in fact repeated Japanese colonial discourses about backwardness of Korea and the need to “catch-up” with Western civilization. This aspect of Japanese colonial discourse, reproduced by Pak Chŏnghŭi, included viewing various elements of Korean traditional culture, for example shamanism, as superstitious and *pigwahakchŏk* due to be overcome by science, as Mr. Ch'oe exemplifies when recounting how Korean acupuncture was considered *pigwahakchŏk* under Japanese rule.¹¹³ The term “obscure” Ch'oe Hyŏngsu used in relation to traditional martial arts and *sanjung suryŏn* echoes the term *pigwahakchŏk*.

¹¹³ A certain degree of contempt toward some elements of traditional Korean culture was not invented during the Japanese occupation but was already discernable in the attitude of the nobility towards shamans, in Chosŏn.

The good point of naegasinjang, if we do it at a cold mountain top, is that although it is cold, if we stand in this position for five minutes, we sweat, right? [...] Not only GiCheon, in our country there are different kinds of Korean ... should I call it martial arts? There are different kinds of sōndo (仙道 the way of immortals), sōnpōp (仙法 techniques of immortality) and the basis of all of them is breathing. That is tanjōn hohŭp [tanjōn breathing]. Through tanjōn hohŭp we purify our body, organize our thoughts, increase and cultivate ki.

When Mr. Ch'oe says *we purify our body, organize our thoughts, increase and cultivate ki*, we are reminded of Ms. Pak who says *like pulling the ki down, we pull our emotional center down*. Both Mr. Ch'oe and Ms. Pak connect cultivating *ki* with cultivation of the self, bringing out the notion of *ki* in the context of effort and intentionality. Similarly to Mr. Ch'oe, other trainees also connect increasing *ki* with the ideas of mountain immortals. This is how Kim Chehŭi, an events planner in his late 40s, talks about *toin* (道人 persons who follow the Way, a term used by different creeds). Mr. Kim counts Wōnhye Sangin, the teacher of Taeyang Chinin, among the *toin* who possess special magical abilities.¹¹⁴ He uses the term *toin* in the sense of *sinsōn*:

I think it is indeed possible that toin exist somewhere in the world [...]. They have accumulated naegong (内功 internal power) through continuous training. It is possible to build up different kind of energy through communion with the nature (chayōn kwa kyogam). [...] I think that there are many toin like that in Korea, apart from Wōnhye Sagongngin.¹¹⁵

The different kind of energy Kim Chehŭi mentions is what Mr. Ch'oe and Ms. Pak call *ki*. According to Mr. Kim, this energy is developed by *toin* (or *sinsōn*) through communion with nature. In fact, a *sinsōn* who has accumulated *naegong* through continuous

¹¹⁴ I relate the legend about Wōnhye Sangin below in the text of this section.

¹¹⁵ Interview of 11.01.2011 Seoul, South Korea. Mr. Kim gave me explicit permission to use his real name.

training is an embodiment of such a communion with nature, a perfect immortal depicted on Korean paintings as a part of a mountain landscape, a model for emulation for GiCheon practitioners, who of course want to train GiCheon in the mountains, just as Mr. Ch'oe and Ms. Pak do.

The connection between mountains and *sinsŏn* is embedded in Korean culture, and is manifested also in vernacular Korean. Flat rocky cliff-tops or clearings in the high mountains with a grand view are sometimes referred to as *sinsŏndae* (神仙臺 *sinsŏn* terrace). In people's minds *sinsŏndae* is associated with spiritual enlightenment, as evidenced by Korean temple-wall paintings, depicting Sakyamuni Buddha as meditating seated on a *sinsŏndae*. Another example is a word *sinsŏnbong* (神仙峯 *sinsŏn* peak). This term is used for a few Korean rocky peaks, all of which offer grand scenic views, despite not being the highest peaks (Mason 199: 56-57, 121 note 46).

Although some people might think that a belief in *sinsŏn* is a thing from the past, the narratives of Mr. Ch'oe and Mr. Kim demonstrate the relevance of *sinsŏn* for contemporary Korea. The way Mr. Ch'oe and others talk about GiCheon and Korea reflect the nation building discourse from the Pak Chŏnghŭi era and from Japanese colonial times. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Ch'oe Hyŏngsu and the trainees of older generation group together GiCheon, traditional culture of Korea and the notion of the "unscientific". According to Mr. Ch'oe, also mountain related beliefs and practices such as *sŏndo*, *sŏnpŏp* and *sanjung suryŏn* belong to this group. He associates them with the stories about stepping on clouds and flying, martial arts, Daoism, *tanjŏn hohŭp* and the cultivation of *ki*.

