Articles

The Humanities Studies Movement in South Korea: A Different Perspective on the "Crisis in the Humanities" and a Caution to Imagining Anti-Capitalist Community

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This paper aims to situate the implications of the Humanities Studies Movement in South Korea in the contexts of two global discourses that matter to leftist thinkers and actors. One is the so-called "crisis in the humanities" and the other is the wide range of efforts seeking to develop anti-capitalist markets under the rubric of commune, the commons, and community.[1] Mapping out either discourse is beyond the scope of this paper because each would be an ambitious project even for a study primarily dedicated to the project. This paper seeks rather a modest goal that is to think about intriguing aspects of a local phenomenon with an umbrella term of the Humanities Studies Movement (hereafter HSM). It seeks to prompt further thought and dialogue on the phenomenon and implications in the larger contexts of Korean local intellectual-social history and the global concerns of daily lives embedded in the capitalist market system.

In short, it points out, using ethnographic data, that the HSM might indicate invisible domains of valuing the humanities, and connects this finding to the vibrant intellectual-social histories of anti-state and/or anti-colonial movements. At the same time, engaging with a thought-provoking text, Mauricio Lazzarato's *The Making of the Indebted Men* (2011), it contemplates the limitations of idealizing community as a self-evident counter force to capitalist markets. These two aspects—the new domain of the humanities and the idealizing of community as anti-capitalist—are delineated as two independent facets of the HSM rather than as coherently integrated features, opening possibilities for further research in dialogue with an interested audience.

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1. "Commune" is a rather outdated notion for these efforts, and "commons" is a more contemporary notion used by leftist scholars (Hart and Negri 2009; Harvey 2013). Of course, there are other efforts under this rubric that do not use either of these terms (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Introduction to the Humanities Studies Movement and the Research Context

HSM became popular after the Asian financial crisis (1997-2001), emerging first in Seoul and spreading through the nation. The term refers to any group or community efforts that activate new or critical ways of thinking—mostly through reading and studying. More specifically, it refers to a phenomenon of popular readership or small study groups not necessarily affiliated with academic institutions that engage in a wide range of subjects from philosophy and literature (from both the "East" and "West"), to creation of theatre or children's picture books, to learning and practice of environment-and-tradition-friendly pedagogy, self-care, and community building. Members of HSM groups include those in normative family-work institutional structures, such as housewives, corporate workers, managers, youth, and the elderly. But the local intellectual leaders of HSM groups have also recruited socio-economically marginalized people, such as the homeless, the incarcerated, North Korean refugees, and sex workers, believing that the humanities are for everyone, not just for the elite, the educated, or the normative.

Readers familiar with Korean currents might have heard of Yôn'gu Kong'gan Suyu-Nômô (YKSN), a critical-thinking commune of self-directed intellectuals whose members published a book on how they study and spend their daily lives together (see Ko Mi-suk 2004), as well as many other individual and collective publications. Although the YKSN has now split into many smaller groups, when it first started up it rapidly became famous. YKSN's founding members' brilliance helped quench people's thirst for new worldviews on the left, for paradigms applicable to the everyday understanding of power or neighborhood activism, and distinct from the orthodox Marxism that supplied the theory and praxis for anti-dictatorship activism prior to the liberalization.

Key figures from YKSN and similar groups include Yi Chin-kyông (author of the 1980s book, *Sahoe Kusôngche Nunjaeng*, Social Formation Debates, which sees Korean capitalism as germinating under Japanese colonialism, a controversial idea among students activists at the time), Ko Pyông-kwôn (2003), and Ko Mi-suk (2003). They are all highly educated yet instead of focusing their time and efforts to produce and disseminate knowledge in academic institutions or in career building, they render knowledge as public intellectuals entertainment and leisure—a voluntary pursuit, rather than a mandatory or

institutional one. They are constantly exploring new territory, whether it be historical, philosophical, political, medical, or cultural. For example, these authors excavated and/or re-imagined Korean historic figures and intellectual thought from the 17th to 19th centuries, including *Pak Chi-wôn's Yôlhailgi* (the Jehol Diary) by Ko Mi-suk; and have translated and/or re-interpreted Western works by Delueze and Gattari, Derrida, Hardt, and Negri.[2] The new thinking of some of these figures, such as Yi and Ko—who were jailed as student activists in the 1980s—appears to differ from their past passion for orthodox Marxism and class movements.[3]

