

Global Humanities, Re-envisioned Globally

The University under Siege: The Corporate Culture and the Fate of the Humanities in Korea

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S1

Introduction

Now we all know what problems the humanities have been facing in higher education globally. Since I am the only participant from the Asian region, I would like to contribute to the discussion by introducing a case of Korea where the humanities are suffering from the same kind of crisis that is more destructive and more outrageous in its expression than in other countries.

I started my teaching career as a tenure track professor 17 years ago, exactly when the Korean government began to implement a project to “reform” higher education in Korea according to the principle of neo-liberalism. Since then, all those problems we know only too well such as the ranking system of universities, competition for more money and more prestige, and as a natural consequence, the marginalization of the humanities have been brought about, which, I think, are all precisely reflected in my own career as a professor of English. So I, myself, am a witness to the radical changes that have taken place in the Korean higher education landscape and perhaps a main victim as well.

I always wanted to be a literary scholar or an intellectual, equipped with a literary wisdom attained only by reading literary texts, just like the “Pedlar,” the narrator of *The Ruined Cottage*, a poem by William Wordsworth. Perhaps I always wanted to spread my own expressions of such wisdom all over the world like Percy Bysshe Shelley did in his “Ode to the West Wind.” But the university always wanted me to be something else. First of all, it wanted me to be more an English teacher than a scholar of English Literature. So I started my administrative career as the coordinator of the university’s General English program which was soon followed by the associate deanship of the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation. I was always under great pressure to compete for academic projects where I have been more or less successful, and the culmination of such career as a fund-seeker was the directorship of Brain Korea 21 project which I am going to explain more in detail in the later part of my presentation. Such an administrative trajectory in my professional career has brought me to my current position as the chief PR person of my university, a major role of which, if I may so describe it rather cynically, is selling the educational program of my university in the global education market.

When I reflect upon my career for the past 17 years, there has always been a very clear message from the university administration, which is, “the scholarship of English Poetry is basically useless, and prove your utility instead in more practical ways such as being an English teacher or a project manager or a university administrator.” Now I realize that my problem is not just uniquely mine but more or less a story of all humanities scholars in corporatized institutes of higher learning in and out of Korea. I may not represent all Korean scholars in the humanities, but surely am a typical case of predicament of a literature professor living in a society based on market economy. Therefore, the presentation I am going to give today will be informed by my own experiences of Korean universities I have had both as a student and as a professor.

Global Humanities, Re-envisioned Globally

S3

-Korean Universities and the Corporatization of Higher Education

We all know well that the problems of the humanities are related to the principle of capitalist economy where all the activities are evaluated by the profit they make. It is basically a Benthamite viewpoint from which all human activities are measured by their utility for society. In Korea, former president Kim Young Sam, once a freedom fighter, announced a blueprint to make Korea's higher education more efficient and more productive, on May 31, 1995 which, I think, was the starting point of all the problems.

S4

What happened afterwards is well known to us all in Korea: many universities came to behave more like companies than institutions of higher learning. University presidents became more like CEOs of companies, fund-raising being their primary objective. Professors were driven into keener competition with each other for more research funds and for more published articles. Tenured positions became more and more tenuous and contingent upon "academic" productivity. Universities became more like vocational schools whose main objective is to produce workers for industries rather than fostering intellectually enlightened and socially responsible members for the global society. Competition became the single most important slogan for all the institutions of higher education. The humanities subjects such as history, philosophy, and literature, as a consequence, become more and more irrelevant to students, more a financial burden to the management of universities.

Let me take three examples to show how quickly and how comprehensively such a reform swept across Korean universities, and how seriously damaging their side effects have been to all the members of universities.

S5

On March 18, 2010, a Korea University junior in the Department of Management announced her voluntary withdrawal from the university because she said, "there is no truth, no friendship, and no justice" any more at the university. Students drop out of universities all the time of course, but this case was especially noteworthy because Korea University is one of the top universities in Korea, and her major was management, the most popular major among students these days. She declared her intentions publicly through what we call a "one man protest," the only form of demonstration that can be done without a prior permission from the authorities in Korea. It was intended as an open denunciation of the educational reform that has been carried out over the last 15 years. It was a dramatic action indeed, making an unignorable impact on the members of universities, reminding them of what higher education should be in the first place.

