

Bio

Victoria Ten (Jeon Yeonhwa) holds an LLB from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, an MA from Sungkyunkwan University, and a PhD from Leiden University. She published a number of books and articles on *ki suryŏn* and contemporary Korean society. Victoria lives in UK and works as a lawyer for Pepperells Solicitors.

Title

Ki Suryŏn in South Korea: Reclaiming the Term *Pigwahakchŏk* (Unscientific) to Rebuild Korean National Identity

Abstract

Industrial growth and the development of a new middle class in South Korea of the 1980s went together with increased consumption and leisure culture, causing growing concerns with health and personal self-cultivation. Accordingly, *sŏngin undong* (成人運動 sports for adults), mountain hiking and *ki suryŏn* (氣修練 training related to *ki* – “life energy”) were on the rise. *Ki suryŏn* are contemporary practices of self-cultivation in South Korea, reinvented in modernity, similar to Indian *yoga* and Chinese *qigong*. They are also referred to as *sŏndo suryŏn* (仙道修練 learning the way of immortality). People of older generations lived through Korea’s dramatic transformation from a mostly rural agrarian society to an industrial one. Their yearning for the past, in which the “past” is idealized and imagined anew, is directly connected to the old Korean mountain culture of immortality, a touchstone of cultural authenticity. Together with the image of rural “old Korea” in the minds of contemporary people, it becomes a source of inspiration in re-inventing traditions in the spirit of nationalism. This tendency is expressed in new religious and spiritual movements that matured towards the 1980s. *Ki suryŏn* is an important part of these spiritual-social phenomena.

This paper focuses on an interview with Mr. Ch’oe Hyŏngsu, a trainee of GiCheon (氣天), one of these *ki suryŏn* practices. He, and other practitioners of older generations, connect GiCheon to an idealized image of “old Korea”, associated with childhood fairy tales and traditional images of mountain immortals. This paper analyses how Mr. Ch’oe understands the term *pigwahakchŏk* (비과학적 unscientific), which he uses in a positive sense. In his narrative, a term *pigwahakchŏk* embodies conflict between Korea of old and new, where “Korea old” indicates the way of life gone forever, yet reconstructed and idealized within contemporary discourse, while “Korea new” means modernity, associated with Westernization, globalization and science.