Against the background of the colonial past and the Pak Chŏnghŭi era which fought "superstition", the *sinsŏn* beliefs and practices with their *pigwahakchŏk* flavour provide a counter-narrative, taken up and developed by Korean nationalists. As I have briefly outlined

in the Introduction, *chaeya* nationalist historians attempted to reconstruct Korea's ancient glory, a tendency developed within the *sōndo* culture of contemporary immortality. Mr. Ch'oe connects the yearning that makes him perform GiCheon practice today with the childhood fairy tales about *sinsōn*. This kind of yearning Ch'oe Hyōngsu talks about is shared by many people. It provides a context and a reason for the re-invention and revival of the nationalist *sōndo* tradition, of which *sinsōn*, *ki suryōn* and GiCheon are one part.

The revival or re-invention of mountain immortality traditions includes not only *sinsōn*, but also *sansin*, who are equally important in the GiCheon legends introduced below. As mentioned in the Introduction, *sansin* are much more central to Korean culture than *sinsōn*. *Sansin* can be male or female, one or more per mountain, integral with it, alternatively either manifesting it or being manifested by it. The number and the size of *sansin* paintings in South Korea is increasing in recent decades (David Mason, personal communication). David Mason stresses that mountain worship is evolving new roles in twenty first century Korea (1999: 14-15), as evidenced by the growing body of research on the ancient and contemporary *sansin* cults and practices. Korean academic scholarship discusses *sansin* in the context of *sansin sinang* (山神信仰 religious beliefs in mountain gods) or *san sinang* (山信仰 religious beliefs in mountains) (Yi Kyōngyōp 2000, Yi Yohan 1987) and *sansinje* (山神祭 festive sacrifice to mountain gods) (Kang Sōngbok 2011, Pak Chongik 2009). *Sansinje* are performed in many Korean villages on a regular basis, in spring or autumn (Kyung Yup Lee 2015).

Mountain worship became systematized under Silla dynasty (57 B.C.E. – 935 A.D.). In his article on five mountains and Buddhist beliefs in mountain spirits, Ch'oe Chin'gu examines both the conflicts between *sansin sinang* and Buddhism and their subsequent fusion (Ch'oe Chin'gu 2013). The examination of ancient and contemporary mountain worship in Korea includes the studies of the rites (Kim Chōngha 2007), *sansin* paintings (Kim Yōngja 2005), and various types of *sansin* legends as well as their transmission (Im Chaehae, Pak

Chongsŏng 2005) and structure (Kim Sŏnp'ung 2003). Yet, the relevance of *sansin* for contemporary Korean society reaches beyond the ritual sphere of regular offerings to local deities. In Korea, mountains are traditionally regarded as a meeting place between humans and gods, an idea accepted by adherents of different religions. For example, some Korean Christian researchers on *sansin* suggest that a few pastors acquired spiritual powers through mountain prayer. These spiritual powers are expressed as leadership skills within the Christian community, conclude these Christian scholars (Yi Yohan 1987).

Sansin worship today is connected to a number of contemporary projects, such as the Noksae Han'guk (Green Korea) environmental movement, and nation-branding (Mason 2012), and the South Korean hiking culture discussed in this chapter in connection with GiCheon. As evidenced in the interviews with the adepts and the orally transmitted and codified legends, the ideas of *sansin* and *sinsŏn* are revived within the constructed mind-body tradition of GiCheon, thus constituting a part of contemporary mountain culture and mythology.

GiCheon mountain mythology draws on such deeply-rooted mountain beliefs. GiCheon claims to originate on Mt. Paektu, and to “have been passed down secretly [...] amidst the mountains in Korea” (as explained at the website www.gicheon.org managed by Lee Kit'ae), presumably by nameless sages and immortals. The role of Mt. Paektu in GiCheon mythology is one example of the importance of this mountain for contemporary Korean culture, and precisely because of this importance Mt. Paektu was incorporated into the newly invented tradition of GiCheon.

