



Morality and Legitimacy in the Sewöl Protest in South Korea

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Rulers of democratic states earn legitimacy from both the bottom and the top. In the recent presidential impeachment in South Korea, these two seemingly opposite legitimizing mechanisms worked together. While the impeachment was decided by the constitutional court, an official, top-down mechanism of governance, the process of delegitimization began more than two years earlier, during commemorative protests related to the sinking of the Sewöl ferry and the death of 304 passengers. The protesters stated that the president had not behaved as expected during the rescue operations, had not communicated properly with the bereaved families and the public, and had not taken responsibility for the disaster's tragic scope. She was not the charismatic leader that Koreans expected to lead them in such a time of crisis and thus she failed in a key task of governance: 'to establish and nurture the connection with citizens' values, needs and expectations, the strength of which depends upon the observable quality of the link between political responsibility and trust and authority in the

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exercise of power' (Pardo and Prato 2011: 1). The sources of authority on which President Pak Kūn-hye (Park Gun-hye) relied, including the legal-rational democratic election process that brought her to power and her legacy as the daughter of a controversial former ruler of Korea, were not enough to prevent her downfall. She was ousted for failing to demonstrate the personal qualities that the public and lawmakers considered imperative, the qualities that Max Weber discussed as *charisma* (Weber 1968).

The Sewōl protests and the subsequent impeachment offer a fertile ethnographic field to examine public perception of the boundaries of leaders' responsibilities, a perception that does not necessarily overlap with the boundaries set by official laws. Mass commemoration events became the social locus of delegitimizing the then president. Such anti-corruption protests can begin even without any proven law breaking. In a case discussed by Atalay (2018, this volume), the Turkish public demanded that the state regulate the banks, although there had been no illegal act. The accumulated emotions of various individuals can affect the ruling elites and generate significant social change, as happened in Seoul.

The Sewōl ferry sank on the morning of April 16, 2014, en route to the resort island Cheju. It soon became clear that the ferry had not been handled, maintained, or supervised properly. The media accused various government ministries for this situation, and many blamed the president personally for not supervising the rescue operation well. The spontaneous demonstrations became a semi-permanent protest camp that the mayor of Seoul has allowed to stay at the centre of downtown, in Kwanghwamun Square.¹ During the past three years, the main protest symbol, a yellow ribbon, has changed its meaning from hope for survivors to an anti-corruption icon (Sarfati and Chung 2018). The deep grief over so many deaths turned into remorse for failing to create public pressure for a better society. The anger turned towards those who should have taken better care of safety and rescue procedures in Korea. Former President Pak was never deemed a very sociable, likable, or charismatic leader, but in the case of the ferry's rescue operation, these shortcomings were seen as leading to negligence and rudeness towards the Korean public.

In November 2016, the president's corruption became evident after the media exposed secret documents, in what came to be called *Ch'oe Sun-sil gate* (Choe 2016). The public demanded that the president resign.

¹Korean terms and names were transliterated using the McCune-Reischauer system, except the word Seoul. In some cases, other common transliterations were added in brackets.

Demonstrations became constant, massive, and effective. Public dissent in Seoul reached its height in the winter of 2016–17.² For more than a month, over one million people attended each Saturday night’s candle-light vigil in Kwanghwamun Square (Kim 2017). President Pak was impeached in March, detained for questioning, and eventually tried. Past Korean presidents who were guilty of corruption mainly escaped full trial and punishment thanks to their immunity. Many Sewöl protesters felt, therefore, that this impeachment resulted from their demonstrations and social media campaigns, which kept public pressure on policymakers.

The impeachment motion discussed the president’s misconduct related to the Sewöl ferry’s sinking in detail, although it did not specifically cite her for disobeying laws in that event. It mainly accused her of not protecting the people and not acting as expected from the country’s elected leader. This case demonstrates how ‘the power to rule can be undermined by the failure to engage fully in the demands and responsibilities of political representation, also of unaligned moralities and interests’ (Pardo 2000: 7).

In this chapter, I analyse how the process that delegitimized President Pak and her regime was related to debates over governance and responsibility rather than to law breaking. After a history of the protests in downtown Seoul, I analyse three moments that demonstrate how questions of morality and legitimacy became central to the rage against Pak and her government. I arrange these moments in chronological order, beginning with the summer of 2014, when volunteers dedicated immense efforts to collect ten million signatures on a petition to change the law in order to enable a proper investigation of the ferry’s sinking. Next, I discuss the distress of the bereaved families and their supporters when the Ministry of Education decided to clear the drowned students’ classrooms of their personal effects and commemoration installations. Last, I discuss the impeachment of President Pak in 2016 as a belated result of her sinking legitimacy in the Sewöl aftermath. These three examples reflect urban Koreans’ strong tendency to construct public opinion on the basis of morality, humanity, and responsibility rather than on legality and formal codes of conduct. I discuss the contextual aspects of Pak’s presidency, including the sources of her legitimacy according to Max Weber’s theory, and relate these to the historical process that the ferry’s sinking initiated.