S6

Second example involves the recent suicides of three KAIST University students. KAIST is a national institute established to cultivate future leaders in science and technology, and provides all its students with 100 % government scholarship. It accepts only 800 students a year, all of whom are academically within the upper 0.1-0.2% of the whole student population in Korea. Students suicides are not unique to KAIST of course, but these recent suicides were particularly disconcerting because they were carried out in three months time with more or less the same reason: a new tuition system introduced by the university president Suh Nam Pyo, a former MIT professor who strongly believes that a good academic

Global Humanities, Re-envisioned Globally

performance came from an unlimited competition among the students, perhaps more efficiently with a financial motivation. He introduced a system in which students with poor grades are excluded from the benefit of the government scholarship. President Suh, with his professional background as a successful MIT professor, was initially applauded as the very icon of university reform in Korea, but now is criticized as the inventor of an inhuman, albeit efficient, education system. He was pressured to resign his presidency immediately, but he refused, insisting that what was wrong was students' lack of strong will, not his system. After much controversy, he compromised a bit, but did not withdraw his Gradgrind system. Professor Suh was able to keep his job in the end thanks to another wave of student protests concerning university tuition, redirecting the public attention away from him and to an issue which has now become the hottest political agenda in the country.

S7

University students in Korea are now demanding that the government cut their tuition in half, which was in fact part of President Lee's campaign platform and which he conspicuously buried once he took office. It was indeed a part of his populist slogan to gain support from the younger generation of Koreans. But the tuition problem was not brought up on the surface until a new leader of congressmen in the leading party raised the issue again to prepare the next election. Recently, however, this issue came to light again as the leader of ruling Grand National Party called on the Lee administration to revisit this issue, a strategic move on to prepare for the next general election. This triggered the submerged anger of the university students who organized a massive protest at the Seoul city square calling on the government to keep its promise to halve college tuition. Such a demand, however, cannot be realistically met without an overall readjustment of the government budget, which cannot happen within the current budget system. Furthermore, increasing the educational budget to make the university education more affordable to the general public is contradictory to the whole idea of the university reform they have been carrying out the last 15 years. This is the reason why the ruling party recently passed an act with which Seoul National University, which is not only No 1 university in Korea but also the symbol of public higher education in the country, could be corporatized to become an independent body with supposedly increased efficiency and more importantly with more prospect of increasing the revenue from the private sector.

All three episodes from Korea's higher education scene are slightly different in background and context, but they all do have one thing in common: the frustration and anger of the student population about the reality of higher education brought about by the university reforms rooted in the neoliberal principle of capitalist economy. Through their desperate measure of resistance, the students are demanding the recovery of public education to universities. And I believe such a recovery of the idea of public education to the higher education is also absolutely essential to the reinstatement of the humanities as the backbone of university education.

S8

- The Growth of Democracy in Korea and the Idealism of Universities

Let me talk about a little bit of the universities in the past, the universities as I knew them, perhaps the kind of the universities you experienced in the sixties in Europe. As far as I know, Korean students were always very much politically awakened and involved, making significant contributions to the democratization of Korea. Going back to 1908, two years

Global Humanities, Re-envisioned Globally

before the Japanese colonization of Korea, my own grandfather, who was then a student of Applied Chemistry in the first school of western natural sciences in Korea, was expelled from school because of a rally he tried to organize against the Japanese teachers and their collaborators. The March 1 Uprising of 1919 to regain sovereignty of Korea from the Japanese is perhaps a pinnacle example of a student-led movement organized and led primarily by students, most notable of whom was Ryu Kwan Soon, a high school student who attended the first girls' school in Korea, the Ewha School, the predecessor of the current Ewha Womans University.

