

Interview

An Interview with Paik Nak-chung

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Interviewer: Kim Sung-Min (Director, Institute of Humanities for Unification, Konkuk University)

(Editor’s note: Since 2016, a series of interviews has been conducted by the members of the Institute of Humanities for Unification (IHU) @ Konkuk University with the most prominent thinkers, researchers, and policy-makers whose thought, research, or professional achievements in dealing with the issues of inter-Korean division and reconciliation have a special connection to the conceptual and methodological advancement of Humanities for Unification. The IHU published these interviews in *Han’guk chisǒnggwa’i t’ongil taedam* [Unification Discussions with Korea’s Erudite Scholars] in 2018. The editorial board of *S/N Korean Humanities* is pleased to publish their translations in English starting with the March 2020 issue. By making their insights available in English, the IHU hopes to engage with a wider international readership in future discussions on inter-Korean division and unification based on the humanities perspective. Relying on the humanities will allow us to contemplate the past, present, and future of unification as a *process* led by *all Korean people* including the Korean diaspora, which is a shift from focusing on the political elites, systems, and institutions of just South or North Korea. To mark the launch of the new section, we began with an interview with the renowned historian Dr. Kang Man-gil. The second in the series in the current issue presents an interview with Dr. Paik Nak-chung, one of Korea’s most eloquent political and cultural critics. Dr. Paik Nak-chung is most distinctively recognized for elucidating the structural dimensions of the Korean problem with the notion of the “division system.”)

Paik Nak-chung’s Theory of National Literature, Division System, and Transformative Centrism (“Middle Way”)

Initiation of the Division System

Kim It is a great honor to meet you. My name is Kim Sung-Min, Director of the Institute of Humanities for Unification (IHU) at Konkuk University. Once again, I

would like to thank you for joining this conversation. To many people in Korean society, including myself, your books have presented numerous crucial topics. These days, however, I strongly believe that it is important to listen to you directly rather than relying solely on printed books, as you are a living witness of the turbulent modern history of Korea and an elder who has continued to speak out in the academe.

Paik Not at all. I feel you have overestimated me, but I am grateful for your words.

Kim Then I would like to ask you a few questions. I remember the time when we as students were thinking about the current of Korean society and focused our academic endeavors on understanding the theory of national literature and the division system. However, I understand that your theory of division system, although it now has a wide range of theoretical dimensions, was originally proposed as part of the theory of national literature. So what is the ideological link between the theory of national literature and the theory of division system? I mean more specifically, the differences and commonalities, for example, between the theory of national literature and the theory of division system. I would appreciate your thoughts on this.

Paik Yes, first of all, to tell you how it happened at a personal level, the theory of national literature comes first, and the theory of division system is subsequent. However, as in terms of ideology, they are not exactly separate, in my personal history, I cannot exactly pinpoint when the theory of national literature ended, and when the theory of division system began. Of course, I gradually employed the term “national literature” less and became more focused on developing the concept of division system as time progressed. However, within the framework emerged transformative centrism (“Middle Way”) vis-

à-vis the work on the division system, as perhaps a practical path. The integration of various reformatory and transformative lines in our society, which this transformational centrism (“Middle Way”) theory espouses, is actually an idea I presented as part of the theory of national literature before I developed the theory of division system. To be specific, I wrote the article “Unification Movement and Literature” in 1989, a little after the June Democracy Movement. In it, I discussed various literary topics, reviewed a few works, and in the conclusion, wrote a section titled “Three Perspectives on Post-June Democracy Movement.” To be clearer about the “three perspectives,” first, there are bifurcated lines within the radical movement, namely the so-called NL and PD. In addition to these two, I mentioned moderate reformism, or liberal reform, which the radicals had rejected as mere reformism, and argued for the necessity of combining all three—NL, PD, and moderate reformism—in approach. That is, so to speak, the beginning of the idea of the “Combination of Three” for transformative centrism (“Middle Way”). Commonly, the claim was that NL and PD must again be combined. In contrast, I argued that the effort to again combine NL and PD would be unfruitful, and that doing so would fail to solve the division or domestic problems; as such, so I forwarded the idea of the combination of three. This was actually before I began to engage in the full-fledged debate on the division. There is no end to the discussion of connection or differences, but I think it will not be interesting to talk about this for too long from the outset, so I will stop myself here. If you, Professor Kim, want to comment at this point, I would like rather to listen.

