

Taoism in Korea, Past and Present

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《요 약》

조선 시대 중기에 한국은 도교의 내단에 흥미가 고조되는 것을 체험했고, 16~17세기 중에 많은 유교 학자들이 받아들인 호흡법과 심신 수련은 이미 초기 중국에서 고안된 심신 수련자의 신체에서 나오는 기의 순환과 양·질을 강화하는 것이었다. 그러나 18~19세기의 한국인들은 이러한 양생법에 대해서 흥미를 잃게 되지만, 20세기의 지난 반세기 동안에 내단을 이채롭게 다시 부흥시킨 것이다. 여러 가지 새로운 조직체들이 단전호흡과 도인체조를 서울과 다른 도시에서 증진 시키고 있다. 국선도가 1970년에 처음으로 시행되었고 이것은 1984년 새로운 내단으로 되기까지 대중들의 호응을 받지 못했다. 그러나 이러한 심신수련이 새 조직인 단(丹)세계에 의해서 멀리 번창되어 나갔으며 이 조직의 지도자인 이 승훈에 의해서 흥미롭게 다시 소생되었다. 단 세계는 한국에서 무려 360개가 넘는 선원이 있으며 수련자들에 의해서 유럽과 북미에서도 선원이 시작되었다. 이것은 근본적으로 중국의 도교 보다는 고조선 시대 단군에 의해서 고안된 것이라고 말한다. 단 세계는 도교적 양생법 수련보다 한국의 전통적인 것에 대한 자부심을 가지고 장려되고 있다.

The Republic of Korea enjoys one of the most diverse and complex religious cultures on the face of the globe. It is the only nation on the face of the globe in which Christianity and Buddhism have roughly the same number of followers. It is also one of the few countries in which shamanism has survived the transition from a predominantly rural world to an overwhelmingly urban society and, in the process, has managed to establish a highly visible presence on city streets and in high-rise apartment complexes. In addition, Korea has the world's largest extant Confucian institutional network, with over 230 Confucian shrines still in existence. On top of that, a wide range of vibrant new religions can be found in Korea, some of which have roots in older traditions such as Buddhism and

Christianity and others, such as the largest new religious organization, Daesoon Jinrihoe, which represent entirely new traditions. Moreover, Korea can claim a thriving Taoist tradition with roots on Korean soil at least as far back as the mid-Chosŏn dynasty.¹⁾

Such religious pluralism is a relatively new phenomenon in Korean history. Chosŏn-dynasty Korea was known for its staunch dedication to upholding Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Indisputably more Confucian than Japan ever was, Chosŏn Korea has even been described by some as more Confucian than China was. Even religions with such deep roots in Korean soil as Buddhism and shamanism were barely tolerated by the ruling circles of the Chosŏn kingdom. When Catholicism penetrated the Korean peninsula at the end of the 18th century, it met with bloody persecution. The indigenous new Korean religion of Tonghak met the same fate in the 19th century. Yet, despite its rigid adherence to Confucian orthodoxy, Korea under the Chosŏn dynasty tolerated some beliefs and practices which Neo-Confucians dismissed as heterodox. One of those heterodox schools which managed to survive under Confucian hegemony was Taoism.

When the Chosŏn dynasty replaced the Koryŏ dynasty at the end of the 14th century, there were several Taoist temples in Korea. However, Taoism had never established the popular institutional infrastructure Buddhism had established with its many mountain temples. The only Taoist temples in Korea were government-run. Therefore the existence of these temples became a matter of contention in the first year of the newly-established

1) I am well aware that many Korean scholars argue that the Korean way of mountain immortals originated on Korean soil thousands of years ago and that it is independent of Chinese Taoism. For example, see Kim Hyŏnch'ang, <Han'guk sŏndo ūi tomaek kwa togyo [Taoism and the chain of transmission of Korea's Way of Mountain Immortals]>, in Kŭksŏndo kyosuhoe, ed. <Tongyang Simsin suryŏnbŏp ūi pigyo [Comparing the techniques for cultivating mind and body in East Asia]>, Seoul: Taehaksa, 2003. However, I have seen no solid evidence to undermine the assumption of most non-Korean scholars that the Korean way of mountain immortals derived from internal alchemy in China. If the way of mountain immortals were Korean in origin, one would expect its basic vocabulary to be native Korean words. Instead, it relies almost entirely on Sino-Korean terminology, betraying its Chinese roots. For an overview of the debate over the origins of Korean Taoism, see Chŏng Chaesŏ, <Han'guk togyo ūi kiwŏnnon-e taehan kŏmto, [An examination of the debate over the origins of Korean Taoism]>, <Han'guk Chonggyo yŏn'gu> vol 3, 2001, pp.93-111.

Neo-Confucian regime.

Rather than totally eliminate official Taoism from the peninsula, and risk offending some potentially dangerous deities, the new government decided that one Taoist temple would remain, staffed by priests selected through a Taoist civil service examination. Known as the Sokyökjön (The Hall for Enshrining Deities), that temple began the Chosön era with a clerical staff of six or seven. However, as the Neo-Confucian tone of the court grew stonger, those numbers were reduced and the Sokyökjön itself was downgraded to the Sokyöksö (The Office for Enshrining Deities) in 1466. As the Sokyöksö, however, it survived for over another century, only to be destroyed during the Hideyoshi's invasions and never rebuilt.²⁾

While it existed, the Sokyöksö was used for a number of Taoist rituals imported from China, usually those asking the gods who dwelled in the heavens above to be kind to those who lived on the earth below, particularly to members of the royal family who might be ill or to peasants who needed rain for their crops (crops which the peasants needed to harvest in order to pay their taxes).³⁾ This was official Taoism, to which those who did not have appointments to central government posts did not have access.

