

**Institute of Humanities for Unification at  
Konkuk University, *Han'guk Chisonggwai*  
*T'ongil Taedam* [Conversations on  
Unification with Korean Intellectuals].  
Seoul: Paradigm Book, 2018. 416 pages.  
ISBN: 1196346518.**

Jin-hwan Kim

(Institute for Unification Education)

I have always thought unification between the two Koreas to be one of the biggest challenges in civilization. Two political communities, which had waged war against one another just after being divided, leading to killing or being killed in millions, cannot help but find it difficult to commit to reconciliation and cooperation, and forge unity peacefully. However, if the two Koreas succeed in solving this difficult task, then I believe it will lead to a great leap in mental culture of humanity. Today's European Union does show this kind of achievement, however, unification of the Korean peninsula will likely be recorded as a greater achievement than the formation of the EU because such unification would have even overcome the geopolitical tragedy whereby a strong centrifugal force had been in action between the continental forces and maritime forces.

### **The Need to Popularize Unification Wisdom**

The seeds of the Korean peninsula's division were sowed by Japan, a maritime force, which had ambitions to advance onto the continent, and it was then finalized

by the Korean War. The Cold War, which was like no other in world history and ensued for decades ever since, weakened the centripetal force of the South and the North while fortifying the centrifugal force. Such geopolitical tragedy lies in the background as to why the wounds we had suffered during the past 20th century run so deep, why it is so difficult to heal them and why such circumstances continue until today. Even in the 21st century, during which a power competition between the US and China emerged, there is possibility that this geopolitical tragedy will continue to persist. Little effort is needed in realizing how difficult unification is under such circumstances, but if done, what a great achievement it will be.

In short, the era of division that we are living under has been extraordinarily hard, and the unification that we have to forge is extraordinarily difficult. One consolation though, is that such difficulties have made our unification wisdom deep. Perhaps not always, but more often than not, those who live through hardships and adversities tend to show perseverance and wisdom that are hard to find in those who live protected and sheltered. Likewise, our society, as a result of the era of division that inflicted numerous wounds on us, has gained a lot of unification intellectuals, whom we can depend upon as we unravel this difficult task of unifying the Peninsula. For example, if it were not for all the insight shown by Kang Man-Kil through his many publications, it would have taken more time, if not outright impossible, for me to gain the perspective of looking at the division and the unification in terms of a confrontation between continental powers and the maritime powers.

As such, if a person has relied on unification intellectuals to deepen one's own contemplations and to heighten one's commitment to praxis, then that person cannot help but hope that the wisdom of unification intellectuals be disseminated to more and more people. Just like the Korean proverb, "Crystal beads have to be strung together for them to become a treasure," allowing the shining wisdom of unification intellectuals to give inspiration and enlightenment to just a limited few is not only unfortunate but inappropriate in resolving the complex issue of unification. The so-called "encounters with unification intellectuals" that the Konkuk University's Institute for Humanities for Unification (IHU) has been

promoting during the last few years is precisely because of such misfortune and its implications.<sup>1)</sup>

Konkuk University's IHU initiated and published, in 2015, its *Intellectual History of Unification Discourse*, which was an attempt to popularize unification wisdom. The book is a collection of research articles. Nonetheless, it is closer to a book for general readers rather than a specialized book. Rather than list series of unfamiliar theories or concepts, the authors tried to introduce and explain as easily as possible the ideas regarding unification of the intellectual each author was in charge of writing about, using a variety of material. Looking at the people who appear the book (Kim Ku, Cho Pong-Am, Chang Chun-Ha, Mun Ik-Hwan, Lee Yōng-Hi, Kang Man-Kil, Paek Nak-Chōn, Song Tu-Yul), my initial thought was that one book would not be sufficient to introduce and explain the ideas of even one person. I was concerned that it would only be able to deal with those ideas very superficially. However, there were advantages of introducing several thinkers in one book. All thinkers had contemplated over the common idea of unification but had been active during different periods, allowing one to see how the vicissitudes of Korean contemporary history affected ideas around unification during each period.

### Common Arguments of the Unification Intellectuals

Three years later, *Conversations on Unification with Korean Intellectuals* was published, and compared to the previous book, there were two differences that caught my attention. First of all, because the previous publication was a compilation of essays, there were some parts that were difficult. However, this publication was, overall, an easier read, as is usually the case with books consisting of interviews. In terms of the aim of popularizing unification intellectuals, this is definitely a big advantage. Secondly, five (Kim Ku, Cho Pong-Am, Chang Chun-Ha, Mun Ik-Hwan, Li Yōng-Hi) among the eight intellectuals who appear

---

1) The content of this article hereinafter is a revised version of two essays ("Contemporary History of Korea As Seen from the Perspective of Unification Ideas", "Unification Wisdom of Intellectuals Who 'Believe and Listen'") I had submitted to E-t'ongilchong't'o (Unification Elysium), monthly newsletters published by the Headquarter for Promotion of National Community of Chokechong Buddhist Sect.

in the previous book were deceased whereas the thirteen who appear in this book are still very much active. Thus, in the previous book, the eight authors were introducing the ideas of the intellectuals rather unilaterally, based on their words and written articles. However, in this book, lively interactive discussions between the interviewers and the interviewees deepen and facilitate understanding for the readers.