Less well known is that the HSM is widespread beyond these well-known study groups and figures, and not limited to metropolitan Seoul in terms of location. It has been steadfastly popular among urban un(der)employed youth, housewives, artists, and non-academic intellectuals since the Asian Financial Crisis spread to the middle and small cities in the first decade of the new millennium. This is puzzling, considering that it does not address matters of subsistence, which have become more and more challenging with the growing numbers of the new poor.[4]

The background of this paper is a pilot research project conducted in a city located in the South (hereafter the City) during late spring 2013. It involved interviewing twelve active members of local neighborhood networks who were directly or indirectly related to alternative market/currency movements. The research participants for the pilot research were introduced to me through personal

2. There are other important groups and figures, such as Chayul-pyôngnon (CYPN), led by Cho Chônghwan, who translated and wrote on Hardt and Negri's work and who popularized the notion of Cognitive Capitalism (*Inji chabonjuûi*); and Siwôl, whose members are translating other Italian autonomists (such as Marrazi and Mazzarato). Siwôl tends to focus on labor issues in connection to finance capital. Another influential thinker is Seo Dong Jin, who although he does not lead a group, is a significant figure in the map of HSM. See for example Seo's critical review of Cho's book, *Cognitive* Capitalism (in which Cho defends the universality of Marx's value theory) and Cho's response to Seo's review (in which he criticizes Seo as an outdated orthodox Marxist) in the *Pressian* (May and June 2011) and the many third parties' follow-up comments in blogs and on-line media.
3. I say "appears" because although predominant paradigms in the HSM are critical of orthodox Marxism, the HSM does not necessarily oppose or reject Marxism. Some HSM publications are even dedicated to reading Marx or reflecting on the Korean orthodox Marxist movement (see Yi Jin-kyông's revised book, *Society Formation Theory and Social Science Method*). The interview data in this paper also supports this ambivalence.
4. See Standing 2011 for the global context of people who are educated yet precarious in terms of employment and livelihood. See U and Pak 2007 for the context of South Korea.

acquaintances established through previous research. Half of the research participants have a background of vocations or activism in relation to education and childcare. The primary methods of the ethnographic research included interviews and participant observation in the location of the participants' work or activism. Except for two participants who are a young man and a young woman, the majority were women in their late forties to early fifties.[5] During this research period there was no evidence that the HSM groups in the City were in communication with mainstream HSM groups in Seoul, or reflecting on the works written by the main figures from Seoul HSM groups. However, a research participant I call the Art Teacher noted that she had visited other cities and Seoul to attend HSM group events in those areas.

Humanities Flourishing in a New Domain

The crisis in (or of) the humanities is an anxiety-provoking priority of Western academia and the educated public, who see the greatly reduced enrolment of students in the humanities as a sign of the neoliberal economy gradually becoming entrenched in higher education, and a resulting focus on an education that it is perceived will lead to specific job market opportunities (Greteman 2014; Gutting 2013; Tworek 2013; Hall 1990). The perception of a crisis in the humanities in Western academia is present not just in the general public and the mass media but a discourse that the author has witnessed first-hand in arts and sciences administrative meetings since early 2000s. South Korean academia is no exception. Although discussions about the crisis in and of the humanities (*inmunhak ûigi*) were more common in early 2000 than they are now, it is not because the situation is improving in the higher education institutions: rather decreasing enrolment in the humanities has become pandemic that is resulting in the disappearance of programs and threat of closures. In the case of South Korea, it is hard to reverse the direction not simply because of lack of interest in the humanities from the job market perspective, but because of the financial predicament of higher education institutions in general. The number of universities and colleges in South Korea

5. Although the HSM has groups comprised of younger participants, such as the youth humanities studies group and the young adults' artist social enterprise group, this paper focuses on the groups to which the majority of participants belong.

increased substantially after the liberalization, and most of them have been left to survive without any public support throughout the neoliberalizing period.

