

Mind-body cultivation in contemporary Korea

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Abstract

In 1980s Korea, industrial growth led to rising concerns with personal health and self-improvement. This middle class trend to “better” living connects with the pursuit of “nature”, invented and constructed to counterpoise pollution and urbanization. This trend found its expression in the rise of *ki suryŏn* (氣修練 training related to *ki* – “life energy”), a newly invented tradition of internal alchemy (內丹 *naedan*) which includes practices for achieving immortality. In *ki suryŏn* “nature” indicates mountains, the dwelling place of mountain immortals. *Ki suryŏn* retreats are often organized in the mountains.

East Asian practices of internal alchemy come from ancient times and are techniques related to *ki*. These techniques are grounded in physiological, psychological and behavioural principles. They include gymnastics, massage, breathing, sexual hygiene, diet, healing, meditation and visualization, as well as rules of daily behavior. In contemporary South Korea, practices of *ki suryŏn* have been integrated into the routine of urban daily life; thus to study *ki suryŏn* culture involves investigating the way urbanites live and relate to each other. The training sites where practitioners come together create opportunities for improving social status by getting to know people of higher standing – a striving for status encouraged by the competitive demands of modern society.

Ki suryŏn is supposed to lead to harmonization of the mind-body and actualization of hidden potential of an individual in the context of a union with the universe. *Ki suryŏn* groups focus on bodily practice, while selectively appropriating elements of various Korean religious traditions. As part of popular culture, the cosmology and values of *ki suryŏn* are interiorized in South-Korean society through internet computer games, animation and films. *Ki suryŏn* groups generally seem to be growing – though exact statistics are difficult to obtain - and the terms *ki* and *ki suryŏn* are among vital keywords of contemporary Korean culture.

Introduction

This paper introduces *ki suryŏn* (氣修練 training related to *ki* – “life energy”) practices of contemporary Korea, focusing on GiCheon (氣天 기천 *Kichŏn*), one example of such practices. First, this paper will discuss the historical context and wider implications of *ki suryŏn*, then proceeding to delineate GiCheon contemporary history and practice. Finally, I will address the problem of studying *ki suryŏn* and similar mind-body practices in academia. This paper is based on a series of interviews conducted with sixty-one GiCheon practitioners between September 2010 and April 2011 in South Korea. Additionally, as a scholar-practitioner myself, I draw upon my personal twenty-year experience as a GiCheon adept and an instructor. I also make use of GiCheon books, texts, DVDs, written and oral legends.

Mountain culture in Korea

Mountain hiking have always been popular in Korea. The hiking boom of the 1980s coincides in time with the rise of leisure culture, *sŏngin undong* (成人運動 sports for adults) and *ki suryŏn*. The popularity of these activities was made possible by the thriving economy of the 1980s, which contributed to the development of middle-class with sufficient means to fund self-perfection in the industrial setting (Dax 2015). *Ki suryŏn* groups rely on the mountain culture of Korea conceptually and practically. The terminology of *ki suryŏn* groups draws on the traditions of mountain immortality (U Hyeran 2006, 75), and they often organize practical retreats in mountain centers.

The cult of *sansin* (山神, mountain gods) worship existed in Korea since ancient times. Chinese concepts of immortals (神仙, *sinsŏn*) connected to the notions of Korean *sansin* in the Three Kingdoms period, when Daoism came to Korea from China.¹ Today the depictions of male and female *sansin* and *sinsŏn* are found in shrines dedicated to mountain gods located in Buddhist temple complexes, usually called *sansingak* (山神閣), or *samsŏnggak* (三聖閣). They are also worshiped in separate shrines called *sansindang* (山神堂), which are not parts of Buddhist temples (Mason 1999, 97).

Despite the fact that *sansin* and *sinsŏn* sometimes coexist and merge as in Buddhist pictorial arts so in other cultural spaces, they are parts of different belief systems. The cult of *sansin* is widespread in Korea. *Sansin* are included in the shamanic pantheon of gods and spirits, and Korean shamans hold for them special ceremonies. While *sansin* tradition is deeply rooted in Korean folk culture, the *sinsŏn* tradition, usually identified as Daoist, was mostly favourite with upper classes, particularly during its introduction in Paekche and Silla. In Koryŏ and Chosŏn *sinsŏn* culture became gradually popularized, manifesting in the 19th century in such new religions as Ch'ŏndogyŏ (Na Kwŏnsu 2012).