Mt. Paektu was considered an ancestral mountain during the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties. In the beginning of the 20th century the theory that this mountain was the birthplace of Tan'gun, the legendary founder of Kojosŏn, the earliest state considered to be Korean, gained currency in Korea. In the 1920s and 1930s, Korean newspapers started

referring to Mt. Paektu as a *yǒngsan* (靈山 sacred mountain). Today, photos and paintings of the mountain are frequently seen in South Korean governmental offices, in the lobbies of universities and business buildings, and in restaurants and cafes. They are found in offices of some Buddhist temples, and in shrines dedicated to mountain gods. Mountain Paektu is often discussed in contemporary South Korean scholarship and is equally important for North Korea. According to North Korea's mythology, Kim Chǒngil was born to Kim Ilsǒng and Kim Chǒngsuk, his first wife, in a secret camp at the base of Mt. Paektu. The semi-mythic struggles of Kim Ilsǒng and Kim Chǒngsuk with the Japanese soldiers around Mt. Paektu have generated a memorial architecture on the mountain which reflects this mythology and informs North Korea's wider cultural production. North Koreans are expected to visit the mountain and its sacred sites as part of a process of deep ideological education with work or army units (Winstanley-Chesters and Ten 2016: 152-156).

Besides providing one example of the centrality of Mt. Paektu to contemporary culture, GiCheon mythology equally demonstrates the relevance of mountain immortality notions. As mentioned in Chapter Two, a legend has it that the GiCheon initiator Taeyang Chinin was raised in the mountains by an immortal, Wǒnhye Sangin (元慧上人), who taught him the art of GiCheon. According to Taeyang Chinin, Wǒnhye 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. As a child, Taeyang Chinin also used to share his playground and sleeping spaces with mountain tigers (Pak Taeyang, Ch'oe Hyǒn'gyu unpublished manuscript).

These legends are taken seriously by many practitioners besides Mr. Ch'oe. Impressed by these legends, some adepts venture into Korean mountains looking for Wǒnhye Sangin, whom Taeyang Chinin first declared dead, but later changing his mind, pronounced to be alive again. Some GiCheon adherents maintain that they have met Wǒnhye Sangin,

whom they describe as an old man who can turn into a tiger.¹¹⁶ This is how the legends are experienced and lived again by the adepts, who re-enforce the value of these narratives through personal bodily practice in mountainous spaces.

The importance of mountain immortality in official GiCheon ideology is also demonstrated by the fact that the highest known GiCheon grandmaster goes under the name of Ch'önsönnŷö (天仙女 Immortal Woman of Heaven). The popular legend about the meeting of Bodhidharma, the founder of Chan Buddhism in China, and Ch'önsönnŷö at Mt. Paektu is often told to newcomers to GiCheon. This legend attempts to place GiCheon within a broader context of East Asian historical and mythological heritage, constituting a part of more general East Asian Bodhidharma lore and of East Asian mountain immortals mythology. The legend inscribes GiCheon in a narrative tradition which gives GiCheon cultural capital, showing that mountain worship and mountain practices are a living tradition of Korea. GiCheon lore claims its place as a part of this legacy. I will quote here the version of the Ch'önsönnŷö legend as it appears on the web-site www.gicheon.org.¹¹⁷ “According to GiCheon folklore, Bodhidharma (the 18th generation heir of Mahakasyapa, the founder of Chan Buddhism and the developer of Shaolin kungfu) learned *yökkün* from the female GiCheon grand master named Ch'önsönnŷö (Woman of Heaven).¹¹⁸ [...] Bodhidharma heard about the great strength and wisdom of the female GiCheon grand master known as Ch'önsönnŷö (Woman of Heaven). He sought her out in the northern mountains of Korea and asked her to spar with him. It didn't take Bodhidharma much time to realize how formidable

¹¹⁶ As I heard from Lee Kit'ae. This motif probably follows a traditional belief that *sansin* can turn into a tiger. On the paintings *sansin* is usually depicted with a tiger (Mason 1999: 77).

¹¹⁷ Lee Kit'ae, “Yeokgeun,” GiCheon, A Korean Tradition for Self-Healing and Self-Awareness, <http://www.gicheon.org/> (accessed November 26, 2016). The legend is reproduced here with a few slight changes, such as romanization and spelling. Another version of this legend says that prior to meeting Ch'önsönnŷö Bodhidharma prayed to the *sansin* of Paektu mountain, and on Mt. Paektu the meeting took place (Kim Hüisang and Kich'önmun Pomun ed. 2000: 53).