S9

Most importantly, the student revolution of April 19, 1960 became the most decisive moment for the development of Korean democracy. Lee Seung Man, the first president of liberated Korea, who had an ambition of becoming the permanent president of the country, had to step down as a result of students' brave resistance.

S10

Since then, Korean students were always at the forefront of resistance against the military regime such as the one headed by President Park Chung Hee, who was assassinated by one of his assistants in 1979.

S11, S12

Even during another military government led by one of President Park's men, university students continued to challenge the autocratic system and to sacrifice their lives for the advancement of democracy in Korea.

S13

In that respect, then, universities have not only provided a major venue for political movements in Korea, but more importantly, an intellectual breeding ground, fostering a sense of social justice and critical thinking in students, which have been the fundamental driving force behind the democratization movement in Korea. It has been the humanities that has provided the democracy fighters with weapons of their ideological struggle. Up until very recently, universities in Korea were generally respected as the main think tank of cultural wisdom and social conscience, making a lot of contributions to the achievement of democracy in Korea. The humanities, being the main component of academic idealism, was not only centrally located in the academic geography in the old days, but also very much appreciated as the one and only discipline that is of great "utility" in the advancement of Korean society. .

S14

- The IMF Crisis and its ramifications for the Humanities

Achieving a democratic political system, however, was not the end of the story. It rather marked a beginning of a new problem, a problem more sinister and more ominous to the humanities.

S15

Just after, Kim Dae Jung, a long time freedom fighter and the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, was elected president in 1998, most Koreans believed that autocratic regimes were things of the past, and only a real democratic society based on the principles of social justice

Global Humanities, Re-envisioned Globally

was awaiting in their future. As soon as Kim Dae Jung took office, however, an abrupt collapse of the national credit grade of Korea brought about a sudden shortage of foreign currency, pushing the country to the brink of a moratorium. Korea had no option but to accept an emergency loan from the IMF on condition that Korean economy open itself to transnational finance capital including all kinds of Hedge Funds. The IMF loan was paid back quickly enough, within two years time with the united effort of all Korean people, but the IMF requirements could not be undone even after the end of the IMF crisis. This meant that the Korean economy now became irrevocably a part of the global economy. What the IMF crisis reminded the Korean government was of the ruthlessness of the global money market and that no government, whether it be democratically elected or not, could maintain itself without accepting the logic of global capitalism. From that moment, productivity became the most important objective in formulating all government policies and its educational policy was not an exception.

S15

-The Crisis of the Humanities in Korea I: Corporate Culture permeated in the Universities

The humanities in Korea are therefore in a dire situation. Their social utility is challenged not only by the industries which now practically dominate all aspects of Korean society but also by the like-minded university officials. It is because the humanities do not translate into many jobs for students, much funding opportunities for professors, and much donations for the university presidents. Let me illustrate the situation by mentioning a couple of facts:

First, Kwang Woon University recently invited a former CEO of Korea Telecom as its president. Do you know the first thing he did after he took his office? He abolished the College of Humanities. It was as simple as that.

S16

Second, SungKyunKwan University, arguably the oldest university in Korea, inheriting its name from the Confucius Institute of Chosun Dynasty, has recently created a new department called the "Department of Mobile Phone" under a special collaborative agreement with Samsung which bought the university a couple of years ago. Doosan, another Korean conglomerate, made accounting a compulsory class in the "reformed" core curriculum at Chung Ang University which they took over a few years ago.

S17

The problem is, there is no hesitation, no qualm, no sense of shame in doing such things. Nowadays no one wants to be the enemy of big companies such as Samsung and Doosan because they are the providers of students' future dream jobs, the source of professors' research money, and the major donors in the presidents' fund raising campaigns. I mentioned earlier that the situation was dire because such a corporate culture has already been deeply internalized in the minds of all university members who do not mind collaborating with companies and even actively seek such opportunities with their own initiatives. A voluntary collaboration, I would say. The humanities are threatened not only by the downright criticism of their utility from the outside, but also from their own voluntary capitulation to the logic and power of global capitalism.