In this context, the HSM is a critical contest to the phenomenon of crisis in the humanities and a potential solution to the question of how to sustain the humanities. Indeed how to think of domains of the humanities beyond academia has been actively investigated in South Korea (Choi 2014; Yi 2004). As a doctoral student of Korean literature notes (Choi 2014), popularization of the HSM resulted from the explicit allocation of budget to support the HSM from the Ministry of the Education and Human Resources, beginning in 2007. This support is predicated upon the South Korean state's promotion of the creative economy as a central doctrine of its national platform. This "complicity" with neoliberal logic might explain why South Korean intellectuals involved in the HSM, have been hesitant to theorize the HSM as radical or revolutionary, and have distanced themselves from such a characterization. However, preliminary ethnographic findings from the City, a peripheral location, offer a different observation. The HSM is a site that provides a significant, if not awakening, influence of the humanities (and social sciences) in the lives of rank-and-file intellectuals. This paper sees the potential of the HSM operating as a terrain contesting the discourse and materiality of the "crisis in the humanities" by rendering the spatial boundary of the humanities beyond the territory of academia.

Significance of Local History

In order to understand the HSM's meaning for rank-and-file intellectuals in a peripheral location, it is important to trace the historical experience embodied by these intellectuals. In a way, the HSM is a vortex of renewed revolutionary subjectivity, especially for people who in the 1980s were part of Social Science Studies Groups (SSS), a key venue of anti-state and anti-capitalist activism. The HSM is a context where the collective memory or re-interpretation of SSS forms a new political subjectivity in contemporary South Korea.[6]

6. Although the HSM does not appear to be directly involved in political issues or in mobilizing political subjectivity, the popular discourses it produces, such as the debate between Seo and Cho, or the fact that Yi re-wrote *Social Formation Debate* with special sections on Marxism in response to Ko Pyông-kwôn, reveals that knowledge production in the rubric of the HMS is embedded in political meaning and experience from the past.

The research data reveal that each research participant went through major life changes through the self-reflexive processes generated by their involvement in the HSM. Their narratives also identify collective memories from the 1980s (when they were student activists or witnessed the potent challenge to state authority) as a source of their strength to make such critical life-changing decisions. Here is a detailed description of the Art Teacher's stories as a window through which we can connect the HSM and SSS.[7]

I met the Art Teacher one afternoon in the spring of 2013, in a quiet café tucked into a strip of businesses near a large university campus. The café was owned and run by followers of a local philosopher who identify themselves as an HSM group (*inmunhak kongbu moim*). They opened the café mainly to have a place for members to study and meet, although it was open to everyone. The art teacher looked young and fit for her age (late forties).

She was not shy but she sometimes had difficulty finding words to express herself. While throughout the interview her emotion was tightly controlled, she did not lose her gracious composure. I noticed that she had a passion for art and art education, and I was touched by her stories. I learned that she had quit her job as an art teacher at a middle-high school the year before. It was a job she had been devoted to for over two decades and quitting was not an easy decision.

She had been proud of her work, especially her success in motivating students' creativity and expression and gaining their trust. She had a child who was in the final year of high school, a time when Korean parents pay particular attention, financially and psychologically, in order to support their children to write their university entrance exams.[8] Although her husband was also working, she knew leaving her job would have a big impact on the support they could offer their child.

When she told her husband she planned to quit her job, he was infuriated, and accused her of being an irresponsible mother, so she postponed her decision

7. As an anonymous reader noticed, this paper does not elaborate on the differences between HSM and SSS so much as the connection between them. However, it is worth noting that the chief differences are the HSM focus on everyday life and the neighborhood vs. the SSS focus on class and the labor movement.

8. See Abelmann et al. 2012; Cho-Han 1997; Park 2011 for the ruthless competition for the entrance exams in South Korea, pressure for both children and parents, especially mothers, the thriving private after-school industry, and efforts to find alternatives.

until after a year of sick leave. Her colleagues, who found out at the last minute, tried their best to dissuade her, saying it was unwise to give up a secure job with an excellent pension plan when the job market was so depressed. She told me that she had expected these shocked responses, which was why she had waited to tell anyone she was quitting.