East Asian Culture of Alchemy and Immortality

Motifs of immortality and never ending transmutation of life in East Asian culture go as far back in history as the culture itself. Early descriptions of the immortals (仙, Korean: *sŏn*, Chinese: *xian*) are found in the Shiji (史記 Records of the Historian), produced around the first century BC. Early immortals were sometimes depicted as clothed in feathers, with the ability to ascend to Heaven by moving their arms as wings.

Shifting and transmuting images of *sansin*, *sinson* of Korea and their commemoration speak to East Asian culture of alchemy. The purpose of alchemy is the achievement of immortality, which is considered possible after grasping the principles of life's origin and transformation. If the declared endeavor of external alchemy is the creation of an elixir that turns any metal into gold and gives eternal life, internal alchemy achieves perfection and immortality through transformative process in the body and mind of the adept. In practice, external and internal alchemy often intersect and merge.

Ge Hong (283-343), an early Daoist thinker, discussed the art of immortality in his famous work *Baopuzi* (抱朴子 [Book of the] Master Who Embraces Simplicity), dedicated to internal and external alchemy. As he describes in his *Baopuzi*, meditation and purification have to be carried out before preparing the elixir. After the elixir was ready, gold is used to verify its perfection. The elixir is proved to be effective when it can transform metals into gold. The perfected elixir which can turn metals into gold is ready to be absorbed by the adept and it will

¹ Immortals are also referred to as *sŏn* (仙, Chinese: *xian*). They are sometimes called *pisŏn* (飛仙, flying immortals) or *sŏnnyŏ* (仙女, immortal women) (Mason 1999: 37-38, 55, 81).

turn a human into an immortal (Daeyeol Kim 2000, 145). Meditation and purification before the preparation of the elixir pertain to internal alchemy, while the process of testing the elixir on metals can be classified as external alchemy. Formulated this way, the process of preparation and absorption of the elixir of immortality manifests both internal and external alchemical processes, and the boundary between them is not clearly set.

The Chinese character for cinnabar (丹 *dan*, Korean *tan*) means “red color”. *Dan* became a generic term for an elixir of immortality (Daeyeol Kim 2000, 133-134, 141, 148, 150). *Dan* forms a part of a word “cinnabar field”, a term in internal alchemy which indicates three *dantian* (丹田, Korean *tanjŏn*), the three bodily loci which play a key role in East Asian practices of internal alchemy (Munakata 1991, 137), located in the forehead, the chest and the lower abdomen of a human body.

The work of achieving immortality is based on imitation of nature. Nature in the East-Asian context is often understood as a mountain. The character *sŏn* (仙, immortality) consists of two elements, *in* (人, Chinese *ren*, human being) and *san* (山, Chinese *shan*, mountain), underscoring the direct connection between immortality and mountains in East Asian culture. Ge Hong stresses the importance of carrying out alchemic work in the vicinity of great mountains (Munakata 1991, 35). Contact with a mountain is essential in internal and external alchemy. In the mountains immortals dwell, and to sacred mountains adepts of immortality withdraw. It is there that they seek herbs, minerals and mushrooms instrumental to alchemical processes. In internal alchemy a human body is often visualized in a form of a mountain (Despeux 1990, 194). In East Asian painting, a mountain is depicted as a “second self” of the adept, and processes and phenomena occur in a mountain that parallel those taking place in a human body. This way, painted images of a mountain, and subsequently the mountain itself, perceived and experienced by an adept following certain cultural “programming”, constitutes a model, or a paradigm, of the alchemic transmutation of the self (Daeyeol Kim 2000, 17-20),

The first alchemical representation of a human body in a form of a mountain dates to 1227 (Despeux 1990, 195). One of the later examples includes a picture *The Fanghu Isle of the Immortals*, Qing dynasty (1644-1911), from the Nelson-Atkin Museum of Art, where three palaces situated one above the other on a mountain can be interpreted as three *dantian* (丹田, Korean *tanjŏn*). A mountain itself reminds the shape of a human body. Mountain paintings often depict people traveling toward the palace in the mountain. This palace can be interpreted as an imperial palace, a palace of mountain immortals, or even the head of a human body. In such a case people moving toward it are a metaphoric depiction of either stream of *ki* or body fluids circulating through the organism. I argue that Korean *ki suryŏn* is a contemporary manifestations of ancient East Asian culture of immortality and internal alchemy. The origin myth of GiCheon, one example of *ki suryŏn*, provides evidence for that.