Taoism appeared outside of official circles under other guises. For the Confucian scholar elite, Taoism provided physiological rather than ritual techniques for obtaining health and longevity. These are the Chinese practices known as internal alchemy [neitan: 內丹] and they were particularly popular in Korea in the century following the upheavals caused by the Hideyohsi and Manchu invasions of the 1590s and the 1620s and 1630s. Internal alchemy refers to certain breathing practices and physical exercises designed to enhance the quantity, quality, and circulation of vital energy (ki 氣) within the practitioner's body. The eccentric Kim Sisüp (1425-1493) was the first Korean scholar to write that by breathing in a certain way, men can slowly expel harmful ki from their bodies while accumulating good, life-prolonging ki. One specific technique he suggested is to rise early and sit facing the east, welcoming the ki which you breathe in through your nose (you breathe in through your nose only and breathe out

2) Yi Chongün, <Sokyöksö kwan'gye yöksa charyo kömt'o> (An investigation of the documentary record on the Sokyöksö), Chosön togyo sasang yön'guhoe, ed. 《Togyo wa Han'guk munhwa [Taoism and Korean culture]》, Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1988, pp.87-190.

3) Yi Chongün, p.100.

only through your mouth). You then slowly close your mouth so that less and less ki escapes, and you therefore accumulate more and more ki with each breath.

Kim noted that we breathe 13,500 times a day, which adds up to 3,860,000 times a year. If we ensure that every time we take one of those breaths, we do so in the manner he recommended, after nine years we will find that we have rid our body of detrimental ki and of yin elements and are instead full of yang, healthy ki. This happens because with proper breathing we breathe in only the original ki of heaven and earth and then store that ki in your cinnabar field.⁴⁾

In the next century, in an essay on the secret teachings of Dragon-Tiger Breathing [龍虎秘訣], another former government official, Chǒng Nyǒm (1506~1549), elaborated on the techniques Kim Sisŭp had introduced.⁵⁾ In that essay, Chǒng wrote that the way to cultivate our own internal elixir of longevity was quite simple. We should begin by retaining the ki we breath in, refraining from excessive exhalation which would allow ki to escape, and then store that accumulated ki in the part of our body in which it can be most effectively utilized. We do this by lowering our eyes to focus on our nose while we point our nose toward our navel. This ensures that we focus on the cinnabar field [丹田], where we want our ki to go. Most people, he said, focus on their head or their chest and thus that is where there ki accumulates instead of in their cinnabar field, the only place which can process it properly.

He said that if we practice this method of breathing long enough, eventually we will advance to the stage of embryonic breathing (breathing through the skin, 胎息) and then will go on to an even more advanced stage in which we will be able circulate our ki through our bodies in a reverse of the natural circulation order, sending warm ki from our chest down to our lower intestinal regional and cool ki up from our lower intestinal region toward the upper chest.

Other scholars echoed Chǒng's interest in Taoist longevity techniques,

4) On Kim Sisŭp, see Yi Nŭnghwa, Yi Chongŭn, trans. 《Chosŏn Togyosa [The History of Korean Taoism]》, Seoul Posŏng Munhwasa, 1977, pp.214-225

5) Chǒng Nyǒm, translated by Kim Chongŭn 《“Yonghogyŏl,” in Han Muae, Haedong chǒndorok (Record of Transmission of the Tao to Korea), and Cho Yŏjŏk, Chǒnghakjip (Collected anecdotes of Master Blue Crane)》, Seoul: Posŏng munhwasa, 1992, pp.275-278.

including such well known Chosŏn dynasty thinkers as the writer Hŏ Kyun (1569–1618) and the philosophers Yi Hwang and Yi I. Both Yi Hwang and Hŏ Kyun, for example, advised those who wanted a long life to do as Kim Sisŭp suggested and wake up early in the morning, and, while sitting facing east, exhale three times to get rid of all their old ki. Then they should hold their breath for a while before breathing in clean ki through their nose. They went on to add to Kim's suggestions that those who sought longevity should then let saliva collect in their mouth, swirl it around in your mouth for a while, then swallow it. This would send ki to its rightful abode, their cinnabar field.

As was typical of any scholarly endeavor during the Chosŏn dynasty, there was a Chinese textual base for these Taoist practices. Such Taoist classics as the Hwang-ting ching (The Yellow Court Classic, 黃庭經) and the Ts'an-t'ung ch'i (The Triplex Unity, 參同契) were widely read during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with staunch Neo-Confucians such as Kwŏn Kŭkjung (1585–1659) writing detailed commentaries explaining the many difficult passages in the Ts'an-t'ung ch'i.⁶⁾

As literacy grew among the commoner population in the last two centuries of the dynasty, other Chinese Taoists texts began to gain an audience as well, but more among the general population than among the scholarly elite. Though it too was heavily dependent on texts and concepts imported from China, popular Taoism was different from the ritual Taoism of the court and the physiological Taoism of the scholars. The Taoist texts used in popular Taoism were the Yü-shu ching (The Classic of the Jade Pivot 玉樞經) and the Ch'i-hsing ching (The Classic of the Big Dipper, 七星經), both focusing on celestial deities believed to play an important role in determining human fate and fortune. Both books had circulated on the peninsula for centuries before they became popular among the commoner population in the 18th century. In fact, the Yü-shu ching was among the texts Taoist civil service examination candidates were tested on at the beginning of the dynasty.