She told her husband that if he did not support her decision, she would get a divorce. She said to him that she literally could not breathe, and was unable to inhabit the space at her workplace. Her husband understood because he had witnessed her having similar symptoms at university, almost three decades earlier when they were student activists: she had lost her voice and could not speak for a year and she was so physically fragile she could not go to school. She reflected that in both cases, her bodily symptoms were psychosomatic reactions to unbearable injustice and suppression by the authorities. Her HSM colleagues urged her to listen to her inner voice and to liberate herself from the suffocating situation.

She noted how helpful her HSM network was in working through her decision to quit, which came with a revelation of a past memory. The HSM group she joined was held in the café where we met, and was made up of her former student comrades, who shared the history of rebelling against the authorities in the 1980s. She felt understood and supported by them not only for their philosophical interpretation of life, but for the fact that the group continued to be a reservoir of collective memory of what they went through together decades earlier and an ongoing reference point for her current suffering and seeking of a more meaningful life.

She pointed out the similarities between being active in an SSS and in an HSM:

> I sometimes think about whether SSS was really different from HSM. It [SSS] was not purely about studying social science methods. I remember we talked about philosophy, literature, and history all the time, which means SSS was inclusive of humanities as well. Both SSS and HSM, we talked about everything to do with reality and how to change it, including [how to change] myself. We do not have that rigorous and soul-searching space and time anywhere else.

For the art teacher, the intense communal space of SSS and HSM—affective as much as intellectual—functioned in the same way to help her deal with her psychosomatic symptoms.

As the Art Teacher's notes, the humanities part of the HMS is not exclusive of the social sciences, despite the fact that the two appeared to be oppositional or mutually exclusive during the height of student activism in the 1980s when social sciences was key and the humanities were downplayed. As some of the narratives in this paper show, the notion of humanities in the HMS is rather a kind of post-structuralist understanding that goes beyond a dichotomy between the humanities and the social sciences.

In many ways, the HSM is operating as a tacit venue for the formation of a new political subjectivity; new in the sense of being renewed, not in the sense of an original creation. The HSM, despite using "culture" as its face and essence, provides a domain that incubates 1980s collective memory and allows a re-interpretation of the revolutionary experience and particularly of SSS. It is a re-mobilization of mobilized collective memory. As Namhee Lee (2009) notes, the *minjung* movement, the leftist student movement against the military state and imperialism in the 1980s, is itself a mobilization of collective memory of resistance against Japanese colonialism during the early 20th century.

A core issue in the SSS, called the Social Formation Debate (*saguche nonjaeng*), was about how to theorize the capitalist development of the Korean agricultural mode of production under Japanese colonialism and later US neocolonialism (Shin 2002, 372; Yi 2008, 16). Given the 1980s effort to interpret and deploy the collective memory and experience of the early twentieth century, the current tracking down of 1980s memory and experience is a re-mobilization of double layers of collective memories and a testing of their relevance in the here and now.

Other research participants' involvement in the HSM and its influence on them are similar to the Art Teacher's. The Daycare Worker, the Housewives' Philosopher, the Community Library Director, and the Alternative Currency Activist belong to different HSM groups in the City and do not know each other. Considering that the interviewees frequently commented that their city was "not very big" (their reference of comparison is Seoul), the fact that they did not know each other offers a glimpse of the magnitude and diversity of the HSM. They revealed their identification or association with HSM voluntarily, without prompting. My interviews with them were not about HSM, but stories of the influence of HSM on their lives arose from their own passionate accounts of their primary activities and work. The Art Teacher belongs to a couple of groups, including a local study group with a philosopher whose followers

opened a café; a local art teachers' group organizing exhibitions and performing arts outside school activities; and a national art students' network that attends art theory lectures.

The Housewives' Philosopher also belongs to—or is constantly creating—multiple groups and networks, including a social enterprise project sponsored by the city, a photo album project for stranded elders in a post-war refuge on a deserted island, a children's photo book group, and an East-West classic philosophy reading group. The Alternative Currency Activist's small neighborhood group initially gathered to study aboriginal medicine and healing methods using herbs, tea, and acupuncture in order to counter the pharmaceutical industry and government policy that supports exploitive medicine distribution. The Community Library Director and the Daycare Worker at first did not seem to directly identify with HSM but the way they describe how to mobilize people or how they meet the right people through "cultural connection" or "pleasure of culture" is rhetoric consistent with HSM discourse.

