encoding visual imagery of **Ki Suryŏn** exported to the West

This essay examines the iconography of an instructional DVD of GiCheon, a contemporary Korean mind-body discipline. Cultural practices such as these, commonly referred to as qi-gong in China and **Ki suryŏn** (氣修煉 cultivating life energy) in Korea, are often reconstructed in East-Asian modernity on the basis of ancient traditions. The DVD was produced to support GiCheon adepts and to advertise the practice to potential newcomers. As a practitioner myself, I am familiar with theories of self-cultivation in GiCheon; within this theoretical context I suggest interpreting the video as a ‘decoding’ of the call for self-development within a visual narrative located in the mountains, particularly through the images of water, wood and stone.

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**Banished, now rediscovered**

In the West, practices of self-cultivation are reemerging, after having been banished to the fringes about four centuries ago. Michel Foucault categorized these and similar practices as *epimeleia heautou,* ‘the care of the self.’ He held that self-care (implying intellectual, moral and physical transformation) was a common ethical axis of Greek, Hellenistic and Roman philosophy. However, within the narratives of Western subjectivity Foucault also identified a ‘Cartesian moment,’ climaxing in the 17th century with the relegation of self-care to the periphery of Western intellect, where it survived mainly in the occult realm.

Self-care is rooted in archaic techniques of purification, concentration of the spirit/breath, interiority through abstinance from the external, and practices based on the endurance of pain and hardship. These techniques were shared by a number of civilizations and, having travelled through a number of avatars, are visible in the contemporary era in practices characterized as ‘internal alchemy.’ East-Asian and European civilizations share ‘operational (external)’ and ‘spiritual (internal)’ alchemical practices and principles. European alchemical knowledge arises from ancient Greek and Arabic alchemy, which, there is evidence to suggest, developed under East-Asian influences. If the declared motto of GiCheon is ‘Do not cling to words and letters just practice with your own body,’ the wish to communicate GiCheon in a manuscript thus presents a problem. In accordance with this sentiment, the ‘GiCheon Instructional DVD Volume One’ was produced in June 2002, by GiCheon teacher and practitioner Lee Ki-tae. The target audience are English-speakers, even though there is special attention to maintaining the dignity of the practice, words’. I argue that in producing this visual aid, Lee paid turning for a moment to the theory of GiCheon, we could ask what meaning the images might have for the maker and the viewer. I suggest interpreting them as an explication of an alchemical transmutation of the self.

In 2014, an encounter with academic discourses on art and craft marked for me the beginning of the process of articulating my GiCheon experiences. Particularly important in this respect was reading Pamela Smith on the connection between crafts and alchemy1 and Rebecca Brown on the deployment of visual symbolism in nationalist movements.2 I do not elaborate here on the nationalistic aspect of GiCheon – despite it being strongly present in GiCheon narrative – yet there is much in common between Gandhi’s use of a spinning wheel image for his anticolonial struggle, discussed by Brown, and the deployment of iconography in GiCheon internal alchemy and other mind-body practices. Instead, I focus on the simple semi-abstract images of mountain landscapes (including streams, lakes, trees), which anchor the conscious and unconscious perceptions of the viewer.3 These images carry extensive meanings; GiCheon flyers, books and websites abound with such visuals, most often focusing on mountains and mountain streams.

The DVD opens with a scene of streaming water. The viewer faces the stream from the front, seeing it cascade between two rocky slopes, down into a little lake, bordered by large stones. The viewer appears to be standing on the lake, with the water streaming at and through him/her. The slopes are covered with greenery, the tree branches stretch out over the water, the passage is flecked by dappled sunlight. The camera then zooms in on the gushing water; splashing and splattering over the rocks. This visual narrative focuses on the lively, dynamic, crude but graceful vigor of the water. We see the current circulating in a little basin, connoting the protruding boulders, which have clearly been rounded and weathered by the water. We see the current circulating in a little basin, which is one example of Korean **ki** suryŏn life energy, manifesting as blood and lymph, awareness, consciousness, sensibility and other kinds of water and consciousness connected to other lakes by routes or channels. A certain contouring of the protruding boulders, which have clearly been rounded and weathered by the water.

