10

Beiträge zur kulturwissenschaftlichen Süd- und Ostasienforschung

herausgegeben von Eva De Clercq, Bart Dessein, Franziska Ehmcke, Ann Heirman und Andreas Niehaus

Victoria Ten (Jeon Yeon Hwa)

Body and Ki in GiCheon

Practices of Self-Cultivation in Contemporary Korea

Ergon

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To Kim Hŭisang

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Preface

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

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

I had expected to meet a white-bearded old master, like those I had seen in the movies, instead, a young man of about my age greeted me. We began by watching a couple of videos about GiCheon in the office, and then went to the studio. The studio was fairly large. On the cream-colored walls a few panels showed six basic GiCheon positions. The floor was covered with square, green plastic mats. The movements were unusual and hard to remember. As I kept practicing, I learned that the movements it took me so long to master are actually different variations of one circular movement called *wŏnbanjang* (원반장). The main position, "*naegasinjang*, the heart of GiCheon practice" was a static one, which was difficult and painful to sustain. When I stood in the *naegasinjang* position, the instructor Lee Kit'ae told me that an old lady who was eighty years old performed it for forty minutes during her first training session. My first *naegasinjang* experience lasted only five minutes, but I immediately felt how effective it was. After completing the position, I felt satisfied, calm and balanced. I instantly realized that this was the practice I had been seeking for years.

The instructor explained that there are regular training sessions, usually three times a day. However, any student could also attend outside of scheduled training hours and practice under the guidance of the instructor, or by themselves. At least one of the three or four instructors were always present in the studio. The monthly fee was one hundred thousand Korean Won (equivalent to about a hundred dollars), but discounts were available for those in tight economic circumstances.

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

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

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

Introduction

The subjects of my research live in a society that is radically different from that of their parents and grandparents. To understand present-day Koreans in general and, more particularly, to understand how the practitioners of GiCheon, who mostly belong to the modern urban middle class, live and use their practice, some attention needs to be paid to these changes.

From the late 19th century onwards, Korea has experienced a process of dramatic and almost continuous change in all sectors. The Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) came to an end with Japanese colonization (1910-1945), and after the devastating Korean War (1950-1953) the nation was divided into North and South Korea. In the 1950s, South Korea was one of the poorest nations in the world, with an income per capita of about 80 USD/year. Yet, Koreans were determined to succeed in the modern world. Per capita income grew to 1,342 USD in the 1960s, to 19,227 USD in 2008, and had reached 31,750 USD by 2011.[1] Over a short period of time, from the end of the Korean War to the late 1990s, South Korea achieved rapid economic development, and significant social changes continue to this day. The legal status of women became equal to that of men, and schools opened their doors to them. The population increased from around 20 million in the 1950s to 43 million in the late 1980s, and to around 51 million today.[2] Accompanying this was a major population migration to the cities from the countryside, so that the rural population of about 18 million in the 1960s decreased to 8.8 million in 2015, in spite of a substantial growth in total population.[3] Such a shift entailed changes in occupation: production workers and manual laborers accounted for only 13% of the labor force in 1960, but their ranks increased to 22% by 1970, 28% by 1980 and 35% by 1990. Professional, technical, administrative, managerial, clerical and sales workers made up only 20% of the labor force in 1960. Their numbers increased to 27% in 1980 and to 36% in 1990. By 1990 the huge increase in industrial labor, during the mid-1960s to mid-1980s, gave way to the growth of a middle class, of white-collar workers. Higher education also strode forward, illustrated by a rise in the number of tertiary students, from 90,000 to over

1 Long Le 2016: 253

2 Statistics Korea, "Population Trends and Projections of the World and Korea," Statistics Korea, http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/8/index.board?bmode=read&bSeq=&aSeq=347597&pageNo=1&rowNum=10&navCount=10&currPg=&sTarget=title&sTxt= (accessed September 18, 2016).