The ways in which these research participants revealed how HSM influenced their lives are diverse but consistent. The Art Teacher's decision to quit her job was affirmed through the space of her philosophy HSM. The Alternative Currency Activist saw her HSM network as the matrix for putting an alternative currency ideal into action, in spite of the perceived impossibility of challenging the capitalist currency system. Similarly, the Housewives' Philosopher considered her appreciative and creative HSM network to be the way to survive and contest the capitalist market without becoming discouraged. The Community Library Director regarded her community network that appreciated culture as the key to changing the rigid educational bureaucracy and the conservative political ambience, and the Daycare Worker identified her HSM affiliation as the only place to rest and restore strength to fight against the exploitive daycare and care labor market. All the interviewees seemed to consider the HSM as a space for brewing and exercising social and political change. Their devotion to HSM is linked to their memories and experience of the 1980s student movements, including the SSS.

However shy or private they were about revealing their past, especially what took place during the era of scandals and accusations of corruption, sell-outs, and compromises by former student activists (i.e., *sam-pal-yuk saede*), the power of solidarity and collective action to make revolution was constant for

them.

The story of the Kwangju citizens' commune that was formed during the military quarantine of Kwangju and was destroyed in a state massacre is still vividly narrated as a symbol of community against US imperialism and the authoritarian state. The Art Teacher, for example, still commemorates May 18, the anniversary of the Kwangju commune massacre, by organizing skits and theatrical performances, especially with and for the younger generation who have not heard the history or experienced political revolution. In short, the idea of community and self-transformation connects HSM to SSS as a vortex of renewed revolutionary subjectivity. This remarkable connection that renders the influence of the humanities (and the social sciences) alive beyond academia may not be unique to South Korea, yet it is an example of a rich social and intellectual history of collective struggle against a colonial power and a repressive state that tacitly regenerates revolutionary subjectivity.

Iterations of Community in the Left

Once acknowledging the potential for carving out new terrain for the humanities in the HSM, it seems useful to look at HSM in relation to another phenomenon—that of community. In South Korean political history the notion of community is an emblematic marker of successful struggles against state authority, colonial legacy, capitalist corporations, and the neoliberal market, making community much revered, if not sanctified.[9] The question here is whether or not the reiteration of community is self-evidently non-capitalistic (because it shares, co-owns, and reciprocates). Or does the reiteration/reverberation of community risk (re)producing the "payback" obligation and logic of financialized capitalism premised upon the ethics of the indebted subject? As Lazarrato (2011, 37-44) notes in *The Making of the Indebted Men*, it is indebtedness and compulsion of return that reify the imperative of repayment in the relationship between creditor and debtor. This ethical foundation of

9. This part of the paper is not ethnographically grounded in part because of the inceptive nature of the research and because of the need to engage in texts by leading HSM intellectuals and Lazarrato's aforementioned book.

indebtedness is not only found in financial relationships, in the "economic sector," but is also daily practiced in social life through the reciprocity of gifts,[10] favors and in-kind transactions that are purportedly non-market activities.

Although the catchphrases of "community" and "anti-capitalism" have a long history, since the Asian financial crisis (1997-2003) and the global financial crisis (2008-2009), efforts to find alternatives go far beyond leftist scholarship to the point where even mainstream economists identify capitalism as a problem (Hong 2010, 13). The new millennium surge for alternative actions worldwide includes co-op movements, local currency movements, urban gardening, (on-line) charities, barter, or auction, and paying-debt actions in the aftermath of Occupy Movements.