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**Iconography**

GiCheon, ‘a school of internal alchemy’ (in the language of Don Baker, the only other scholar who mentions the existence of GiCheon in an English language academic work), is one example of Korean **ki** suryŏn. As an expression of the vast mind-body culture in East-Asia, GiCheon favors verbal articulations even less than other similar practices. In fact, the motto of GiCheon is **epimeleia heautou** (implying intellectual, moral and physical transformation) was a common ethical axis of Greek, Hellenistic and Roman philo-

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**GiCheon Instructional One**

*Main Menu*  
- Training  
- Bonus Features

*Main Menu*  
- Play  
- Training  
- Bonus Features

*Shaping the circle of TaeGeuk*  
(Tae: cosmic, Geuk: ultimate)

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Left and right: Series of stills from the GiCheon Instructional DVD Volume One.
of information) circulates within the lake, new water constantly comes in, and some water leaves. As the new ‘water’ – food, sensations, experiences, perceived words and actions of others, etc. – comes in, there is a constant need to ‘purify’ the water. There will always be ‘bad’ water left and some stagnation cannot be avoided. But the relative amount of ‘bad and stagnant water’ can be reduced, in an attempt to achieve ‘better flow’, which is the primary goal of GiCheon practice.

GiCheon postures are supposed to facilitate smooth passage of ‘information’ through the body and mind; heart, food and liquids are absorbed easily, sweat and excretions leave the body comfortably, thoughts and emotions are perceived and realized efficiently, words are said and actions performed with greater honesty and simplicity. In GiCheon this ‘flow of information’ is addressed as ‘ki flow’ and is metaphorically compared to the circulation of water, visually represented in the video.

The camera’s focus moves from the small waterfall towards the stone basin. This is a separate section of the stream, with a clearly marked beginning and an end. We can interpret this as a human lifespan. Every thing has a beginning and an end, and every form will be ‘unformed’ in the course of time. The flow of life occurring within an individual as a microcosm, and in the universe as a macrocosm, is exemplified in the visual narrative as a mountain stream, a little ‘world in itself’ illustrating an alchemical transmutation.

The view shifts towards the smooth slopes of tree-covered mountains. The camera zooms in on multi-colored wooden pavilions built in a traditional Korean style, Buddhist pagodas and bells, and then a Buddhist monk striking a big drum in one of the pavilions. In a sense, this progression from a natural mountain panorama towards wooden buildings, metal structures, and the display of culturally engaged humans, is significant. This is the advancement from nature to culture, whereby nature is not discounted, but continues to coexist harmoniously with culture. This is typical for an East-Asian worldview, usually categorized as Daoist. In one scene the viewer is shown a red mountain at dawn, and then a Buddhist monk striking the symbols of water, wood and stone, correlating with the ‘self’ placed at the center of the visual narrative, creating the dynamics of interactive knowledge and mutual transformation, thus continuing an alchemical tradition and the ‘care of the self’.

This paper looked at the two layers of knowledge involved in the alchemical process of GiCheon. The first is the alchemical operation in the body and mind of the adept, which are related in GiCheon theory; and the second is its visual representation on the screen. But the two layers are connected: visual images direct and shape the alchemical process inside the ‘self’, thus encouraging the transformation of the self. This is how visual depiction on the screen becomes a technique, a medium for self-transformation, a ‘technology self’ in Foucauldian terms.

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The instructional DVD portrays a practitioner performing the alchemical traditions of past and present – traditions which continue to shape the topographical, physical, spiritual and moral lives of the Korean peninsula. The GiCheon instructional DVD is one medium through which East-Asian internal alchemy claims its place in Western or modern society, helping to maintain the global circulation of knowledge and practice.

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References
2 Other forms of Korean kisuryŏn include Kouksundo ( Nikkiendo), Dahn World (GKi), Sŏnpŏp, and Maum Meditation (Mum sŏnyŏl, and Seok Mun Breathing (Seok Mun Hwa)).
8 Mountain worship in Korea is still vibrantly alive today (see Mason, D. 1999. ‘Spirit of the Mountains: Korea’s San-Sin and Traditions of Mountain-Worship, Seoul: Hoshiy). The notion is intimately connected to the idea of spirit [ki] mountain immortal gods) from whom GiCheon allegedly originates. The instructors and some adopters of older generations identify GiCheon as techniques of immortality, sŏnpŏp, another name for ‘internal alchemy’. Understanding this aspect is vital for grasping the significance of mountains in GiCheon imagery and narrative; in East-Asian tradition a retreat into the mountains, the space of ‘anti-civilization’, is essential for a successful alchemical transmutation of the self.