6) Yi Chinsu, <Chosŏn yangsaeng sasang ūi sŏngnip-e kwanhan koch'al: toinŭl chungsimŭro, I (An examination of the establishment of the rise of the longevity school in Korea, with emphasis on physical exercises, Part 1)>, Chosŏn togyo sasang yŏn'guhoe, ed. <Togyo wa Han'guk munhwa [Taoism and Korean culture]>, Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1988, pp.191-258.

However, in the second half of the dynasty, those ancient texts were supplemented by more recent Taoist morality texts which explained in much more detail exactly how human fate and fortune, and particularly an individual's life span, were determined. In 1796 Puram-sa, a Buddhist temple in Kyönggi-do, published in Korean translation a collection of such morality books which stated exactly how many days are added to a life span for specific acts of good behavior and how many are subtracted for specific acts of immoral behavior. For example, a major breach of ethics would take 300 days off an offender's life, while a minor offense might only shorten his life by three days.

Such moral arithmetic became increasingly popular in the nineteenth century, and many more copies of such longevity-calculating manuals were published.⁷⁾ Fortunately for those whose behavioral record threatened to give them less time on this earth than they desired, it was possible to approach the Big Dipper directly and beg for leniency. That was best done at the shrines to the Big Dipper [七星閣] which, by the end of the Chosön dynasty, were found in most major Buddhist temples.

The presence of a shrine to a Taoist deity within the confines of a Buddhist temple is not unexpected in a religious environment such as Korea's in which the boundaries between religious traditions have traditionally been blurred and few saw themselves as adhering exclusively to one religious tradition or another. Despite the growing visibility of Christianity and its jealous God on the Korean peninsula since the late 18th century, this same religious pluralism still prevails among the general population.

Even now, at the end of the twentieth century, Taoist beliefs and practices continue to attract those who are adherents of other religious traditions. Formal Taoist rituals are rarely seen these days, nor is Taoist moral arithmetic very popular. However, it is a rare Buddhist temples in Korea today which does not have a shrine to the Big Dipper on its premises, and it is a rare Shrine to the Big Dipper which does not attract a daily stream of worshippers. Moreover, many of the new religions of Korea

7) Kim Nakp'il, <Chosön hugi mingan togyo üi yulli sasang" [morality in the folk Taoism of the latter half of the Chosön dynasty]>, Chosön togyo sasang yön'guhoe, ed. 《Hanguk togyo üi hyöndaejök chomyöng [Korean Taoism in the light of the present day]》, Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1992, pp.355-372.

offer classes in traditional Taoist neitan breathing practices and physical exercises. There are also secular Taoist practice centers, often called centers for the study of Ki or centers for the practice of Cinnabar Field breathing[丹田呼吸] scattered through the cities of South Korea. There are few traditional Taoists to attend those centers, but businessmen, housewives, university professors, university students, and even Buddhists monks and nuns and an occasional Christian pastor, provide those centers with enough eager paying practitioners to provide those who run those centers with a steady income. However, those who staff those centers and those who attend them deny any connection with the Taoism of the Chosŏn dynasty. Instead, they claim to be reviving ancient longevity techniques devised by the founders of Korean civilization over three thousand years ago.

Contemporary Korean Taoism

The contemporary interest in Taoist longevity techniques began in 1967, when a man named Ko Kyŏngmyŏng began teaching what he called Kouk Sun Do [국선도].⁸⁾ At first Ko, better known as Ch'ŏngsan, didn't attract much interest, but in the 1980s, after a best selling novel entitled Tan (cinnabar)⁹⁾ reintroduced Koreans to Taoist immortals and the supernatural powers they are believed to possess, more and more Koreans began to read his books and learn his techniques. Ko was soon joined by others Taoist teachers who established their own schools and wrote their own books on Taoist breathing practices and physical exercises.

Rarely does the word Taoism appear however. The preferred terms are "The Way of the Mountain dwelling Immortals" [that is what Sun in "Kuok Sun Do" means], tanjon hohŭp [cinnabar field breathing], or simply Dahn hak (단학). Anyone who spent much time in the subway stations beneath the streets of Seoul since the early 1990s has probably seen advertisements proclaiming the benefits of tanjŏn hohŭp and explaining where those who want to learn more about it can go for information and guidance. The poster which first caught my attention, in 1993, showed an attractive young lady dressed in white martial arts-style clothing, with the Chinese character

8) 《Ch'ŏngsan sŏnsa, Salm ũ kil [the Road to Life]》, Seoul: Kuksŏndo Press, 1992.

9) Kim Chŏngbin, 《Tan》, Seoul: Chŏngsin segye-sa, 1984

tan (丹) imprinted in red inside a green circle on her chest. She was sitting in a meditative posture, holding her hands slightly apart in front of her so that she appears to be holding an invisible ball of energy (ki) between her hands. Beneath her the poster provided addresses and telephone numbers for a number of centers in Seoul which offer to teach the tanjŏn hohŭp path to health and happiness. Those centers were all run by an organization known as the han munhwa wŏn (Korean Culture Academy, 한문화원) and were called tanhak sŏnwŏn (Centers for pursuing immortality through internal alchemy [丹學 仙院]).¹⁰⁾ In 2002 those centers changed their official name to Dahn Centers, and their organization to Dahn World.¹¹⁾ However, the head of that organization remains a man named Yi Sŭnghŏn. Yi is better known to those who look to him for guidance as Ilji Taesŏnsa, (Ilji (一指, The Great Teacher of Immortality 大仙師).¹²⁾ He has become the leading promoter of Taoist longevity techniques in South Korea today.