- The Crisis of the Humanities in Korea II: Pernicious Effects of Government Financial Support based on an Evaluation System.

Global Humanities, Re-envisioned Globally

The crisis of the humanities does not necessarily mean the elimination of the humanities related departments. What is more threatening than the abolition of a couple of departments is the disintegration of their distinctive identity in the landscape of academic disciplines and the destruction of their unique academic conventions that had been taken for granted and reflected in the infrastructure of the modern academic system. My argument is that the government financial support sometimes can be more destructive to the humanities in the long run than a downright criticism or a gracious ignorance. The Korean government has not simply “whip” universities but also have lured them with “carrots” which of course have been their financial support.

There have always been the government subsidies to the higher education in Korea without which no university could possibly survive. The education budget, however, is still the same, but they now want to distribute the money based on a so called “merit” based scheme. The government wants to inject a fair amount of competition into the educational milieu, in which the organization with more productivity gets more money. The principle of selection and concentration was indiscriminately introduced in the government subsidy scheme for higher education, which has resulted, quite predictably, in life-and-death competition among the universities to get a bigger piece of the pie.

Some of you may say that competition is inevitable in a society based on free market economy and that it is fair and appropriate for a government to give favor to universities with more “productivity.” But this begs these two questions: Question 1: Is competition always appropriate in higher education? Question no 2: How can we define and measure productivity of an academic discipline? We all know the standard answer to each question and I do not have to reiterate the same old story. But let me take two examples regarding these questions. Question No1. regarding the competition for the research grant.

S18

Some of you may remember a scandal involving a Korean scientist who was also a professor at Seoul National University and who specialized in Stem Cell Technology. His name is Hwang Woo Suk and was once considered one of the pioneering experts in the field. You may also remember that Professor Hwang fabricated some of his results in his “epoch making” research and was soon the focus of one of the largest investigations of scientific fraud in recent history. His papers were retracted by the journals, *Nature* and *Science*, and he was eventually convicted on criminal charges. He was prosecuted and sentenced to be guilty in the end. It was a national shame and still remains a nightmare for all the scientists in Korea. What is less known about Hwang’s case, however, is the fact that he actually was one of the best researchers in the field, and his unabashed argument that his results would have become a reality if he had been given an extra 6 months for research.

My intention is not to advocate him by any means, but I want to note that he was under an enormous pressure to present his results to the government, which had decided to appoint him as the very first “National Scientist”(a scientific version of the poet laureate), allocating a large sum of special research fund to him based upon the principle of “selection and concentration.” Such a special measure was taken with a belief that his research had a great potential of immediate commercialization, translating into a lot of money from the global market of medicine. Against such a backdrop of the national get-rich-quick fantasy, Hwang’s unethical and illegal practice of getting human eggs from the commercially motivated donors,

Global Humanities, Re-envisioned Globally

his monopoly of research fund, most importantly his anti-academic, or business friendly style of research which views scientific research as a money-making instrument, were all ignored, overlooked, and condoned until his unethical, unscientific methods were publically revealed.

Do you know who disclosed Hwang's deception in the first place? It was a group of young Korean Ph D students of biochemistry working together on their website called BRIC which challenged the announced results of Hwang's research. They were not wavered by the government celebration of Hwang's research and the growing expectation that Hwang would eventually be nominated as a candidate for the next Nobel Prize in Chemistry. I think that it was one of very rare occasions where truth seeking science prevailed over money seeking research, which is to my mind a very strong case showing that competition is not a panacea for research in higher education. It is the case with the natural science, but even more so with the humanities.

Question No 2. How can we define and measure productivity of an academic discipline? We all know the problems with quantity based assessment when indiscriminately applied to all disciplines including the humanities. So let me take an example from my own experiences as the director of a government funded project to illustrate how such a scheme is fundamentally unsuitable and damaging to the humanities.

