

The National Commonality Series

(Written by the Institute of the Humanities for
Unification at Konkuk University)*

Park, Myung-Kyu**

Professor at the Department of Sociology, Seoul National University

As was just introduced, my name is Park Myung-Kyu. The phrase ‘book review’ was used, but I am here not so much to present a book review but rather to congratulate the Institute of the Humanities for Unification (IHU).

First of all, I would like to congratulate the Director Kim Sung-Min and all researchers of the IHU for successfully completing the first stage of the Humanities Korea (HK) Humanities for Unification project and initiating the second stage. In particular, I would like to thank you for making great contributions to the academia and our society at large, by publishing the very valuable research results that we had just seen. And thank you, also, for giving me a chance to speak at such a meaningful event.

To be honest, though I am congratulating you, I also feel envy because we also have to go through a similar evaluation session next year, and I am not certain whether we will be able to receive high evaluation as the IHU. Nonetheless, we

* This article is an English translation of the speech given by Park Myung-Gyu, professor of sociology at the Seoul National University, on the occasion of the inaugurating ceremony of the second stage of the Institute of the Humanities for Unification at Konkuk University (IHU) – a Humanities Korea (HK) project. The speech took the form of a book review on the National Commonality Series, published by the IHU during its first stage. The National Commonality Series is composed of: *National Identity of Koreans*, *Division and Unification Awareness of Koreans*, *Living Culture of Koreans* and *Historical Trauma of Koreans* (all published by Sunin Publishing in 2012).

** parkmk@snu.ac.kr

will do our best.

I was requested to make a speech in the form of a book review, and was given 10 minutes. So I will discuss what I had felt after reading the four books, organizing my thoughts into three major achievements and three proposals.

I believe the major achievement made by the IHU based on these four publications, is proposing a refreshing alternative into how we should understand the concept of the 'nation', which is one of the biggest challenges the academia faces in and outside of Korea.

As many of you know well, there is a lot of dilemma on how to understand the idea of the 'nation'. How are we going to resolve this issue amidst the difficulty, on the one hand, of adhering to the rather transcendental 'theories of the unchanging nation', and on the other, of being unable to revert to the deconstructive 'theories of the post-nation'? How are we going to avoid defining the 'nation' as something imperative and prescriptive, but not overlook the fact that the 'nation' incessantly activates in our daily lives and politics? How are we going to approach this issue not just from a cognitive and social sciences perspective but also from a sentimental and spiritual dimension? These are some of the questions that challenge us and place us in a dilemma.

I cannot say that the Series published by the IHU is complete, but I believe it deals with this dilemma seriously and head-on, thereby contributing greatly not only to our society at large, but also to theoretic development.

Secondly, unlike dealing with the nation purely as humanities and on the imaginative level, if one brings the issue into reality, in relation to unification for example, one inevitably has to face a gap between the humanities community and the political community. However, the IHU has tried to fill this gap by comprehensively researching into the diverse but inter-related groups of the Korean diaspora. This is another important achievement.

Thirdly, the term 'humanities for unification', which is also a part of this institute's name, sounds all very nice, but it is a difficult task. There are also skepticisms on what exactly humanities research for unification is and how far it can go. Such questions existed ever since the IHU took off and I am sure Director Kim Sung-Min and many researchers were well aware of them.

Nevertheless, I think some potentials were revealed through the first stage. I apologize for saying ‘some’ in the midst of a congratulatory event, but if I say a lot was revealed, then you won’t have anything left to do. So I will say ‘some’, meaning not a very high level, but a certain level that is nonetheless quite meaningful. In particular, the fact that the IHU categorized its ideas into identity, living culture, trauma, and unification and division awareness, and then tried to conclude its thoughts through the concept of national commonality, was quite significant to me. I also think that the IHU showed us a good model by merging, in a novel way, a humanities-style inquiry and a social science-style research methodology of implementing a social survey.