Nowhere on that poster, nor in any of Ilji Taesŏnsa's writings in Korean, did Ilji Taesŏnsa claim that he was teaching Taoism. He makes few references to the philosophical Taoist classics by Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu and he wears clothing that makes him look more like a martial arts master than a Taoist priest. Moreover, the Dahn Centers look nothing at all like the Taoist temples of China and no Taoist religious rituals are performed there. If the Korean Culture Academy/Dahn World is thus neither philosophical Taoism nor sectarian Taoism in what sense is it Taoist, then?

The path to longevity, health and happiness which Dahn World promotes may not be called Taoism by its promoter and it may not take on the external trappings of religious Taoism as it exists in China, but in its basic objectives and in its fundamental concepts and vocabulary, it bears a striking resemblance to a side of Chinese tradition which is usually labeled Taoist, particularly that part of the amorphous Taoist tradition known as internal alchemy.

Tanjŏn hohŭp, as practiced in Ilji Taesŏnsa's Dahn Centers, is a series of

10) Up-to-date information on the Korean Culture Academy can be found at <http://www.hanmunhwa.com/>

11) Up-to-date information on Dahn World and Dahn Centers can be found at <http://www.dahnworld.com>.

12) The latest information on Yi Sŭnghŏn's activities can be found at his website site, <http://www.ilchi.net>

breathing exercises and gymnastic postures and movements designed to increase the practitioner's intake of ki as well as his or her ability to accumulate that ki in the tanjŏn (cinnabar field), an invisible storage facility believed to be located in the human abdomen, slightly below the navel.

Ki is a notoriously difficult term to translate into English since, like so many other important Chinese philosophical and religious terms, it has a very wide-ranging frame of reference, sometimes referring to something as specific as the air we breathe, at other times referring to the primordial matter-energy out of which the universe is formed. Most of the time when Ilji Taesŏnsa talks of ki, he is thinking of it as energy. (In fact, he sometimes even spells out the English word energy in han'gŭl when he is trying to explain what Ki is.) As energy, ki serves as both the basic vitalizing force of the cosmos as well as as the basic life-force of the human body.¹³⁾ According to Ilji Taesŏnsa, these two forms of ki, celestial ki and terrestrial ki, are, essentially one and the same.¹⁴⁾ As he explains it in his early publication, it is this underlying unity of celestial and terrestrial ki which makes tanjŏn hohŭp such an effective technique for enhancing both health and happiness.

His insistence on the importance of ki, and on the unity of cosmic and human ki, does not make Ilji Taesŏnsa a Taoist. Neo-Confucians and oriental medicine doctors share his vision of ki as the fundamental life-force permeating and animating the entire universe. He does begin to show Taoist colors, however, when he focuses on the cinnabar field and the role he believes it plays in breathing and in enhancing, preserving, and regulating ki within the human body.

The cinnabar field is first mentioned explicitly in a (possibly) Han dynasty Taoist text, the Yellow Court Classic (Hwang T'ing Ching).¹⁵⁾ This text

13) Yi Sŭnghŏn, 《Tanhak: kŭ iron kwa suryŏnbŏp [Tanhak: Theory and Practice]》, Seoul: Han munhwa press, 1993, p.78.

14) See the list of Ilji taesŏnsa's aphorisms filling the backside of the page behind the title page of Tanhak: kŭ iron kwa suryŏnbŏp. In the mid-1990s, practitioners sometimes chanted these phrases, particularly when they are preparing to attempt to heal others by sharing their ki with them.

15) For a discussion of this work, see Isabelle Robinet, *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-Shan Tradition of Great Purity*, trans. Julian Pas and Norman Girardot (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 55-96. For the passages where the cinnabar field is mentioned, see Ch'oe Changnok, trans., 《Hwang chŏng kyŏng》, (Seoul:

later became a major source of inspiration for internal alchemy longevity techniques, such as breathing exercises designed to strengthen internal organs, and is an unmentioned source for many of the physiological ideas behind Ilji Taesönsa tanjŏn hohŭp, though Ilji Taesönsa does not adopt that text's suggestion that practitioners focus on visualizing the thousands of spirits which inhabit the various organs of the body.

The importance of the cinnabar field in contemporary Korean Taoism is obvious not only in the name for those Taoist practices, cinnabar field breathing, but also in some of the specific exercises practitioners engage in. In 1993, when I was attending the Dahn Center in Pongch'ön dong, near Seoul National University, each day's session began with a series of warm-up exercises designed to stimulate the circulation of ki throughout our bodies. Beginners such as myself would then slowly move through 9 postures assumed while in a horizontal position, spending a few minutes in each position. The first of those 9 involved lying on our backs with our hands on our abdomens, cradling that space below the navel where the tanjŏn was believed to be located.¹⁶⁾ While in that or the eight other postures, we were supposed to keep our minds focused on our cinnabar field and breathe from our lower abdomen. While doing this, we were supposed to visualize ki entering our bodies through the palms of our hands and the soles of our feet and then traveling to the tanjŏn.

We were then ready for the next stage, in which we sat in an approximation of the lotus posture for several minutes, with our hands held slightly apart in front of our chests, while we focused on the ki we had accumulated so that it became a palpable presence between our hands. This meditative stage of the training session was always accompanied by what I can only describe as new age music, music with no lyrics but with a repetitive rhythm which slowly grew louder and faster, with more brass and drums added as the pace picked up. This musical accompaniment to our meditation was apparently designed to accompany, or stimulate, a gradual increase in the palpability of the ki which was filling the empty space between our hands. Experienced practitioners would often find their hands starting to move about automatically, as though there was an invisible ball

Tonghwa munhwasa, 1991), p.243.