¹¹⁸ *Yökkün*, the principle of maximal bending the joints in GiCheon, facilitating the flow of life energy (*ki* 氣) while enhancing physical, moral and mental well-being, has been explained in more detail in Chapter Six.

Ch'önsönnjö was. He begged her to teach him the art of GiCheon. She offered him one lesson in GiCheon, but only if he could show her something: a bouquet of red flowers in a pure red sky. And so, one snowy day in the mountains, Bodhidharma cut off his left arm to prove his sincere desire to learn GiCheon. When he threw the arm in the air, the snow all around him became soaked with blood, forming a crimson bouquet. The grand master was appeased. She saw that Bodhidharma possessed a passionate will to learn, and so she taught him the great secret of GiCheon: *yökkün*.”

While distinct in time and space but involving the same protagonist, the Ch'önsönnjö legend borrows important motifs from Bodhidharma-related Buddhist legends: Huike (慧可), the disciple of Bodhidharma, cut his arm to prove his sincerity, thus becoming the second Chinese patriarch of Chan after Bodhidharma (Maguire 2001: 58). According to a different version, Huike's arm was cut off by scoundrels (Broughton 1999: 62). The narrative structure of the GiCheon legend here clearly follows the Chinese legend as a story of a disciple and a master. Huike cuts off his arm in order to prove his sincerity to Bodhidharma, and as a result becomes his successor, but in the GiCheon legend Bodhidharma is the disciple and the Woman of Heaven is the master. Bodhidharma cuts off his arm in order to prove his sincerity to the Woman of Heaven, and as a result becomes the next acknowledged master after her – or at least, within the constructed legendary time and space, he becomes a “GiCheon propagator dispatched to China”. He will transmit the secret teaching there, while the Woman of Heaven will continue teaching GiCheon in Korea. This legend clearly shows the progress of Bodhidharma upwards on the hierarchal ladder. From a “stranger coming from afar” he upgrades into a disciple and then into a potential master. Implicit in the story is that through his mastery of GiCheon Bodhidharma acquires a chance of becoming a *sinsön*, just like his teacher, the Woman of Heaven.

Bodhidharma comes to Mt. Paektu, and in order to become a GiCheon disciple he has to undergo transformation, to cut off his own arm. The Woman of Heaven is a GiCheon version of a *sinsŏn*. Understood this way, this legend, visualising the progressive self-cultivation, or a transmutation from mortal into immortal, reconstitutes mountains as a space of and for bodily and spiritual transformation. The deeds and demeanour of the Woman of Heaven translate and transpose GiCheon practice onto a heavenly, transcendental plane, as GiCheon is her attribute and an art that she teaches. The legend builds and confirms the status of the practice as a technique of immortality. In reality, not daring to hope for final immortality, the actual practitioners aspire to advance at least a few steps upon this road, a journey of improvement of their physical-moral-mental state and life. This is how the idea of GiCheon practice as self-transformation is portrayed within the legend of Ch'ŏnsŏnnyŏ.

Ch'ŏnsŏnnyŏ links the concept of the mountains to that of femininity. In vein with other practices of inner alchemy (Schipper 1993), GiCheon ideology gives a certain preference to females. Scholars concur that the *sansin* were held to be female in ancient times, and have mostly transformed, changing their gender into male under the prevailing patriarchal norms during the last half-millennium (Mason 1999: 37). Nevertheless, female mountains spirits are still actively worshiped in South Korea today, sustaining old traditions and evolving new ones. One example is Mt. Unje northeast of Kyŏngju. Today many female pilgrims frequent this Korean mountain to pray to the Unje Yŏsansin (雲帝 女山神 Unje Mountain Goddess), the wife of the second Silla king (Peter H. Lee; Wm. Theodore de Bary ed. 1997: 51). This worship goes back in historical record for at least a millennium (Grayson 1996: 126-130).¹¹⁹ Other examples of contemporary female-oriented Korean myths include the developing cult of “Mago, the Mother Goddess of the Korean people” advanced by

¹¹⁹ For research on other Korean mountain goddesses see, for example, Kwŏn T'aehyo 1998 and Ch'oe Unsik 2004.