The eleven interviewers in this book were professors and researchers affiliated to the IHU, who travelled not just around Korea, but also to Japan, China, Germany and elsewhere to meet the interviewees directly. The interviewees were “former Ministers of Unification, who most directly accumulated experience regarding exchange and cooperation between the two Koreas, and who, even after their term in office had ended, made practical efforts to unify the Peninsula” (Yim Tong-Won, Chŏng Se-Hyŏn, Yi Chong-Sŏk), “intellectuals in and outside of Korea who have shown rational and in-depth contemplation and reflection on Korean society with the aim of building a peaceful future on the Korean Peninsula” (Vladimir Tikhonov, Fujii Takeshi, Sŏ Chae-Chŏng, Pak Myŏng-Lim, Chŏng Kyŏng-Mo, Pak Mun-Il, Pak Han-Sik), “academics who committed their lives to the major theme of overcoming division of the Korean Peninsula and to forging the foundation of humanities-based unification discourse” (Kang Man-Kil, Paek Nak-Chŏng, Song Tu-Yul), among others.

The unification intellectuals, who lived through the scarred era of division, all jointly show wisdom, insight and accurate prediction that allow them to gain a penetrating vision through the flow of history and major issues of each period. For example, the former minister of unification, Yim Tong-Won, had already predicted a year and a half ago that the election of US President Trump could actually be “an opportunity for us,” and the projections Professor Pak Han-Sik made four years ago are now becoming a reality for us in 2018.

Hillary Clinton tends to support status quo whereas Donald Trump seems to support change of circumstances and tipping of status quo. I think his words that if we want to maintain the US Forces in Korea or the forces in Japan then Korea and Japan should pay more for their maintenance came from that kind of mindset. (...)

However, I think all this could be an opportunity for us, as people who wanted peace rather than the Cold War, and unification instead of division. We need an excellent president and a government that can make good use of this opportunity (Yim Tong-Won; November 15, 2016).

I participated in the centennial ceremony commemorating the birth of Kim Il-Sōng. At the ceremony, Kim Jong-Un made a very surprising speech. He said that we, North Korea, must break away from a situation where people have to tighten their belts. (...) Kim Jong-Un was focusing on improving relations with the US, without which economic growth and improving the lives of his people would be impossible. (...) So I think there are going to be very persistent efforts and policies to improve relations with the US in the future. (...) US-North Korea relations and inter-Korea relations are directly correlated to one another. Trying to improve just the US-North Korea relations excluding South Korea is strategically paradoxical. I think promoting improvements in both relations with the US and with South Korea simultaneously is the wisest way for the Kim Jong-Un regime, and I predict this is what's going to happen (Pak Han-Sik 2014).

What's particularly notable here is that there are many similarities in what they argue, characteristic of intellectuals who have committed themselves and fought hard on the common issue of unification for a long period of time.

First of all, they did not consider the geopolitical tragedy of the Korean peninsula as a fate that cannot be overcome. They emphasized that, in moving towards unification, South Korea should not meekly be dragged along by the centrifugal force but rather take on an increasingly leading role – something which is actually possible. During the Cold War, it was true that the voice and influence of neighboring powers were huge. However, recent Sino-US relations, unlike past US-Soviet relations, are characterized by both confrontation and cooperation. Therefore, they argue, there is room for South Korea to implement some measure of independence in its policy towards North Korea. In this vein, Chōng Se-Hyōn, former Minister of Unification, pointed out that South Korea's policy toward North Korea must be supported by the Korean people, North Korea, and the international

community.

Second, these intellectuals did not consider unification as something that can be attained suddenly overnight and emphasized “*de facto* unification” and “unification as a process.” In light of the antagonism that has built up between the two Koreas due to the wounds they inflicted on one another during the Korean War and also due to the military stand-off that has continued until very recently, hurried legal and institutional unification can lead to the start of yet another tragedy. They said that the process of alleviating the antagonism between the North and the South and the instability of an armistice regime should also be considered as a form of unification, and that we should not be too impatient in pushing ahead with legal and institutional unification. In this sense, they considered the achievement of peace on the Korean peninsula to be a necessary task in accomplishing unification and vice versa—advancing unification would consolidate peace on the peninsula. In other words, peace and unification are inseparable.

Third, they reiterated that the North and the South should not consider one another as competitors or targets to be obliterated, but as being mutually complementary, as equals. A term that frequently appears in the book is “putting oneself in the other’s shoes.” For these intellectuals, unification is not a competition in which the two Koreas fight over who is superior but a process of respecting each other’s differences. In short, unification is a future-oriented task of making “a home of the future” by the peoples of both South and North Korea as well as the Korean diaspora.

### **If All Citizens Were to Become Unification Intellectuals**

Recently, Seoul and Pyongyang have been advancing their relations quite well as if they were reading this book together. During the inter-Korean summit of April 27—the first in 11 years—the two heads of state agreed to open a new era by bringing a swift end of longstanding division and confrontation, and promote joint prosperity, unify the Korean nation on their own accord, and achieve peace on the Korean peninsula. They recognized peace and unification to be mutually complementary and strongly affirmed unification to be a future-oriented task. At

the same time, the Moon Jae-In government is in the process of overcoming various obstacles facing the attempts to improve US-North Korea relations and acting as a guide or a facilitator in the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Thanks to such efforts, there are now higher hopes that the Korean peninsula can break away from its geopolitical tragedy. The unification of the Korean peninsula, which will promote reconciliation and cooperation between the continental forces and the maritime forces, is the future that unification intellectuals all call for. The conversations in this book took place between 2014 and January 2018. The common arguments the unification intellectuals made during those times when things were unlike what we are currently witnessing are now becoming a guideline for inter-Korea relations. If the IHU does not become complacent about the achievements it has made so far and continues its encounters with unification intellectuals, then unification wisdom will no longer remain the realm of merely a few intellectuals or experts but rather that of increasingly more ordinary citizens. I believe the more citizens there are with unification wisdom, the easier it will be to solve the difficult problem of unification.