²A video depicting these protests with English captions is available from the *New York Times* at <https://nyti.ms/2mtKWgq> (accessed May 1, 2017).

LEGITIMACY, LEGALITY, AND DISSENT IN KOREA'S HISTORY

Before the nineteenth century, few if any large-scale demonstrations or rebellions were documented in Korea. Korea was often described as a peace-loving nation of obedient peasants. Following the introduction of Western thought, including Christianity, democracy, and human rights, large-scale protests began in the countryside in the 1880s, when the farmers, led by some intellectuals and aristocrats, sought to eradicate the corruption of the wealthy (Shin 2014). Korea was a monarchy at that time, and the king deemed such rebellions illegal. He requested military help from China, bringing thousands of foreign soldiers to Korea to control the raging peasants. Law, in its contemporary, democratic sense, was irrelevant at this time. A similar pattern was repeated in 1894, but this time, Japanese and Chinese soldiers who arrived to help the Korean elites to control extensive dissent ended up clashing with each other in what became the first China-Japan War. The king's inability to control the public's rage and frustration thus cost Koreans a massive, violent, international clash conducted largely over their land.

When Japan annexed Korea in 1910, Koreans expressed their wish for freedom with mass demonstrations in central Seoul and elsewhere. While the annexation was performed according to Western conventions, with a bilaterally signed treaty, the Korean people viewed it as an abusive, unilateral move on the part of the powerful imperialist Japanese army. The demonstrations, known as the March 1st Movement, drew hundreds of thousands (Manela 2009). In 1919, mass protests against Japan achieved a temporary relaxation of speech regulations and shaped international opinion of Korea's annexation. However, this was only a temporary relief from the colonizers' tight grip, which ended only after World War II.

Koreans continued to revolt against Japan, but their different approaches divided the nation into two groups. Northern Koreans wielded armed resistance with the help of China and Russia, while Southern Koreans relied on underground cultural nationalism aimed at preserving Korean culture in the face of Japanese efforts to quash it.

After the Japanese colonizers left the peninsula at the end of World War II, the American and Russian liberators controlled the South and the North of the land, respectively, for three years. In 1948, the United Nations pressured the Koreans to conduct democratic elections, take responsibility for ruling Korea, and enable the foreign forces to withdraw. Democratization was thus enforced from outside, and for alien interests,

while the Koreans themselves were still harshly divided between communist and capitalist factions. Tragically, the Northern, Communist leader, Kim Il-sung, did not register as a candidate, his supporters did not vote, and the Southern candidate, Yi Süng-man (Syngman Rhee), won. The Korean War ensued, with Korea now split into two enemy countries. Again, protest and dissent combined with international involvement caused dire consequences.

The Korean War was followed by ten years of ineffective rule in South Korea and protest against the corruption of Yi's regime and his immorality. Huge demonstrations in 1960 brought about a political collapse and the election of a new president. The following year, another coup by Dictator Pak Chŏng-hi (President Pak Kŭn-hye's father) began more than 20 years of military dictatorship. While the demonstrators managed to oust President Yi, they did not ultimately achieve greater political freedom or human rights.

The plea for democratization in South Korea reached its height in the 1980s, manifested in the active engagement of hundreds of thousands in street demonstrations in Seoul and other cities. The largest of these demonstrations took place at the funerals of student protesters who died at the hands of police (Tangherlini 1998). The perceived immoral conduct of the authorities enraged Koreans more than the daily hardships that they suffered. Protest was most efficient in 1987, as the Olympic games were supposed to be held in Seoul the following year, and the government was warned that this long-awaited event might be moved to another country if violence continued in the streets. Free presidential elections were announced in 1988, although not in the manner envisioned by the dissent.

Since full democratization in the early 1990s, Seoul has seen massive demonstrations over various civil and economic issues including factory workers' labour conditions, objections to the signage of free trade agreements with the USA, and disputes with Japan related to colonial comfort women's compensation (Lee 2014). The Sewŏl protests should be examined within this well-documented and much-studied environment of mass mobilization. Both protesters and policymakers in contemporary South Korea have been aware of many successful past demonstrations, and these antecedents increased the effectiveness of mass mobilization in the Sewŏl movement.