adherents of the mind-body movement Dahn World. Mago (麻姑 Chinese: Magu), one of the most important female immortals in China, was allegedly born under Emperor Ming of the Han (57-75 C.E.), and her cult in the regions of Anhui and Jiangsu had an active following until at least the 13th century (Despeux, Kohn 2003: 94-96). She became a Mountain Goddess from Korean folktales and is promoted in Dahn World mythology into a “mother of all humans”, living in the “highest spot on the face of the earth” (Baker 2007b: 511-513). The image of Mago is becoming linked in recent years with a generalized conception of female *sansin*, an association even spreading beyond Dahn World circles (David Mason, personal communication July 2014).¹²⁰ Another important female *sansin* is Sōndo Sōngmo (仙桃聖母 Immortal Peaches Holy Mother), the goddess of Sōndo mountain west of Kyōngju. According to the legend recorded in *Samguk Yusa*, she gave birth to Pak Hyōkkōse (박혁거세), the first king of Silla. Later she became a promoter of Buddhism (Mason 1999: 38).

In GiCheon, the notion of feminine mountain immortality is embodied in a figure of the legendary Ch’ōnsonnyō. Male teachers often add that “men are stronger physically, but women are stronger spiritually. Women are better at GiCheon.” However these assumptions are not shared by male trainees, who represent more than half of all GiCheon practitioners. For example Mr. Ch’oe, whom I have quoted previously, while supporting the ideas of mountain immortality, does not support the idea of feminine superiority: *When we do GiCheon we have to bend knees, elbows, wrists. [...] In the beginning it is very difficult for men. People who started training with me, all felt like that. [...] But women’s bodies are soft so even persons who just start [practicing] achieve correct positions. [...] I am not saying*

¹²⁰ See also Kwōn, T’aehyo 1998.

*that women are doing better, or that men are doing better. It takes time until you can build a correct posture.*¹²¹

Mr. Ch'oe does not think that women are better at GiCheon. In his opinion women can achieve correct positions with greater ease simply because *women's bodies are soft*. GiCheon theory views things differently; a particular state of the body is never “by chance”. The state of the body reflects the state of the mind, so if a woman's body is softer and more flexible, it means that a woman is closer to the “GiCheon ideal” than a man. However, the majority of male adepts do not share this view, displaying a disparity of opinion between the students and the teachers, with whom the Ch'önsönnnyö legend is a favourite.

7.7 Conclusion to Chapter Seven

The reports of GiCheon practitioners weave into the general human experience of mountains over time and space, resonating with the meaning of this experience. Edwin Bernbaum, a scholar who has dedicated his life to the study of sacred mountains of the world, compares those who hike and climb for sport and recreation with those seeking spiritual awakening within traditional cultures. Across geographical regions and historical periods, mountains have been perceived as mysterious and splendid, evoking wonder and fear. Mountains are often revered as places of sacred power, spiritual attainment and pilgrimage, of revelation, transformation and purification, as centers of the universe, pathways to heavens, abodes of the dead, temples of gods and expressions of ultimate reality. In his book *Sacred Mountains of the World* Bernbaum talks mainly about mountaineers who use special gear for climbing steep rocks. Korean hikers rarely use this kind of gear. Nevertheless, the experiences described by Bernbaum have much in common with the experiences of Korean hikers, including those taking dangerous paths high up in the mountains. A previously unknown

¹²¹ Interview with Ch'oe Hyöngsu, 10.11.2010, Puch'ön, South Korea.

landscape unfolds around us as we climb up. Reaching a mountain summit permits one to gain greater knowledge of the surroundings – of the topography of the mountain one is climbing. The view from the summit of a mountain opens us to a fresh vision of ourselves and the world around us, and in doing so gives our life a new meaning and direction. Professional mountaineers also compare climbing to a temptation, to a challenge. The valleys and peaks conceal what lies hidden within and beyond them, beckon to us, holding out a secret promise. In contemporary mountaineering the struggle, the effort to reach the summit, often ends in a quiet understanding that leads to deeper insight and wisdom. Many climbers notice that the extreme conditions encountered on mountains – wind, clouds, fatigue and altitude – predispose them to awakening of the spirit and focus of the mind. They force the climbers to concentrate on what is important and real, to dispense with trivial concerns that often fog our vision and distract our attention. In the mountains, we see what lies around us with a sharper, brighter awareness. Experienced hikers say that from contact with forest and stream, rock and snow, come health and peace of mind, as well as fresh perspective that can lead to new ideas and ways of seeing things. Exposure to mountains and practice of mountaineering develop character and instil self-confidence. Climbing high mountains requires great effort and concentration, even self-sacrifice, and can transform the climber's perception of herself and the world around her, move her to the depth of her being, as the encounter with mountains often does. Some mountaineers notice that in the mountains they lose awareness of time, and enter a state of timeliness. (Bernbaum 1990: xiii, xv, xviii, xxi, xxiii, 223, 225, 236, 238, 242-247, 255). Similar motifs come up also in the interviews with GiCheon adepts when they talk about mountains.