Kim I will ask you again toward the end of our conversation, but you mentioned the distinctive concepts of the global system, the North-South system of the Korean peninsula, and the division system

between the two Koreas, discussed by Immanuel Wallerstein. These three systems and hierarchy appear to be four disparate categories. In what you have discussed in terms of specific social realities and historical perception, all contradictions have been entangled, and even though these contradictions cannot be resolved by basic concepts such as class and ethno-nationality, I do believe that such endeavors have been concentrated upon the concepts from the early-to-mid 1980s. In such a milieu, I think that what you have proposed, namely that “Division is no longer a contradiction, but a system,” has appropriately explained the social and historical perceptions to the present. Would it be reasonable for us to interpret what you called the “system of division contradiction” as we do now?

Paik Yes. However, you mentioned that the global system and hierarchy are different?

Kim Yes.

Paik I think that is a crucial point. If there are a global system and a decentralized system based on the concept of hierarchy, one is forced to choose one. And many people, especially social scientists, harbor the misunderstanding that the theory of division system relegates the global capitalist issue and only focuses on division. That is not true, however. What I mean is that although there is a division system, it is not a self-completed system, and that there is a higher hierarchy, a higher-level system. This means that it can be used as a conceptual tool to analyze the aspects manifesting on the Korean peninsula. Moreover, I mean the division system as a reality in which the global system operates on the Korean peninsula, not as a mechanical combination of the two systems of North and South Korea on the Korean Peninsula. However, since the global system manifests in the milieu of the Korean peninsula, the

most important component is that there are the South Korean system and the North Korean system. In this case, the hierarchies of the systems as well as the concepts inherent in these systems differ. We also use the term “regime,” which is a little less self-completed than the term “system.” Depending on how we view it, the division system may be said to a regime rather than a system, but if we use the English term “division regime,” would this not be read as “divided government”? This is why I translated it as “division system,” and it does not make too much difference if you think there are systems that are different systems with disparate hierarchies and self-completion.

Kim You have really clarified conceptually “regime” and “system,” but I think some kind of internal mechanism wherein a system can operate must be satisfied before one can apply a system as conceptualized. You have continued to tell us through various writings and lectures, but in your writings, you have said that because the Korean peninsula is divided, and that because it is a division system, North Korea cannot realize complete socialism in the North, and South Korea cannot realize complete liberal democracy. In that sense, I do not know if one can view as interchangeable the concept of a system and contradiction.

Paik Yes, in fact, contradiction is inherent in any system. There must be numerous contradictions, and as one or some of them prove more important than others, I do not think it is necessary to discard the term “division contradiction” so long as it is stringently stipulated and carefully employed. As I said before, the moment we use such a term, it is as though disturbing a beehive, and if we change the metaphor, we fall into a swamp. This is why we do not use the term.

Kim You talked about the theory of national literature even before the introduction of the theory of division system, but in fact, the latter has deepened in its content alongside the historical ebb and flow of modern Korean history since it first emerged as a theory of division contradiction in the mid-80s through the debate over social structure. I think there is an intimate relationship between your theory of division system and the development of modern Korean history. What are some of the events that have affected the formation of the theory of division system since the 1980s and what specifically are their effects?

Paik Though it is not based directly on a historical event, I had argued in the article I mentioned earlier that we should review the three existing perspectives and combine them post-June Democracy Movement. And the following year or so, the article was published in a book called *The New Stage of National Literature*. After the June Democracy Movement, our society and our literature entered a new stage, and I began to believe that we should self-reform and develop accordingly. Thereafter, the field of social science began the debate over social structure, with which I did not find simpatico. Moreover, in the early 1990s, Germany was unified and the socialist bloc basically collapsed, right? Looking at such realities, many have come to think that the explanation or analysis based on orthodox Marxism-Leninism is inappropriate. Those who had high expectations of the existing socialist bloc were discouraged and changed their course, but I myself had never considered using the Soviet Union or North Korea as a model while arguing for national literature and pursuing popular literature throughout the 1970s. Based on the reality of the South Korean people, I thought of a project that would start from said reality, but would also encompass the entire Korean peninsula as well as the people of the third world, and by means of which

joining the ranks of world literature. That is why I was less perturbed by such large-scale historical events, and in some sense, held conviction that I was moving in the right direction and that I needed to continue to develop it.