16) For photos of the nine horizontal postures, see 《Tanhak: kü iron kwa suryönbŏp》, pp.125-129.

of ki between their hands which was growing larger and moving about. This stage of the daily session would often end in such a tanmu, a ki-inspired dance.

At the end of each day's session, after we had assumed all of the appropriate postures, accumulated the appropriate amount of ki, and felt that ki within and around our bodies, we would loosen up with some final exercises, one of which involved standing upright and pounding our hands on our lower abdomen several times. We were told that the purpose of these final exercises was to ensure that our ki did not stay in our cinnabar field but began circulating throughout our bodies.

I never advanced beyond this beginning level. However, in the books explaining the philosophy and practices of tanjŏn hohŭp as taught and practiced in those Dahn Centers, some more advanced techniques are detailed, and they indicate even more strongly the Taoist origins of what Ilji Taesŏnsa has been preaching.

For example, Ilji Taesŏnsa says making water rise and fire descend is one of the fundamental principles behind tanjŏn hohŭp. Such reversal of the natural order has been a fundamental principle of Taoist internal alchemy for centuries. A Sung dynasty text, the Wu Chen p'ien by Chang Po-tuan (983-1082), for example, speaks of such inversion, which it agrees should start with fire and water.¹⁷⁾ Inverting the motion of fire and water is meant figuratively, not literally, and refers to a reversal of the usual order of physiological processes. One of the basic assumptions of internal alchemy was that if you reversed the natural order which began with birth but led to decay and death, then you could postpone decay and death. Internal alchemists expressed this figuratively as making water flow uphill and fire burn downhill. Physiologically, it meant, as Ilji Taesŏnsa explains it, having the fiery ki in the heart descend along the conception meridian (immaek, 任脈) and the watery ki in the kidneys ascend along the governing meridian. [tongmaek, 督脈].¹⁸⁾ Such reverse circulation of the ki through the body's ki channels would, according to both traditional Chinese internal alchemists and Ilji Taesŏnsa, prolong life and enhance health by reversing the natural tendency toward deterioration and decay.

17) Chang Po-tuan, *Understanding Reality*, trans. Thomas Cleary, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987, p.32.

18) 《Tanhak: kŭ iron kwa suryŏnbŏp》, pp.75-76.

Ilji Taesönsa even offers what he considers empirical evidence of this physiological phenomenon. He points out that, when we worry too much, our mouths turn dry. That is because fiery ki rises from our heart to our head when we worry. However, if we relax and don't worry too much, our fiery ki will naturally tend to descend instead and our watery ki will naturally rise. The result will be that we will be healthier, our breath will be sweet-smelling, and our saliva will be sweet and clear.

If we then let such sweet and clear saliva accumulate in our mouth and, once a sufficient amount has accumulated, swallow it with a deep swallow so that it descends all the way to our abdomen, that saliva becomes what is called the jade spring [玉泉] and can serve as a marvelous medicine which will further enhance our chönggi [精氣], the ki of our precious bodily fluids.¹⁹⁾ This is what Ilji Taesönsa advises as part of what he calls an ancient Korean path to health and happiness but anyone who is at all familiar with Taoist practices will immediately be reminded that saliva swallowing is also one of the Taoists' favorite techniques for promoting health and longevity.²⁰⁾

I never advanced to the stage where I would have practiced swallowing my spit. However, I was just beginning to learn another Taoist technique, breathing through my skin rather than through my nose, when I had to leave Seoul and return to Canada. I did not learn enough to be able to describe skin-breathing from personal experience, but I can relate what the books published by the Korean Culture Academy say about this practice.

Perhaps breathing is not the proper word, since breathing refers to inhaling and exhaling the ki we find in the air around us. Skin breathing draws into our bodies a more refined form of ki, that ki which can enter our bodies through the 84,000 invisible ki portals in our skin. The most important of those portals is the Gate of Life, the myöngmun [命門]. The Gate of Life is located in our lower back, roughly opposite the cinnabar field. In most people, we are told, it is underutilized but through training provided by Dahn Centers, we can learn how to open it and take full advantage of it. Once it, and the other portals (the training is called "opening the 365 portals" --kaehyöl [開穴], are opened, then a higher quality ki can enter our bodies and drive out the lower quality ki which we have been inhaling through our noses.²¹⁾

19) 《Tanhak: kü iron kwa suryönböp》, p.76.

20) Robinet, Isabelle *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-Shan Tradition of Great Purity*, pp.90-94.

Practitioners begin practicing inhaling ki through invisible portals in their skin in the earliest stages of tanhak training. Some of the postures practitioners assume during their daily sessions keep the soles of their feet and the palms of their hands facing skyward to receive celestial ki through the gushing stream (Yongch'ŏn-湧泉) portals on the soles of their feet and the heart of the palm (changsim 掌心) portals on the palms of their hands. However, the training designed to open up the Gate of Life and the other important portals is quite different, as are the results it is said to bring.

When I first was invited to come to my Dahn Center and have my 365 portals opened up, on November 19, 1993, I had visions of being punctured 365 times by acupuncture needles, or at least of having to pound on my body in 365 different places, as I had been taught to pound on my gushing spring portal earlier. Much to my surprise, the session that evening turned out to be much more mental than physical. We were told by the trainer that we had to open up our minds in order to open up our portals. Selfishness, needless worrying, and other mental distractions which clouded our thinking were keeping us from realizing that we were one with the world around us, that we and all other human beings were all composed of the same fundamental ki.