Usually, humanities scholars, rather than deal with numbers or perform surveys, tend to focus on one or two particular cases and analyze deeply into them whereas social scientists tend to rely on statistical consistency without raising issues as in humanities. Nonetheless, the IHU has raised a very humanities issue but has tried to verify and interpret the research results through the statistical method of a survey. This is a very refreshing attempt. I personally had the desire to make such an attempt myself but was unable to do so until now. The IHU has solved the task instead, which I would like to personally thank you for.

It is said that a book review is not fulfilling its job if it makes only positive comments, so I will try to do my duty by proposing three things I think the IHU can improve on.

First of all, as the title implies, the project approached the diversity of Koreans from the outside, through the Korean diaspora. Through the various groups of ethnic Koreans outside of Korea, like those in China, Japan and Russia, as well as through North Koreans, the research has well manifested that concepts such as national consciousness or national identity are not as simple as they seem, and that there are many different aspects. However, I think the project could be further enhanced by supplementing it with views from the inside, not just expanding those from the outside.

In fact, diversity and difference of perspective are growing within us. As we all know very well, already in our society, the numbers of foreign inhabitants, marriage immigrants and multicultural youths are growing exponentially. If we are

to designate them also as protagonists of integration and unification in our future society, we have to think not just about the Korean diaspora outside the country but also about how we are going to link these heterogeneous groups inside our society.

Furthermore, alongside such multicultural elements, I think that the generational gap with different historical experiences and diversification of groups with different lifestyles will only get bigger in the course of the 21st century. Such heterogeneous internal fragmentations and multi-cultural elements will become as important as the issue of diversity of the Korean diaspora in the process of integrating and healing our society in the future. In this sense, I hope that the IHU include such issues in its research so that the issues of diversity, such as in culture, corporations, religion and arts, which are creating various habituses inside of us, can be revealed.

Secondly, while I very much agree with the IHU's idea of aiming for integrative humanities, so as to strive for a solidaristic unification and a communicative future by binding the Korean diaspora and South and North Koreans into one, and also with the plan to more proactively develop these ideas in stage two, I think there are differences and asymmetries between the relevance of the Korean diaspora and that of South and North Koreans, when it comes to the issue of unification.

Let me elaborate. In regard to unification, there are many questions we have to answer - who is responsible to what extent, who is going to bear how much burden, who is going to exercise what rights, if we are to found a unified Korea, who are going to be its members. Of course, there are many different groups within the Korean diaspora and they also certainly have the right to voice out their opinion about the future of the Korean Peninsula as well as participate and communicate in the process. However, if we compare their role with the extent South and North Koreans have to be responsible for, to bear and to decide - I am not sure whether this is an issue of weight or priority - but I believe there is an asymmetry that we need to highlight. Shouldn't we contemplate more seriously on this asymmetry in the future? I am not asking for Korea-centrism or anything of the sort, but we need to avoid the simple, abstract idea of homogeneity that everything will be all right if we all go together. So I hope that the IHU, in its second stage, will focus more on this point and propose some ways on how to responsibly deal with such

a challenge.

The last thing I would like to propose, is that the IHU probe a little deeper into humanities for unification. There was one part that was particularly inspirational in the books. They discuss the process of overcoming Koreans' trauma, the mindset distorted due to division, and various other elements we have to surmount, not as therapy but healing. It is not about performing surgery on something that has gone wrong but about comprehensive healing. If this is the case, then I believe humanities have to be able to show the in-depth dimension where such healing takes place.

Humanities have aspects different from the generalization, institutionalized approach or political engineering of social science. If the IHU can dig deeper through its humanities into at what point or what occasion very hostile groups of people can integrate, through what opportunity people who were very hurt can heal, and in what context separated people can communicate and enjoy the happiness of becoming one - of course, such analyses may be based on particular examples, a unique point in time or obscure imagination - and if the IHU can also show how elements of humanities can more vividly reveal the potential of our society to heal, then I think the IHU's achievements will go much further than just becoming the best HK research institute. The achievements will be endowing a precious gift to those, in and outside Korea, who are suffering because of their inability to theoretically resolve the issue of the nation, and also to those who want to confirm how much healing power humanities can exert in real life. With the belief that my wishes will be brilliantly realized in the second stage, I once again like to sincerely congratulate the IHU.