A short history of GiCheon

The first GiCheon teacher Pak Chŏngnyong (later called by his students Taeyang Chinin 大洋真人 “perfected man Taeyang”) first appeared in Pusan in the early 1970s and started teaching GiCheon positions and martial arts. Taeyang Chinin claimed that he was raised and taught GiCheon in the mountains, by Wŏnhye Sangin (元慧上人), an old man who possessed extraordinary powers. According to Taeyang Chinin, Wŏnhye Sangin could run faster than the wind, created a magical boundary in the mountains from which Taeyang Chinin, as a child, could not stray, and, to some extent, communicated with birds and animals (Pak Taeyang and

Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu, unpublished manuscript).² We can easily identify Wŏnhye Sangin as a traditional *sinsŏn*, an immortal mountain dweller, an exemplar of a perfected being, whom GiCheon practitioners are instructed to emulate. This origin myth of GiCheon demonstrates that GiCheon is a part of Korean mountain culture, and is the first among a series of contemporary GiCheon-related legends.

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

As the years passed, the practice of Taeyang Chinin was identified in Korean society as martial arts, dance, magic/mysticism, a meditation technique and therapeutic gymnastics. Lee Sangwŏn, one of the major followers of Taeyang Chinin, established GiCheon as a meditative self-healing discipline. Previously Taeyang Chinin taught GiCheon differently to different people, without order or system. Lee Sangwŏn systematized the teaching method to be applied to all the students more or less equally, though keeping in mind the particular characteristics of each person. Lee Sangwŏn has modified the main GiCheon position, *naegasinjang*, to fit the body constitution of contemporary Koreans. Besides, Lee Sangwŏn has realized the importance of prolonged standing in the *naegasinjang* position, and correcting the position of the student, and his method was later adopted by other GiCheon instructors in Korea. The followers of Lee Sangwŏn say that Lee Sangwŏn asked Taeyang Chinin countless questions, and made endless efforts to procure the answers from Taeyang Chinin, information that Taeyang Chinin never transmitted to anyone else.³

In the 1980s Taeyang Hagwŏn (대양학원) was opened in Noryangjin (노량진), Seoul. It was an *ipsi hakwŏn* (입시학원 a private academy for students who have failed their university entrance exams, and are studying for next year's exams). GiCheon was a mandatory subject, studied and practiced at Taeyang Hagwŏn in order to maximize concentration and improve study results. Taeyang Hagwŏn closed a few years later, though the students of Taeyang Hagwŏn continued to various Seoul universities, where they formed GiCheon clubs. In the opinion of Kim Hŭisang, as he has written to me in the years 2010 and 2011, it was at Taeyang Hagwŏn that GiCheon teaching was systematized and classified into practices of warming-up, static discipline, dynamic discipline, breathing techniques and decorum training.

² The manuscript was circulating among GiCheon practitioners, and I personally received it from the now deceased GiCheon teacher Kim Hŭisang. Kim Hŭisang heard that the writer Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu held a series of interviews with Taeyang Chinin which lasted for six months, and composed the manuscript on the basis of these interviews. Kim Hŭisang has received the manuscript from other GiCheon practitioners, and assumed that this manuscript was indeed composed by Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu. I later met the author Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu, who confirmed that he is the author, and gave me his belated permission to read and reference the manuscript. Ch'oe Hyŏn'gyu has previously submitted the manuscript for consideration to the Han'gyŏre Publishing Company where the manuscript was rejected. However, some of the workers of the Han'gyŏre were GiCheon practitioners, they liked the manuscript and started circulating it within the GiCheon community. The manuscript describes the childhood of Taeyang Chinin in the mountains, his later descent into South Korean society and his adventures there.

³ Lee Sangwŏn was the most loyal and committed champion of Taeyang Chinin, to whom Taeyang Chinin always turned in times of trouble. Lee Sangwŏn always supported Taeyang Chinin emotionally and economically until the death of Lee Sangwŏn in June 2007.

The setting for practice: what, where, how

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

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

Naegasinjang (內家神掌) position is considered the heart of the practice, believed to suffice for achievement of perfect health, immortality and final enlightenment. In South Korean studios it is maintained by the students for long periods of time, sometimes for 40 minutes or more. *Naegasinjang* is performed as follows: the legs are spread shoulder-length, the ankles are turned outward, the knees are bent down and inward, the back is arched, the buttocks are pushed out, the shoulders are pulled back, the arms are stretched out in the front above shoulder-height and finally the palms are pressed outward (see picture 1). In *naegasinjang*, the backbone is stretched from the neck to the coccyx, while the weight is directed downwards, toward the ground. GiCheon instructors comment that this contributes to the centering of the lumbar and pelvis area, supporting the whole body and balancing right and left hip joints, knees, ankles and shoulders.



picture 1 (copyright Sangmuwŏn, reproduced with permission)

Naegasinjang position is explained by the instructors to be reminiscent of a “phoenix which is about to lay an egg”. The “egg” here is a metaphor for the new self of the practitioner, an outcome of the painful practice. The metaphor of the egg is one of the popular motifs in East

Asian inner alchemy (Schipper 1993: 189). This position is described as a perfect application of *yōkkūn*, the principle of the maximal bending of the joints. Ankles, knees, waist, elbows, wrists and finger joints have to bend to the maximum. Joints in GiCheon are believed to be passages, or gateways (門 *mun*), through which *ki* flows. Maximal bending of the joints in *yōkkūn* opens the passages to allow the flow of *ki*.