Kim Our Institute fully agrees with you. But to be more precise, as you said earlier, the division system is not part of the usual Cold War system, but a sub-system of the global capitalist system, in that imperialist hegemony operates more unilaterally and the division system materializes the contradictions of the global capitalist system more deeply and diversely. And this position has been criticized by many since the beginning.

Paik The first point of criticism is how the division system can be rendered a “system.” However, the concept of system encompasses diverse systems, such as the solar system, the global system, and others, and there are numerous meanings that can be changed or added to the concept. In this regard, there is nothing wrong with establishing the idea of a division system and arguing that it presents a diversity of systematic characteristics. Some people criticized me for not understanding what a system is because I am a scholar of literature. And of course, I wrote counterarguments. What is more common is the theory of reduction of division, which is the argument that division is the origin of all that is wrong, and many accused me of such an oversimplified reliance on unification of the Korean peninsula. Of course, even if the common problems of capitalism are being realized on the Korean peninsula, we need to note that when they do materialize on the Korean peninsula, they do so in face of the distinct reality of division and the unique division system, and because of this, it makes it difficult to compare such manifestations with those in other countries. However, I never thought division was the root of all

the problems. I have repeatedly said that the theory of division is not based on the idea that division is the root of all problems, but such claims will continue to be lodged in the future. (Laughter)

The Problem of the Combination of the Unification of the Korean Peninsula and the East Asian Order

Kim It appears that we will need to study more in-depth to refute your theory. (Laughs) I understand the situation wherein when you named the system “division system,” you really had no choice. Please allow me to ask you another question in a slightly different vein. You have stressed the need for a systematic perception of East Asia as the medium because the division system is incorporated into the sub-system of the global system through this medium of East Asia. And over the last twenty years, there has been a plethora of talks about the theory of East Asia. What is the intermediary role of East Asia between the division system and the global system? Should we not prioritize the relationship between the division system and the East Asian regional order rather than the global capitalist system?

Paik Let me then ask you a question. I had said that there is a division system on the Korean peninsula, which is on a different level than that of the global system, but do you think there is an East Asian system?

Kim I consider whether the East Asian system may be a fluid concept, but if East Asia emerged in our perspective after the fall of real socialism, rather than a solid geopolitical concept, I don’t know if the East Asian system will become solidified as an actual “system.”

Paik As I said before, I think there is freedom in using the term “system” if one defines it in one’s own way and uses it consistently and accurately. However, as for East Asia, I do not see that there is a regional order well established enough to call it a system yet. The Korean peninsula is complicated and geographically defined. There are also two nations on it, with surrounding context, and a basic functioning of the global system, which all contribute to the appropriate application of the term “system.” When it comes to East Asia, however, its bounds are unclear. For example, whereas we see China as a member of East Asia, the Chinese do not use the term East Asia much at all and instead rely on the term “Asia.” Then, there are many intellectuals who consider East Asia as limited to Northeast China. In fact, should the Xinjiang-Uygur region be considered part of East Asia, especially considering the region both culturally and geographically? China also shares its borders with South Asia. Even so, I think there is a good reason to treat China as East Asia, but I still do not think the term “system” is appropriate. So how much East Asia is intertwined in the discussion of the division system? As I said earlier, the division system is not a self-completing system. Moreover, it is not just a combinatory unit of two societies, namely South and North Korea, but a reality in which the global system operates in and around the Korean peninsula. To address this, humanities scholars sometimes use the word “text”—it is not a fixed mass, but a kind of text. If a “text,” then the surrounding powers and the nations are naturally involved. We have to judge by case and by time period which region in East Asia is involved and the extent of the impact.

Kim So, despite the fact that there is, of course, a mediatory nature of East Asia, there is nothing to call an East Asian system vis-à-vis the global system?

Paik There is definitely a communal context or a regional order in East Asia, though sometimes it is referred to as “regional disorder.” What is clear is that we cannot discuss the division system without considering the communal context and the regional order. In addition, we cannot find a way to overcome the division system without such considerations. As such, I view it as only natural to think about and research East Asia and to interact and unite within East Asia.