The lecturer that evening began by telling us that we must love our own bodies. We even practiced telling our bodies we loved them as we massaged our own necks, arms, and legs. Then we practiced linking our ki with that of a partner. We sat in pairs, facing each other, and held our hands parallel to the ground and directly above or below those of our partners while we focused on obtaining a palpable sensation of their ki on our hands. At the same time we concentrated on sending our partners mental images of a favorite flower while trying to send some of our own surplus ki along with that flower image in order to strengthen whatever part of their body needed strengthening. The whole point of this exercise was to physically sense the ki which joins us to one another and makes us one.

Afterwards, we all sat in a circle holding hands while the pŏpsanim (the instructor) asked each of us what we felt during that exercise. She

21) 《Tanhak: kŭ iron kwa suryŏnbŏp》, pp.166-167; Han munhwa wŏn editorial committee, 《Tanhak suryŏn ch'ehŏnggi [Accounts of experience with Tanhak training]》, Seoul: Han munhwa wŏn, 1992, pp.87-90

explained that we were learning how to share with others the celestial ki we had absorbed. She also gave us instructions to go forth and do good deeds to those close to us as a way of sharing and developing the proper selfless mind.²²⁾

When I studied at a Dahn Center in 1993, I was taught that such training, when repeated four times, gives the practitioner the ability to pass on his or her surplus ki to others and thus cure them of whatever ails them. This healing technique was called [hwalgong--活功] [the meritorious activity of saving others] or, more colloquially, *salang chugi* [giving love].²³⁾

The first thing I saw such healing techniques applied took me by surprise. It was November 5, 1993, and I had just finished an early morning session at the Pong-ch'ön-dong Dahn Center. I came out of the practice room and into the reception area and found it filled with about ten middle-aged housewives, all lying down on the floor while they received ki from the massaging hands of some of the more experienced practitioners, those who have graduated from wearing the white belts which identified beginning practitioners. I remember another time later that fall, when a group of us were sitting around after a session, drinking tea and talking as we usually did after we had spent an hour and a half cultivating and circulating our ki, when one of the leaders asked if anyone of us had any particular physical problems that day. It happened that he was feeling particularly full of ki that particular day and wanted to share his surplus with someone who needed it.

Healing through the laying on of hands is not the only special ability promised to advanced practitioners of tanhak. Ilji taesönsa promises that those who are able to advance through all three levels of tanhak training (first learning to accumulate their ki, then learning how to harmonize and circulate its movements through their bodies, and, finally, becoming proficient at using the ki of heaven and earth to help others), will reap a number of both physical and spiritual benefits.²⁴⁾

22) 憫趨厝 寰趨厝 on the "opening the portals" training, see 《Kaehyöl yöhaeng: 365 hyöl kaehyöl suryöm annae [A Kaehyöl journey: a guide to learning how to open your 365 portals]》, Seoul: Han munhwasa, 1993.

23) For more on Hwalgong, see Yi Sünghön, 《Tanhak: kü iron kwa suryönböp》, pp.168-169.

24) 《Tanhak: kü iron kwa suryönböp》, pp. 171-176

For example, among the 44 physical benefits he specifically mentions are a strengthened resistance to disease, a lowering of high blood pressure, an improved sexual prowess, an end to cravings for cigarettes, and, most amazing of all, an ability to actually see ki emanating from onions, cucumbers, the leaves of trees and other animate objects. He also promises that advanced practitioners will feel their bodies rising into the air and even find themselves standing in a different spot without knowing how they got there. And those are only the physical benefits of tanjŏn hohŭp. There are at least 31 different spiritual benefits as well. Practitioners of tanjŏn hohŭp are promised that, when they become sufficiently advanced, they will be able to bestow blessings on other humans and on all other material entities as well. They will also be able to speak with the inhabitants of the spiritual world and even summon a spirit general to do their bidding.

Such promises make Ilji taesŏnša sound suspiciously like he is promoting a religion rather than a mere system of healthful physical exercises and breathing techniques.²⁵⁾ Anticipating such an objection, he explains that Dahnhak is a religion which is not a religion, just as it is medicine which is not medicine, science which is not science, a sport which is not a sport, and a martial art which is not a martial art. What he means by that is that Dahnhak encompasses all the truths taught by all religions, just as it heals what medicine can heal, explains what science can explain, and provides all the benefits to the mind and body which sports and martial arts can provide.²⁶⁾ It does all that and more, and thus, he claims, it is superior to all of them.

Such a claim to universal hegemony is typical of religious movements. So is another feature of the teachings, beliefs, and practices presented in Ilji taesŏn's writings. He calls on his followers to respect and internalize the spirit of the founder of tanjŏn hohŭp. That founder, he says, is not himself. All he did was rediscover the teaching of the original founder, who founded not only Dahnhak but the Korean people and nation as well. It is Tan'gun , with his hongik in'gan (broadly benefiting mankind) philosophy, whom

25) For a discussion of the religious elements in Dahnhak, see Kim Mugyŏng, «Tanhak sŏnwŏn: Sinhwa ŭi huegwi wa k'alisŭma ŭi ilsandhwa [The Tanhak immortality centers: The return of myth and the standarization of charisma]», Han'guk Chonggyo yŏn'gu, vol 2, 2000, pp. 71-121

26) «Tanhak: kŭ iron kwa suryŏnbŏp», pp. 27-55

practitioners are encouraged to honor and emulate.