Approaches to *ki suryōn* in academia

When examining *ki suryōn* and similar East Asian practices in academia we encounter a problem of how we tackle, study and classify them. What are they? And how do we acquire knowledge about them? Russian sinologist Abayev has introduced a new term, “psycho-physical culture” (Abayev 1983, 1). In his opinion, psycho-physical culture is an essential element of East Asian civilization. Psycho-physical training aims at cultivating, at “forming” a person toward a culturally defined “ideal” (Ibid).

Thomas Ots names psycho-physical practices “techniques of health preservation and exercises prolonging life” (Ots 1994, 120) and calls on researchers to personally analyse the concrete perceptions of their “lived-bodies” (Ots 1994: 134), hoping this empirical work might support the overcoming of long-lasting subject-object and mind-body dichotomies (1991, 43). The “lived-body”, a new term Ots introduces into anthropological and phenomenological discourse (1991: 43), must be experienced before it can be thought and talked of. Ots himself entered a *qigong* group as a follower rather than as anthropologist (Ots 1994, 134).

In studying Korean *ki suryōn* practices, I find particularly helpful also the notion of “technologies of self” elaborated by Michel Foucault. Foucault’s concern with the technologies of the self began with an investigation into the practices he categorizes as *epimeleia heautou*, translated into English as “the care of the self”. These activities, originating in ancient Greece, included practices of purification, concentration of the spirit/breath, techniques of retreat and practices of enduring pain and hardship (Foucault 2001, 46-47). Foucault takes the “care of the self” as the starting point in his discussion on technologies of self which “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1988, 18).

Two vectors model

Foucault’s notion of the technologies of the self can be utilized in the analysis of *ki suryōn* as intentional cultivation of body and mind-heart. In this analysis, I suggest also to deploy the Confucian schematic from *The Great Learning*, *sōngū chōngsim susin ch’ega ch’iguk p’yōngch’ōnha* (誠意正心修身齊家治國平天下 “authenticate the intention, rectify the mind-heart, cultivate the body, regulate the family, govern the country, bring peace to the world”).⁴ This diagrammatic strategy is repeatedly called for by GiCheon practitioners themselves when describing their experiences. In my application of the Confucian scheme we might portray the

⁴ Daxue (大學 *The Great Learning*) (E-SKQS 1999). One of the four books of the Confucian canon, *The Great Learning* summarizes the process of self-perfection on the levels of the intention, mind-heart, body, family, country, and the world, then proceeding towards detailed explanation of self-cultivation on each level. Cultivation of the self here includes embodying virtue thus providing a personal example and a role-model for the others.

self as live, busy, active movement. Like a ray of light, it bursts from the inside towards the outside, towards the world. Following the order of *The Great Learning* we could recount its progress as starting from intentionality and progressing towards emotion and cognition, further coming into actualized being on the personal, familial, social and universal planes.

Active and universal as it is, the self is always already in the world (Merleau-Ponty 1945). The moment we look at the self, we see how it is conditioned to this fact. The social, for example, is defined by the conditions of the universe (like climate and topography), but moulds the familial and the personal, while ways of acting, thinking, feeling and intending are shaped by bodily, familial and social factors. The self as active subject is simultaneously a passive object of external influences. The first vector is intentional influence, the unfolding of the self towards the external. The second vector is the un-intentional influence through which the self is formed, from the external towards the internal.

We can schematically portray the vectors as following:

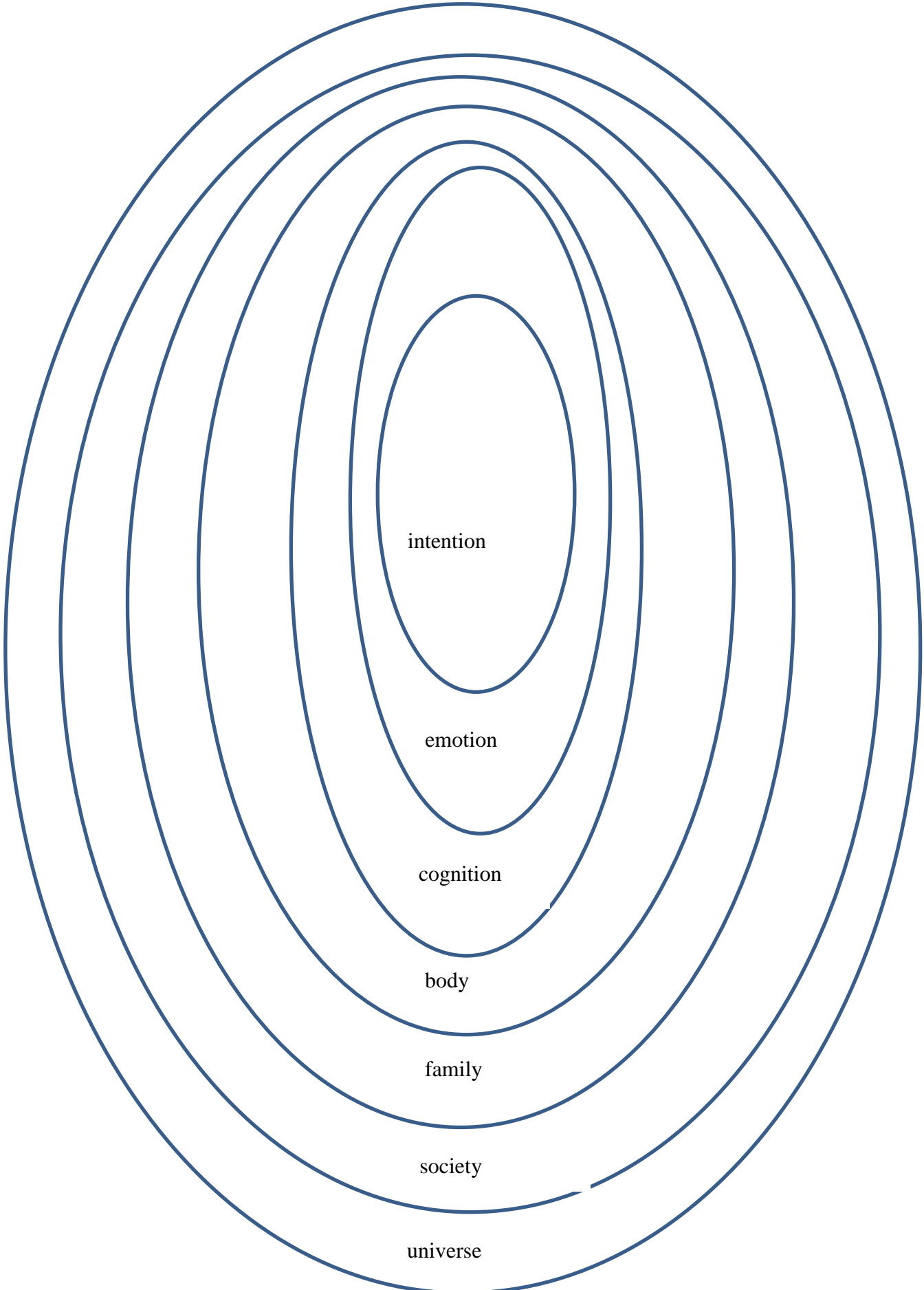
the first vector:

intention→emotion→cognition→body→family→society→universe

the second vector:

universe→society→family→body→cognition→emotion→intention

(see picture 2)



intention

emotion

cognition

body

family

society

universe

picture 2

My two vectors scheme is developed on the basis of the Confucian self-cultivational schema and technologies of self elaborated by Michel Foucault.⁵ I suggest that this two vectors scheme can serve as a useful tool for studying Korean *ki suryŏn* and other mind-body disciplines. This scheme can be equally utilized in the philosophical discourse on the self. To which degree does the self manifest outward movement of intention, emotion, cognition and action? To which degree is the self constituted by familial and social influences? Which one is the real me – the one who imagines, hopes and desires? Or the one who accepts, submits and gives in? I suggest that application of the two vectors scheme in the study of various anthropological material and in philosophical discourse may further develop our understanding of the self, forming a link with the continuing history of subjectivity of which Foucault speaks. The study of Korean *ki suryŏn* is an important moment in this history.

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⁵The connection between the Confucian prescript for self-cultivation and Foucauldian technologies of self has been noticed and insisted upon also by Hahm Chaibong. He dwells on the common points between Confucian practices trying for an ideal moral self expanding towards the universe and practices of "care of the self" originating in ancient Greece and Rome as described by Foucault. But Hahm's analysis as based on the texts of Confucian canon is purely theoretical: he does not investigate Confucian practices as applied in actuality (Chaibong Hahm 2001).

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