Kim Now that you’ve mentioned it, what do you think the role of East Asia is when you talk about what we need to pursue in terms of the process or goal vis-à-vis what you call “unification as the present progressive” and a multi-state?

Paik The perspective that moving toward a multi-state rather than a single-state is inevitable is primarily concerned with the unification of the Korean peninsula. Though a colony, North and South existed as one unified nation until 1945. Before becoming a colony, Korea, though not a modern nation-state, had maintained a single political system for a long time. As such, when most people on the Korean peninsula were liberated in 1945, they sought to build a unified nation, but were thwarted. Since it has already been more than seventy years, it is practically impossible for the two Koreas to merge into a single nation dreamt of at the time, and there is also the question of the appropriateness of such unification. Of course, one could argue that though initially impossible and undesirable, single-state unification is ultimately the goal. However, I don’t think it is the single-state, in other words a modern independent nation with its particular sovereignty, is the ideal political form that people are now pursuing. In that sense, we could leave the form as an option should the people of the Korean peninsula decide later that they prefer unification via achieving a single-state, but at the moment, it may be better to stop insisting on this

form. I believe it right to pursue different forms such as federation or union before seeking to become a single-state. Beyond the context of the Korean peninsula, even from the perspective of countries surrounding East Asia, the single-state may be viewed as undesirable. There are those who are reluctant about unification, but they can usually tolerate the unification through loose bonds. However, they, particularly Japan, will be extremely wary of unification beyond such limitation. And since there is the problem of ethnic Korean-Chinese in Korea, China would not want such a unified nation situated across from its northeastern region. Since the U.S. is far away and powerful, it may support a pro-American single-state that puts pressure upon China, but the more the U.S. supports such a state, the more Russia and China will despise the single-state. All of these are the reasons that I believe we should start with a very loose union and gradually increase the degree of unity.

Overcoming the Division System and Clues for the Unification Movement

Kim I would like to continue with your inquiries about the theory of division system. There is the theory of reduction of division in the position challenging your theory, but there has also been criticism that all problems in our society, such as regionalism and sexism, have been attributed to the division system. What are your thoughts on this issue?

Paik I don't know. (Laughs) Isn't there a variety of reasons for such problems as regionalism and sexism? When we attempt to historicize them, we must first find such elements in our own tradition, but I do not agree with unconditionally attributing sexism, for example, to Confucian patriarchy. Confucian

patriarchalism posited numerous problems, but it was not as hypocritical as today's sexism. As such, we have to look for the origin within our history and present a vision to overcome it. We also have to examine it critically to establish our position. Next, sexism is rampant throughout the world, not just in Korea, though to different extents. This is why I think sexism is related to the essential nature of the global capitalist system. The start of the capitalist modern era put into motion manifestation of ideas such as equality of all people, egalitarianism before the law, gender equality, and so on. For example, though it took an extremely long time for women to vote, now women's suffrage is legally recognized and the ideology of gender equality is advocated in virtually all modern nations. But I also suspect that it will take even longer for the ideology to be manifest in the future. It appears that there is an inherent contradiction between ideologies and the essential nature of capitalism, so these are problems that capitalism cannot solve. In any case, we have to try, and as long as the problems are not resolved within the global system, they are bound to affect our society, apart from the question of the source of such problems in our own tradition. But what I want to emphasize here is that in our response, we need to be mindful of how the reality of the division system functions as a medium in the process of adjoining our traditions with the problems of the global system, and that we must figure out exactly which aspects are transformed, distorted, and even deteriorated. I have talked about this intermittently. I have also said we should not define Confucian patriarchy as the sole source of sexism in our society. However, I am cautious because I know that I run the risk of being accused of defending patriarchy. I don't have expertise in that arena, however, so I haven't engaged in full-fledged discussions.

Kim What do you think about the textbook claim that it is nationalism and Korean-ethno-centrism to argue that we should move toward the theory of world peace as a universal concept but begin with the theory of division system at its center?

Paik Well, you don't agree with the argument that discussion of the division system excludes such general universal problems, do you?

Kim Oh, of course. (Laughs)

Paik For example, if we want to know how the problem of sexism in the division system specifically appears, then we should examine it closely, considering the specific context of Korean society and the historical period in which it manifests. In collaborating on such research, colleagues may criticize that I seem to be less interested in women's or human rights issues because I am fixated on the problem of division; in such a case, I can engage in conversations with the critics to confirm whether that is true. I could even eventually agree with them, or explain in detail my position. However, if those same critics accuse me of neglecting general human rights issues, then I would rather ignore such an accusation (laughs) and focus on my work.