Back in 2005, the English Department of Ewha Womans University which I belong to applied for the government research initiative called Brain Korea 21, and we were lucky enough to be selected one of the five graduate programs in the category of foreign language and literature. We received a total of 3.5 million dollars over 7 academic years based on a competitive scheme in which we had to pass an annual research assessment. Every two years, one of the five teams that scored the lowest was dropped, replaced by a new team selected out of another round of competition. I was the first director of the project and served for three years. I can tell you all day long about what I went through as the director, what I had to do to stay in the scheme in such a ridiculous, but still dead serious survival game. But let me tell you only two things that annoyed me most.

First, the evaluation format they formulated was entirely quantity-based, comparing what cannot be compared in the first place. English literature and Japanese linguistics, for example, are different not only in language but also in methodology and theoretical underpinnings. Still they insisted, and still insist, on comparing the two projects based on, for example, the number of articles published in the journal listed in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index. How on earth can scholars of Japanese Linguistics publish their articles in A & HCI journals which are mainly a collection of academic journals published in English?

Second, the evaluation format was basically modeled on that of natural sciences with the assumption that all research projects are carried out more or less in a similar manner. For example, they encourage all kinds of collaborations: collaborative research of professors and students, collaborative participation of international conferences, collaborative activities with related industries. I have never heard of a joint publication in the literary research, nor any joint presentations. Which company would want to do a collaborative work with a Wordsworth scholar like myself? They are basically the practices for the natural sciences or the social sciences, not those of the humanities. But this survival game has continued on without allowing any reasonable discussions with the humanities scholars.

Global Humanities, Re-envisioned Globally

What I am trying to tell you is simply that the academic practices of natural sciences were outrageously imposed upon the humanities and such a violent imposition was implemented with the “carrots” of financial support and the competitive evaluation scheme attached to it. You may think that this portrait of a crisis in education that I’ve just sketched for you is rather exaggerated, extreme, and limited to certain countries like Korea which does not have a strong established tradition of humanities scholarship. But if you recall Alan Sokal’s hoax in 1996, the fate of the humanities in other countries is not that much different from that of Korea. Ever since the science revolution in the 17th century, the Natural Sciences have always competed with the Humanities for honor of being the champion of truth in the academic world. Shelley defended the humanist knowledge by saying that “Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be,” the humanities have been playing a losing game, which was confirmed in the Sokal’s case in a rather humiliating way. Most recently, a professor of English cynically declared the virtual extinction of professorship in the humanities as we know it in the American higher education system, calling the last remnant of tenured professors in the humanities like himself as the “Last Professors” echoing the “last Mohicans” in the Indian Reservation.

S19

Conclusion: for the survival of the humanities in higher education

The humanities have to survive as an academic discipline, not just for ourselves, but for the future of mankind. As we all know, there is no quick and easy solution for that. The financial subsidies both from private and public sectors are of course indispensable for university survival. But I have already explained to you that the government subsidies could easily be combined with a requirement which the humanities cannot meet without disrupting their unique academic principles. Collaborations with industries are sometimes helpful, but we need to remember that companies make an investment only when there is a very good reason to do so. We, humanist scholars, sometimes naively expect CEOs of big companies to be pure philanthropists without demanding anything from us. We all know too that such an expectation is more often than not groundless in the harsh reality of capitalist economy. That is why I tend not to appreciate some initiatives from the humanities find a friend in the industries by convincing them of the use of the humanities in business. Steve Jobs’ celebration of the humanities as the prerequisite element in the creative design of Apple is indeed very encouraging to us all, but his comments were made in the context of defending the unique quality of Apple design and not intended as a proper apology for the academic disciplines in the humanities *per se*. We cannot rely on the pure good will of an industrialist for the future of our profession. We may need to adapt ourselves to the changing climate of higher education, which however does not necessarily mean that we have to borrow somebody else’s instruments to play our music. What I want to tell you as a colleague of the humanities scholarship working in a little different social context is that we need to defend our profession and our trade in our own terms. We need to restore the academic idealism to our university by reclaiming our role as the disciples of truth, the advocates of social justice, and the defenders of human values. Thank you.