Given that the Sewŏl movement centred on non-legal issues such as a thorough investigation of the sinking and a proper commemoration of the

victims—issues not clearly relevant to each and every Korean—it is surprising that these demonstrations attracted larger crowds of more diverse backgrounds, political agendas, and lifestyles than other previous and ongoing protests, such as the THAAD anti-missile base construction, which was followed by vocal objections related to safety and environmental issues, by people living around the planned bases (Koleilat 2016). Furthermore, the symbols used in the Sewōl movement gained an iconic status and have been utilized in various contexts, both related and unrelated, such as the comfort women’s claims and recent presidential campaigns. The yellow ribbon proved to be such an effective symbol that the government tried to ban its use through legal procedures six months after the sinking. Several students appealed to the National Human Rights Commission, saying that banning the yellow ribbon in schools breached their right to self-expression (Jhoo 2015). Eventually, individual use of the ribbon was allowed, and protesters felt that the law could be used to promote their interests as well.

FIELD AND METHOD

During my ethnographic study of the Sewōl movement, I attended several dozen demonstrations, commemoration events, and parades. I visited the camp in Kwanghwamun Square almost daily for two months in 2014 and again on shorter field visits in 2015, 2016, and 2017. While my main research method was participant observation, I also collected, photographed, and filmed many of the material manifestations of dissent in Seoul and Ansan (the residential suburb where most of the ferry’s victims went to school). I recorded in-depth interviews with 20 protesters, who were leaders of diverse protest projects. Among those interviewed were bereaved family members, volunteers in the protest camp, social media content managers, and a lawyer who became involved in the families’ demand for further investigation of the sinking. I also followed several social media channels where the protesters have maintained a constant presence with updates from the camp and various events. My closest informants corresponded with me through email and social networks about their thoughts and feelings related to the protest and other issues while I was away from Korea. One of them, Dr Bora Chung of Yonsei University, has cooperated with me on three articles about the Sewōl protest. Data from this three-year-long ethnographic work are used here to unfold the process of President Pak’s delegitimizing, from the first weeks after the sinking to her impeachment in 2017. The first case discussed is the plea for a thorough investigation that might reveal if the disaster was preventable.

PREVENTABLE OR INEVITABLE? DEMANDING A PROPER INVESTIGATION

When the Sewŏl ferry sank in 2014, leaving hundreds dead and many missing, South Korea was shocked. Mass mourning soon turned into anti-government protests. When a few weeks had passed and no significant investigation committee had been appointed, activists collected ten million signatures on a petition to change the law in order to enable a full investigation, punishment of those found guilty, and better safety and rescue regulations. Many bereaved parents went on hunger strike towards the same end. Like other grass-roots movements, such as the New York local volunteers' involvement in the national Democratic Party activities, rezoning processes, and bike lanes' planning (Krase and Krase 2018, this volume), the Sewŏl parents were identified as a marginalized group fighting for its rights through petition and personal appeals to authorities. The protesters mainly targeted a malfunctioning bureaucracy and improper cooperation between economic tycoons and government officials.

Additionally, the president's reaction to the tragedy left many doubtful of her legitimacy as the country's ruler. Mrs Kim (full name withheld), who collected signatures every weekend in the first few months of the protest, recalls with tears in her eyes:

I was so upset to see the hunger-striking parents at the square with no one paying attention. The president did not visit the commemoration altar even once! I was shocked to see how she did not care to do this. Even if not for the feelings of the families, but for her own political needs. Did she not think that people would see that as immoral behaviour? Hundreds of dead people and she cannot even come to shake hands with the families? What kind of person is she? I was feeling all that rage, and then I began to visit the protest camp and sit in solidarity with the families. Then I heard that they needed volunteers for the petition booths and began to do this. Some days I would stand ten hours until my feet hurt so much, but I wanted to do it. I could not allow myself to stand aside. That would have been immoral.

In Kim's recollection of the president's behaviour, the immense death toll was only one part of her failure as the country's leader. No less significant was her refusal to demonstrate compassion for the grieving families. Kim and many protesters told me that they thought that the president was 'flawed as a person,' and therefore they did not believe her statement on the news that she felt sorry for the loss. As Pardo (2000: 7) suggests,

‘Credibility is heavily dependent on the relationship between the actual and the perceived management of responsibility.’ In the case of Sewöl, the people of South Korea hoped that the president would personally supervise the rescue efforts, visit the bereaved families, and order a thorough investigation. These were her perceived responsibilities. Although it is difficult to prove that direct presidential involvement would have changed the event’s disastrous results, fingers were pointed at her. Pak’s detachment from the event, while legal, was perceived as mismanagement and irresponsibility, and people blamed her individually, connecting this event to the heartless image of her late father.