Kim Yes, that's right. Let's move on to the next question. You said that the division system is not working merely on political, military levels, but sickening our minds and bodies, and that we need to cultivate the "Wisdom of the Middle Way," or a kind of centrist wisdom. Can such centrist wisdom overcome the scars, social psychology, and irrational hatred that are imprinted physically and psychologically on South and North Koreans?

Paik I don't know if I used the term "Wisdom of the Middle Way." I have said the "Middle Way" and "wisdom,"

but separately. The concept of the “Middle Way” is inherently tied to the same concept in Buddhism as well as to the mediality of Confucianism. However, as you know, it doesn’t mean that there is a specific middle path in all situations. Rather, it means that there is no bias in the pursuit of truth or morality. It’s not easy to actually know what the “Middle Way” is. In Buddhism, the way Nāgarjuna preaches the “Middle Way” is not to tell the disciples the specifics of the “Middle Way,” but to deconstruct the that which is not the “Middle way.” Rather than asking what the “Middle Way” is, we should consider what deviates from the “Middle Way” to practice the “Middle Way” to achieve the ultimate goals. Wisdom also encompasses many different meanings; wisdom is often referred to as practical wisdom, or as subterfuge, in a negative sense. However, the original Buddhist meaning of wisdom is the brightness that emerges naturally when one realizes the “Way (Tao)” properly or learns the truth.

As such, it would be more accurate to say that the “Middle Way,” or the center, is not apart from wisdom, rather than use the term the “Wisdom of the Middle Way.” In terms of the study of the mind, actually, religious people who engage in such study sometimes only understand it as a discipline apart from the corporeal. However, isn't it fundamental for Zen monks to discipline their bodies through meditation? Study of the mind should always mean physical and mental training. I am highly interested in Won Buddhism, and in Won Buddhism, central to the study of the mind is a concept called “Chŏng,” or rectification/equanimity and the cultivation of the mind toward this end; at the same time, it focuses on examination of the logic of all things as well as practice. Examination of the logic of all things includes not only the understanding of such logic, but the production and study of knowledge, which is largely rejected by Zen Buddhism. In addition, the

fruit of all of this is the practice of such understanding in choosing between justice and injustice. These are the so-called “Three Great Powers,” and studying equipped with these “Three Great Powers” is called the study of the mind. That’s why if we study our minds properly on said level, I think we may be able to solve the problems that you, Professor Kim, mentioned earlier as well as other problems of our reality. Otherwise, study of the mind focused solely on the mental will naturally be criticized, as the individualist element of such a study appears unlikely to solve the problems of division and the gap between the rich and the poor, for example. But as I said before, to study the mind properly, to walk the “Middle Way” with proper wisdom, is to solve such problems in reality.....

Kim The Process of Practice!

Paik Yes, it’s the process of practice. Then, the question of how to practice arises, but existing by studying with such questions in mind is itself the study of the mind.

Civic-Participation Unification

Kim Now that you’ve talked about the transformation of Korean society, is it all right to view the citizenry as one of the agents of the transformation?

Paik Who is not a citizen? (Laughs) There are many meanings of “citizens,” and in Korea, citizens are generally recognized as those who have citizenship. But when I use the word “citizens,” I think of the citizens and residents who exercise their rights as the sovereigns of a nation. Therefore, I sometimes use the term “people on the Korean peninsula” instead. However, there are many on the Korean peninsula who have different nationalities, who also have the right to be treated as

human beings where they reside, whether they are actual citizens or not. If they are deeply involved in the discussion of unification, it can become almost a fantasy novel, but in the sense that they can participate in the future and contribute to the decision in this society and the entire Korean peninsula in the process of moving toward a better society, it is more appropriate to refer to them as residents rather than citizens. And then, to add to the transformative centrism (“Middle way”), isn’t it not common sense to understand transformation and the “Middle Way” as opposite concepts? You used the word “hierarchy” earlier, but depending on the hierarchies of concepts, the extent to which they can be applied differs. Transformation is applicable to the Korean peninsula, and the “Middle Way” concerns our South Korean society. When not used in the religious sense, but rather used as a political path, the “Middle Way” is a concept centered on the South Korean society. Transformation and the “Middle Way” together argue that the Korean peninsula should be transformed into a better system, and in the process, a large-scale reform by the majority of South Korean society, which excludes various forms of extremism, should be carried out simultaneously.