The basis for the claim that Dahnanhak originated with Tan'gun is an apocryphal text, ascribed to the Tan'gun era but said to have been lost for centuries until it resurfaced in the second decade of the twentieth century. That text, the Ch'önbugyǒng, [scripture of the heavenly seals 天符經], is only 81 Chinese characters long but, because it is believed to have been first given to mankind by Tangun's father and is thought to contain the fundamental principles of science, philosophy, and religion, it is described as one of the three sacred scriptures of the Korean nation.²⁷⁾

The Ch'önbu kyǒng was so important to Dahnhak that practitioners were told to memorize it while they were being trained to open their 365 portals. They were also taught a dance, a series of movements and postures, to perform as they recite all 81 characters in unison.¹⁹ Moreover, the Ch'önbukyǒng was written on all the tea cups practitioners drink from after each session. It was also plastered to the ceiling of the reception area of the Dahn Center I attended in 1993.

Why does Ilji Taesǒnsa, along with many other Koreans, believe that Tan'gun is the father of techniques which the rest of the world identifies with the Taoist internal alchemy of China? And why does he place such importance on the Ch'önbugyǒng?

First of all, the oldest extant histories of Korea, the Samguk yusa (written in the thirteenth century) and the Samguk sagi (written in the twelfth century), identify the legendary figure Tan'gun as an immortal. The Samguk yusa says Tangun governed Korea until he was 1,908 years old, at which point he retired into the mountains to become a mountain god. So, if that history is to be believed, even if Tangun was not immortal, he at least had discovered the secret of unusual longevity.²⁸⁾ Even the more sober Samguk sagi, which does not say how long Tan'gun lived or reigned, calls him a sǒn, an immortal.²⁹⁾

27) Those three texts were given canonical status by the Tan'gun religion Taejong-kyo in 1975 and now comprise the bible of that religion, the Taejong-kyo yogam (Seoul: Taejong-kyo Publishing House, 1992). They have also been translated and discussed in a number of other publications, including Ch'önjiin, published in 1986 by the Han munhwa Publishing House.

28) Ilyǒn, 《Samguk yusa [Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms]》 (Seoul: Minjung sǒgwan, 1973), pp.33-34.

29) Kim Pusik, Samguk sagi [History of the Three Kingdoms], Seoul: Kwangjo Press, 1976,

However, probably a more important reason is that, though he never mentions it, Yi's Dahnhak was greatly influenced by the beliefs and practices of Taejong-kyo, the indigenous Korean religion of Tan'gun worship. Taejong-kyo not only worships Tan'gun, it also includes the Ch'önbugyöng in its scriptures. Moreover, the leader of Taejong-kyo when Yi was formulating his Dahnhak theory was Pongu Kwön T'aehun (1900~1994), a man who provided the model for the fictional Taoist in the popular 1984 novel *Tan*. Kwön also helped introduce Korean-style internal alchemy with his book *Minjok pijön chöngsin suryönböp* [Our people's secret tradition of mind cultivation] in which he argued that Tan'gun originated that secret tradition of longevity-enhancing breathing exercises.³⁰⁾ He also promoted the idea that the Ch'önbugyong provided the textual basis for that tradition.³¹⁾

Even before Kwön T'aehun was introduced to a Korean general public through the novel about him, there was another Korean Taoist who had also been diligently teaching what he called traditional Korean longevity techniques of mountain hermits. Ko Kyöngmyöng (1936~?), who preferred to be known as Ch'öngsan (Blue Mountain), claimed that he had been adopted by a couple of mountain hermits in the late 1940s, when he was but a child, and had spent twenty years with them learning ancient Korean techniques of breathing practices and physical exercises which enhanced health and longevity. In 1967, he says, he descended from the mountains and by 1970 had established academies under the name of Kouk Sun Do (Kuksöndo) to teach those techniques to others.³²⁾ Though he returned to the mountains in 1984, his techniques are still being taught in Kouk Sun Do academies in cities across Korea and in North America as well.³³⁾

p.298

30) Kwön Taehun, 《Minjok pijön chöngsin suryönböp [Our people's secret tradition of mind cultivation]》, Seoul: Chöngsin segyesa, 1992.

31) Kwön Taehun, 《at told to Chöng Chaesüng, Ch'önbugyögyöng üi pimil kwa Paektusan-jok munhwa [The secrets of the Ch'önbugyögyöng and the culture of the people of Paektusan]》, Seoul: Chöngsin segyesa, 1989. For more on Kwön and the internal alchemy schools he founded, see <http://dahn.org>.

32) Ch'öngsan sönsa (Ko Kyöngmyöng), 《Salm üi kil [the Road to Life]》, Seoul: Kuksöndo Press, 1992. For more on Keuk Sun Do, see <http://www.kouksundo.net/>

33) For more on both Kwön T'aehun and Ch'öngsan, see Yu Pyöngdök, *Kün.hyöndaek Han'guk chonggyo sasang yön'gu* [A study of modern and contemporary religious thought

Kouk Sun Do has at least a 15-year head start on the Dahn Centers. However, it is Ilji Taesönsa's Dahn Centers, founded in 1985, rather than Kouk Sun Do or Kwön T'aehun's Han'guk tanhakhoe [Society for the Study of Korean Internal Alchemy] which are the most visible manifestation of contemporary Korean Taoism, not only in Korea but around the world.