The HSM in South Korea is not very different. Lazarrato explores the possibility that both global financial markets and community support networks are predicated upon the ethics and politics of "payback,"[11] and unwittingly risk co-producing debtor subjects and indebted society by romanticizing the notion of community.[12] Lazarrato argues that the relationship of the creditor and the credited (or lender and borrower) existed before the exchange-centered market and cannot be understood as simply "economic." Rather, it emerged from ancient society where religious, political, social, and economic life was not separable. In the contemporary moment, the unequal power relationship continues in that lenders discern the borrowers' ability to pay back and call for the ethical duty to pay back. This is how the process of the subjectification of indebtedness enforces a financial relationship beyond the purely "economic." Building on Nietzsche, Deleuze and Gattari, and Foucault, Lazarrato delineates how reciprocation within social circles that imbricate guilt or owed feeling, religious condemnation or self-blame of "sin," and the compulsive obligation to work and be self-enterprising all go together to build this machine of ethics and politics of indebtedness—producing debtor subjects at the individual,

10. Kochleman (2007) proposed a concept of replenishment and substitution instead of reciprocity. Discussions on gift exchange in juxtaposition to market exchange have a long history in anthropological tradition following Marcel Mauss (1954), which demonstrate that the two are co-reliant rather than mutually exclusive (Strathern 1988; Hart 2014; Graeber 2014; Guyer 2014; Argyrou 2007).

11. See also Atwoods' *Payback* and Greaber's *The Debt.*

12. See Joseph's *Against the Romance of Community*, and Jinkyung Lee's *Service Economies.*

communal, and national levels. If the virtue of reciprocity and mutual help and citizenry ethics of being responsible is not separable from the moral of "the owed must be paid back," how can the idealization of community self-help be a countering force or even survival strategy at the same time nurturing lateral agency to make revolution?

As an illustration of the reiteration of community as an ideal space in the texts written by leading figures in the HSM, here is a quotation from Yi Jin-kyông:

> It is well known that when money intervenes and speculation appears in human relationships that used to be managed through *gift exchange*, *granting favors, and being considerate*, other people also become speculative and unwilling to lose in the game. Furthermore, *when community and common reliance on mutual support are destroyed,* people have to enter the capitalist system for survival. (2008, 16)

On the one hand, it is clear that Yi Jin-kyông did not intend to idealize or romanticize community per se. Rather, he refers to a time and a space prior to capitalism. More precisely, the Marxist conception of capitalism is predicated on how the means of production owned by people in the agricultural mode of production are taken over by industrial capitalists and the modern state through the expropriation and appropriation of land and forcing the agricultural population to work in an urban industrial labor force. On the other hand, this theorization based on historical materialism does not necessarily resolve the epistemological conundrum, namely, that community was never destroyed by capitalism. Rather it has thrived with capitalism, whether in the imagination of it as pre-capitalist or anti-capitalist history or in its evolution in contemporary capitalist versions. Further, the core imagination of the community against capitalism was never free from the logic of reciprocity (or replenishment) as a mode of re-distributive justice. Although since the Marcel Mauss' *The Gift*, anthropological studies have contributed to demarcating the boundary between gift and market exchange by giving credit to the gift side as an alternative to market society, the dichotomy has been debunked in various ways—as different sides of the same coin, or there is no such a thing as a "pure gift"—so that by now it is a moot point to romanticize gift society and exchange as non-market. In that sense, the abundant reiteration of community as something different from capitalism might have a conceptual limit to contest the capitalist market system. Then, what do we do about the contribution of community to the

brewing of revolutionary subjectivity that is a potential risk to the capitalist market? This paper can only be a preliminary observation to stimulate further dialogue on this question.

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Abstract

If the virtue of reciprocity and mutual help and citizenry ethics of being responsible is not separable from the moral of "the owed must be paid back," how can community be a revolting agency of financial markets? This paper contemplates limits to community as a potential source of mystification about how to fight capitalism. In order to do so, this paper does not denounce the community as useless, rather demonstrates the legacy of community building as contingently on-going revolutionary attempts. In the context, this paper has a double edge of dealing with community: on the one hand, it historicizes the emergence and re-emergence of "community" in the anti-capitalist state legacy through a window of Humanities Studies Movement in the post-Asian Financial Crisis; on the other hand, it opens up a critical view of the very revolutionary goal as potential enemy, critically engaging in Lazarrato's insight from his recent book, *The Making of the Indebted Man.*

Keywords: community, ethics of payback, revolutionary subjectivity, Humanities Studies Movement

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