3 The World Bank, "Rural population," The World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL (accessed September 18, 2016).

one million in 1990[4] and 3.3 million in 2013.[5] In 2015, craft, machine operating, assembling and elementary workers amounted to about 35% of the labor force in the cities and 27% in the countryside, while professional, managerial, clerical and sales workers amounted to 58% in the cities and 34% in the countryside.[6]

From the mid-1960s an outward-looking, export-oriented economic policy successfully drove the industrialization of South Korean society. Under Pak Chŏnghŭi's stern rule (1961-1979) South Koreans experienced the equivalent of Europe's industrial revolution in a matter of two decades. For South Koreans, economic growth was, and still is, not without its costs. For a time, during the 1970s and early 1980s South Korea had the highest industrial accident and death rates in the world.[7] According to the findings of the McKinsey Global Institute from 2013, GDP had nearly tripled between the years 1993 and 2013, but this growth became decoupled from the real wages of ordinary citizens, as the wages grew by less than half this rate. By 2013 more than 50% of middle-income households were spending more than they earned each month. One of the primary reasons for this is that South Koreans invest more in private education than almost any other society on earth. This is related to characteristics of Korean society that will be explored in more detail below.[8]

Striving for upward mobility and self-improvement

When the scale of the South Korean economy expanded, large numbers of people became wage or salary workers. Thus in the course of three decades, leading up to the early 1990s, a new urban middle class emerged. One of the defining characteristics of this class was a desire for upward mobility. New ways of asserting status also emerged in the urban, industrialized society, but both old and new methods of acquiring and maintaining status involved occupation, education, material wealth, marriage strategies and lineage claims.

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4 Wells 2015: 216, Lett 1998: 37-38

5 WENR: World Education News and Reviews, "Asia Pacific: Education in South Korea," WENR, http://wenr.wes.org/2013/06/wenr-june-2013-an-overview-of-education-in-south-korea (accessed September 18, 2016).

6 Statistics Korea, "Characteristics of the Employed Persons by Industry and Occupation according to the Local Area Labour Force Survey in the Second Half of 2015," Statistics Korea, http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/5/4/index.board?bmode=read&bSeq=&aSeq=354718&pageNo=1&rowNum=10&navCount=10&currPg=&sTarget=title&sTxt= (accessed September 18, 2016).

7 Wells 2015: 216

8 Wonshik Choi 2013: 3

Traditional ways of asserting high status included, for example, lineage claims and the exemplary performance of ancestral worship. Most South Koreans claim today that they have descended from the *yangban* (兩班), Confucian scholar-officials and their descendants, the aristocracy from whom the state bureaucracy was recruited during Chosŏn dynasty.[9] The Confucian legacy of the *yangban* reemerges, sometimes in new and altered forms, as an active factor in contemporary South Korean life.[10] Confucian influence has been diffused in Korean society and permeates all kinds of practices and religions. One example is the Christian modification of *chesa* (祭祀), a memorial ceremony for ancestors, commonly performed by most South Korean Protestant believers twice a year.[11]

Probably as a consequence of its history, South Korea is a very status-conscious society, and the assertion of status has become an important element in both the formation and the definition of its new urban middle class, a project carried out by families rather than by individuals.[12] Denise Lett argues that South Korea's contemporary urban middle class exhibits a culturally inherited disposition to seek high status. Lett sees the legacy of the *yangban* and their concern with high status as the driving force behind the development of South Korea's new middle class and the country's rapid emergence as a global economic player.[13] Today, middle-class status is built and maintained by families,[14] just as in the past the maintenance of the *yangban* status was a family affair. Today's middle-class families, and those aspiring to become middle class, make great sacrifices trying to give their children access to higher education. A university degree is a prerequisite for most jobs of middle-class status, including government officials, corporate managers and administrators, educators, doctors and lawyers.[15]

Signifiers of high social status and culture in Chosŏn included housing, dress, lifestyle, behavior, and landholding as the basics. Equally important were knowledge of Confucian classics, literacy in Chinese, along with adherence to Confucian ethical norms and Confucian rituals. Career and position in society were measured by the passing of civil service exams to earn a degree, holding governmental offices, or keeping a life of leisure, rather than one characterized by labor. Familial status was maintained by an extended kinship system, intermarrying among elite lineages, the performance

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9 *Yangban* were the social, cultural, political and economic elite of Chŏson society (Lett 1998: 14-17).

10 Lett 1998: 31, 39; Asakura 1998: 198

11 Grayson 2009

12 Abelmann 2003

13 Lett 1998: 1-2

14 Abelmann 2003

15 Lett 1998: 44

of lineage rituals, maintenance of genealogies, proper family behavior and association with those of good social standing. Many of these behaviors, in more or less adapted forms, are still aspired to in South Korea, and constitute the hallmarks of the contemporary middle class. The requirements to adhere to them are all consuming and exhausting. While these behaviors demand investments of various kinds of economic, cultural and social capital, education is considered the key element to their achievement.