Kouk Sun Do is not invisible. There is a Kouk Sun Do center about a five minute drive from my home in the Vancouver area in British Columbia, Canada, and there is another center across the street from an apartment I keep in Seoul. Kouk Sun Do says it operates over 100 ðanother 10 or more overseas. However, Dahnhak Centers, under a variety of names, have expanded much faster over the last decade. than any other form of Korean internal alchemy. In 1993, when I first began studying Dahnhak, there were only around 35 Dahn Centers, all in Korea.³⁴⁾ There are now 360 centers in Korea, United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Brazil, and Japan. Dahn Hak claims that over 1 million people around the world are practicing Dahnhak and Brain Respiration (the name they now use for the form of tanjön hohŭp).³⁵⁾

The Dahn Centres have expanded so rapidly because Ilji Taesönsa keeps redefining Dahnhak to gain a larger audience. He has moved far way from his Taejong-kyo base, even though in Korea he and his organization (under the name of Han munhwa undong yönhap) are major sponsors of National Foundation Day celebrations [celebrating the day Tan'gun founded the first Korean state] and have paid for statues of Tan'gun to be erected in school yards all over the Republic of Korea. In the late 1990s he moved to the United States and established a headquarters in Sedona, Arizona, a town which is known for attracting New Agers and others interested into tapping into invisible cosmic forces. At first, he called his center in Arizona a Taoist retreat center, even though he never referred to his practices or teachings as Taoism in Korea. However, he now he prefers to call it Mago's Sacred Garden. His focus on Tan'gun has moved in North America to a focus on an Earth Goddess who Koreans supposedly worshipped long before they worshipped Tan'gun.³⁶⁾

in Korea] (Seoul: Madang kihoe, 2000), pp.49-58.

34) Kang Mugyöng, p.107.

35) <http://www.dahnworld.com>

36) <http://www.sedonaretreat.org>. The textual basis for this claim of an ancient Korean

Moreover, the Dahn Centers have moved far beyond promising to help individuals become healthier and live longer. They now promise their breathing practices and physical exercises promote such a powerful change in human consciousness that the whole world can benefit from them as a global community. Rather than individual longevity, world peace is now the goal of Dahnhak. That change is evident in the changes in the names of the magazines it has published over the years.

At first, it published its magazine under the name Kõn'gang Tan (Dahn), emphasizing the health benefits which could be gained by practicing the techniques it taught. As it moved toward claiming broader benefits for human consciousness, it changed the name of its publication to "New Human." Then it changed the name again to "Healing Society," partially to reflect the commercial success of the book with the same name but also to indicate that its techniques would have much broader benefits than just an improvement in personal health.³⁷⁾ Rather than a way to gain personal peace of mind, "brain respiration" and other Dahnhak practices are now being portrayed as a way to bring about world peace. Moreover, as interpreted by Dahn Centres, world peace means not just peace within the human community but also peace, harmony, and cooperation between human beings and the natural world. That change is reflected in the latest name for their magazine, "Earth Human."³⁸⁾ It is also reflected in the latest Dahnhak venture. In early 2003, the Dahn Center Han Munhwa Wõn opened an International Graduate University for Peace in Ch'ungnam province in Korea³⁹⁾.

Even though Dahn Centers now have renamed their internal alchemy practices "brain respiration" and mix Western New Age terminology (including terms imported from South Asian Yoga), and have added goals traditional internal alchemists did not even dream of, they remain at core a

belief in Mago is Pak Jesang. Kim Ŭnsu, trans. Pudoji [A record of the Heavenly Kingdom] (Seoul: Hanmunhwa Press, 2002). I have been unable to find any other information on this supposedly ancient Korean tradition, except for one article on Mago as a female mountain god. Kang Chinok, <Mago halmi sõlhwa-e nat'an-an yõsõngsin kwannyõm [The concept of a Goddess as seen in the myth of Grandma Mago]>, 《Han'guk minsokhak》, vol. 25, 1992, pp.3-47.

37) <http://www.healingsociety.org/>

38) Notice, also, the website for the World Earth Human Alliance, <http://www.weha.or.kr/>

39) <http://www.peace.ac.kr/>

manifestation of Korean Taoism. Along with Keuk Sun Do and the Society for the Study of Korean Internal Alchemy, they represent a revival of a tradition which flourished centuries earlier, in the middle of the Chosŏn dynasty. This internal alchemy revival, with its claims of Korean roots, reflects a recent collapse of various strands of Korean tradition, both strands from China and strands which originated on the peninsula, into one unified Korean tradition. That unified Korean tradition, formed from both imported and indigenous components, is used as a counterweight to Western cultural influence in order to preserve and assert Korea's distinctive cultural identity.

As a non-Korean attending sessions at a neighborhood Dahn Center, I could not help but notice, for example, that when I entered and exited the practice hall, I was greeted in a traditional Buddhist manner. My teachers and fellow practitioners would each clasp their hands together in front of their chests and bow to me, a form of greeting I had observed on many occasions at Buddhist temples in Korea. However, the clothing practitioners wear is not Buddhist at all. It more closely resembles the uniforms seen in East Asian martial arts studios, even to the use of the color of the belt to indicate the rank of the person wearing the uniform (I never advanced beyond the basic white belt).

The basic physiology taught in the Dahn Centers is the same as that taught in Colleges of Chinese Medicine in China and the techniques for enhancing that physiology are classical Chinese Taoist techniques. However, the texts on which those techniques are explicitly grounded are not texts found in the Taoist or medical canons of China. Texts such as the Ch'ŏnbugyŏng originated in Korea.

The recent explosive rise of internal alchemy organizations in Korea draws on a combination of ingredients drawn from both indigenous and imported strands found in traditional Korean civilization. Contemporary Taoism in Korea may have Chinese roots, but it is quite different from the Taoism (including Qigong and other approaches to internal alchemy) seen in China today. Taoism in Korea, both past and present, remains recognizably and distinctively Korean.

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