The centrality of the mountain image for spiritual progress, in GiCheon and in other old or newly invented Korean traditions, has a rich historical and religious background. In this chapter I shed light on the experiential and bodily aspect of the imagery related to

ascending a mountain, which grounds the mountain as a metaphor of life. Some adepts talk about their actual hiking experiences, others utilise the mountain image only metaphorically. In any case the image of the mountain itself has a strong experiential aspect, as for the majority of the citizens of South Korea walking in the mountains is a part of life.

This chapter has examined the variety of mountain images as articulated by GiCheon adepts in the interviews. Starting with the mountain paths as a metaphor for *ki* channels in a human body in section 7.2, this chapter continued toward the ascent of the mountain as a symbol of religious or spiritual progress in section 7.3, relating to the account of Mr. Ha. The metaphorical connection between a human body and the body of a mountain, or the body of the universe comes up also in the narration of Ms. Pak discussed in section 7.5. In the narration of Kim Hyōngt'ae in section 7.4 we have considered climbing a mountain as an allegory of study and overcoming the challenges of life. The mountain image is a symbol of life, reality or the universe also in the descriptions of Mr. Kwōn and Mr. Yi, discussed in section 7.4. The three thematic motifs connected with mountain imagery: the human body, spiritual progress and life or reality relate to GiCheon training in both a literal and metaphorical way. As reviewed in the previous chapters, GiCheon exercises, performed by the human body, are regarded by many adepts as spiritual progress, and of course they are part of life. Besides this literal connection of the images to GiCheon, there is also a metaphorical connection between them: human body, spiritual or religious body, a body of life, or a body of the universe. These three bodies are identified with a body of a mountain, and ultimately, with GiCheon practice. Mountains constitute an additional body, or an additional self, both the core and the space of the practice.

In Chapter Four, we have seen that Ms. Pak interprets *suryōn* as a hard practice, but one that makes the burden of life bearable and possible. This is the leading experiential modality of her account. The extract from her interview brought up in the present chapter

follows similar narrative direction: it is hard to go on, but you have to endure the pain and the difficulty. The extreme effort should and could make the progress possible. If you persist, you will prevail and reach a mountain top. In section 7.5 of this chapter, Ms. Pak evokes the factual memory of a concrete mountain hiking trip, which took place in real time 30 years ago, and also alludes to mass hiking culture in contemporary Korea. This is an association of mountains with fresh air, nature, health and relaxation, positioning “mountains as a hiking space” in opposition to South Korean hectic urbanism.

In the section 7.6 we have discussed the immortality motifs in GiCheon lore. We have examined extracts from the interviews with Ch’oe Hyōngsu and Kim Chehŭi that demonstrate the importance of immortality theme for contemporary adepts, and discussed two legends that anchor the leitmotif of mountain immortals in contemporary GiCheon mythology. I have demonstrated that the ideas of mountain immortality, *sinsŏn* and *sansin* are deeply rooted in traditional and contemporary Korean culture. GiCheon and other *ki suryŏn* movements draw on these ideas, reinforce and develop them, constructing and constituting mountain immortality and mountains in general as a living tradition of Korean peninsula.

Like Mr. Ch’oe, many adherents say that they like performing GiCheon exercises at a mountain top. On one hand hiking and practicing GiCheon in the mountains constitute their active participation in hiking culture of contemporary Korea. On the other hand, this is their attempt to partake in mountain-related spirituality and purification, and in a way repeat the legendary explorations of Wŏnhye Sangin, Taeyang Chinin, the Woman of Heaven and Bodhidharma, discussed in section 7.6, thus contributing to the construction of the *sŏndo* tradition. GiCheon practice is the *sŏnpŏp* of contemporary adepts. For many of them, like for Mr. Ch’oe, mountains and GiCheon practice themselves are symbols of *sinsŏn*, of immortality, of childhood fairy tales and the whole way of life in old Korea when people did not lead busy lives [like today] (*pappŭge an saratta*). This reclaiming, reassessing and re-

evaluation of mountains as spaces of reconstructed tradition occurs against the background and in the context of urban society.