In South Korea, education of individuals is funded and driven by families, but that is not the only reason for familial pressure. Urbanization often broke up the extended family structures, so that whereas 27% of families were living together as extended families in 1960, by 1980 16.7% did so, and by 2000 only 7.9%. Although extended families were thus physically separated, extended family culture remained reasonably strong. Family authority, decisions about marriage, the naming and number of children, mutual support in times of difficulty, inheritance agreements, funeral arrangements and commemoration of ancestors, to a large extent, continued to follow extended family practices.[16]Also significant is that income from salaries in South Korea has been insufficient to support a middle-class lifestyle. Thus, for Koreans, dependence on kin is not just a manifestation of the traditional culture of the extended family, but is essential if a family is to maintain middle-class status. Services such as day care for children and care for the elderly remain largely unaffordable outside of the family. People live with their parents until they marry, and sometimes also after marriage.[17] The cases of Ms. Sin and Mr. Kim from Chapter Five, both unmarried adults older than thirty years old living with their parents, are examples of this social arrangement.

The Korean obsession with education did not start in the modern era. During the Chosŏn dynasty, education, the hallmark of *yangban* status, was one of the means to achieve upward mobility. Commoners hoped to improve the social standing of their families by educating their children.[18] In the Chosŏn dynasty, education was mostly Confucian, run privately or by local officials, and consisted of village schools, local schools and Confucian academies. Following the Kabo Reforms of 1894, in 1895 a new Ministry of Education was established to reconstruct the state education system. A curriculum for new public and private schools included mathematics, geography, history, foreign languages and physical education. Reading and writing were stressed, but the first topic for both elementary and higher grades was *susin* (修身), self-cultivation in social mores. By the summer of 1910, just

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[16] Wells 2015: 240, Gyesook Yoo 2006: 60
[17] Lett 1998: 29, 39, 46-60, 80-81, 159, 182, 223
[18] Walraven 2007: 244

before the annexation by Japan, a state survey listed 10 state-run schools, 50 local primary schools and 2,082 licensed private schools that offered modern education. Under Japanese colonial rule the number of students who received a modern education continued to increase.[19]

After Liberation, modern education has spread in South Korea with disproportional speed. By the end of the Korean War (1950-1953) school enrollments in elementary, middle and high schools, and colleges for respective age groups, were 59.6%, 21.1% and 3.1%. By 1975 enrollment increased to 107.6%, 74% and 8.6% respectively.[20]Since the late 1990s, almost all Koreans of school age were able to finish high school.[21] Within two decades from 1980 to 2000 the proportion of males going to universities increased from 37% to 45%, while that of the female population increased from 17% to 58%.[22]

In his book *Korean Spirituality* Donald Baker talks about the Korean tendency for moral self-improvement.[23] I suggest that this tendency toward self-advancement and self-cultivation stands behind the pursuit of status which Lett sees as a force driving the development of modern South Korea. During the last six hundred years this tendency was primarily embodied in the Confucian institutions of the Chosŏn dynasty. I view personal self-improvement, the striving for status and for material wealth on the individual and familial levels as various expressions of this tendency for self-advancement. It also has a direct link with the modern Korean obsession with education.

According to the Confucian ideal, moral perfection, stemming from self-cultivation on the levels of intentions, desires, thoughts and actions, is expressed through the harmonious functioning of the family and productive service in the government bureaucracy. In Chosŏn, *yangban* aristocrats studied Confucian classics, and tried to put into practice Confucian principles. In order to obtain the position of a scholar-official, *yangban* men were required to demonstrate mastery of Confucian classics by passing the civil service exam (科擧 *kwagŏ*).[24] Education of today manifests the continuity

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19 Kyung Moon Hwang 2016: 170-176

20 Children who are older than elementary school age are now also enrolled in elementary school, thus the percentage is over one hundred.

21 StateUniversity.com, "South Korea - Educational System – overview," StateUniversity.com, http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1400/South-Korea-EDUCATIONAL-SYSTEM-OVERVIEW.html (accessed September 18, 2016).

22 Wells 2015: 238

23 2008: 6

24 The hereditary *yangban* elite consisted of career bureaucrats in the capital and local landlords, landowners in the countryside. Most *yangban* never passed the civil service exams, and even fewer became scholar-officials in the central government (Lett 1998: 21).