- Kim Professor Paik, that is exactly my understanding. It’s a Korean-peninsula-style unification driven by civic participation, and transformative centrism (“Middle Way”)—that the term “transformation” is about transforming the division system of the Korean peninsula, and the “Middle Way” is about the participation and expansion of a wide range of centrist forces.
- Paik Yes, primarily within South Korea.
- Kim Yes, I will organize your thoughts along those lines. However, because the division system has been subconsciously imprinted on the majority of South Korean citizens, the main agent of unification is claimed

to be citizens, but sometimes the same citizens think that unification is unnecessary.

Paik On the one hand, because the South Korean society is inured to the division system, it takes division for granted. On the other hand, the reality of division is unacceptable and is believed should be changed, but unification cannot be imagined. This is because what the proponents of simplistic unification argue is fantastic and absurd. It's just not possible. Such inherent contradictions cannot gain popular support from the public. As such, I think that within the unification movement, we should reflect on ourselves and change the concept of unification, and realize that being inured to the division is common amongst not just everyday people, but also academics—at times even more so in the latter. That's why I use the term “Acquired Division Recognition Deficiency Syndrome,” which I think is extremely severe in our academic world. (Laughs)

Kim Scholars have many such factors (laughs).

Paik Yes, I think it is more common amongst scholars.

Kim Professor Paik, we always keep unification in mind, but I see post-unification also deserves much consideration. So I'm thinking about how to bring up the concerns for post-unification of Korea in a timely manner, so I would deeply appreciate your advice.

Paik I once used the term “unification era” even though it was a period of strict division. It is not just rhetoric about the importance of unification; rather it partly means that the reality of the unification era is growing within the era of division. In addition—and you mentioned unification and post-unification—if the concept of unification is even slightly altered, it is not easy to distinguish unification from post-unification. In the same vein, as the distinction between unification and post-unification is not easy, it is difficult to

distinguish between unification and pre-unification. Following the June 15 Joint Declaration, the October 4 Declaration was issued in 2007, and I think that the first stage of unification would not have been a distant reality if the subsequent implementation of the declarations had been carried out. The North is talking about a low-level federal system, but I think a national union comes first. In addition, there are high-level unions and low-level unions, and even a low-level union connotes the process of unification that has entered an irreversible phase. We have not reached this yet. Entering that phase can be called unification, and any stage thereafter, post-unification. However, if the first stage of unification is only the beginning of a long unification process, then the second stage of unification, which connotes a higher level of unity, is not post-unification, but still part of the unification process; it can even be understood as pre-unification. In any case, if we assume gradual, phased unification, we need not worry too much about post-unification, which will occur after that long process. On the contrary, it may be more prudent to engage in considering, with the framework broadened to the global system, how the transformation of the current global system, which precipitated and has maintained the division of the Korean peninsula but is impermanent, will unfold and the types of choices that will be made.

Kim Finally, the Institute of the Humanities for Unification to which I belong is concerned with overcoming the division and achieving unification on the level of the humanities. While not too long ago, considering unification on the humanities level was uncommon, but now many people seem to sympathize with and recognize it. I would like to ask your advice on the significance of unification on the humanities level and ways in which our perspectives can be improved.

Paik In fact, I did write about this before, but I view as the same the integrated and practical social sciences and

the humanities in its original meaning. As such, I think it's against the spirit of the humanities to separate what the scholars in the humanities do from what the social scientists do. As such, exchanges amongst people are important, but I think that the humanities scholars should cultivate themselves with the perception that their work covers the social sciences. When I say this, some people say, "Well, I am already extremely busy with my own major; now I have to be involved in the social sciences, too?" (Laughs) I don't mean humanities scholars must be knowledgeable in all subjects; I mean that they should move toward a convergent and integrated approach and subsequent research should be carried out based on such an approach.

Kim I will treasure your advice. Professor Paik, I would like to thank you again and again for sharing your valuable time. Thank you so much.