Former President Pak is the daughter of the Cold War Dictator Pak Chöng-hi, who ruled the country from 1961 to 1979. His legacy includes a constitutional change in 1972 that allowed him to control most of the country as he wished. His violent treatment of those perceived as disloyal to his regime cast a shadow on his daughter’s political behaviour, even though South Korea has been a democracy since the late 1980s. Her father’s actions gained President Pak many supporters, too, who thought that she might be able to pull Korea out of economic recession in the 2010s, just as her father did in the 1960s. Thus, she was elected democratically in 2012, despite fierce opposition to her right-wing, corporatist ideology.

The dictatorship’s legacy has been viewed as contributing to weak safety regulations and poor supervision of private business, apparently leading to the ferry’s poor maintenance. You and Park (2017) demonstrate how state corporatism stemming from the pre-democratic period enabled the ferry business to operate with little regulation. They quote several laws in the shipping industry that were not changed since the 1970s, among them the self-regulation scheme, by which the shipping industry is responsible of maintaining safety without governmental intervention. In the 1990s, passenger ships were given the right to be as much as 30 years old, replacing the safer 20-year age limit of 1984. The Sewöl was already 18 years old when it was purchased from Japan, after it had been retired from service there. It was then remodelled to carry more passengers and did not have proper safety devices installed. Even though President Pak did not initiate these regulatory relaxations, she is blamed as immoral and irresponsible for not changing them. As for the rescue operations, these were mostly in the hands of a private business, and therefore, the coast guard did too little. It has been suggested that Pak and her government preferred to see the boat sink rather than saving it.

Rumours about the government's mishandling of the boat and the disaster circulated extensively in the protest camp. The prevailing assumption was that ruling and economic elites had cooperated to silence the reasons for the tragic event, leading to multiple conspiracy narratives. When I recorded some of the narratives, speakers asked me to mask their identities, fearing persecution by the authorities. While they spoke freely in front of people they met in the camp, their trust in the world outside the dissent movement was dropping. In the summer of 2014, the police announced that they had found the body of Yu Pyŏng-ŏn, the owner of the ferry who had been missing for several weeks after the disaster. Mr Son, a middle-aged volunteer who made yellow ribbon pendants in the square, shared his sentiments:

They can never convince me with this silly story that the body was so close to his house but was found only after a month of lying there in the field. They did it on purpose so that it would be difficult to identify it and they can say that it was his body. I am sure that he escaped the country with their [government officials'] help. At first, they said that he disappeared, and this enabled them not to investigate his role in the tragedy. Then they said that he showed up in places and that they are looking for him, and suddenly they find him dead. Somebody wants to cover up things real bad.

Ms Yun, another activist, thought that the National Intelligence Services (NIS) were interested in the cover-up:

I heard that the boat carried many metal poles that overloaded it. This was possible because the boat was secretly run by the NIS, and the passengers were just a camouflage for a secret operation. This is why the government would not investigate the shipwreck or pull it out. If the involvement of the NIS is discovered, then everyone will understand why there were so few survivors. The president surely gave orders not to go into the boat to save people. Otherwise, I cannot understand why so few were saved. I saw in the news a rescue boat standing next to the half-sunk ferry. Why didn't they break the glass portholes to save the children? I think that one of the marines on the boat was looking inside a window and I think that I saw a face there. Who would not break the window to save that child? Only someone who was given direct orders. I think that they intentionally let the children die in order to cover up their corruption. The boat should not have carried all this metal. Who knows what was there and what it was for?

Ms Yun more readily embraced corruption as the cause of the disaster than coincidence and human frailty. Furthermore, the conspiracy theory helped her make sense of the delay in the wreck's salvage. When the wreck was finally pulled out in March 2017 and no metal poles were reported, she explained that these must have been removed secretly.

Such rumours fuelled the protesters' confidence that their fight was justified. They felt that, if they would not construct the memory of the event, the conspiring elites would draw it to oblivion in order to escape trial for their shortcomings and corruption. This is why memorials were so central to the Sewöl protest and were the core of the camp that sprouted downtown (Fig. 13.1). Photographs of the youths who had died and lists of their names were a constant emotional provocation that kept the issue alive. Moreover, constant discussion of Sewöl-related rumours in the media resulted in broad social legitimacy for, and participation in, the struggle. The Sewöl protesters often emphasized that the peaceful nature of their protest was their source of strength. When, in the winter of



Fig. 13.1 The main protest camp at Kwanghwamun Square. Photographs of dead and missing passengers feature in posters and commemoration altars. (Photograph by author)

2016–17, the protesters voluntarily cleaned the streets and square of downtown after the mass gatherings, it was perceived as a symbol of good citizenship, as opposed to the ‘bad people’ who ruled the country and caused the immense death toll of the disaster.

Many thought that the accident was manmade and that, if no precautions were taken, it could be repeated (Kim and Ham 2015). The protesters and media reminded the public of previous disasters that had not resulted in serious revisions of safety regulations, such as the sinking of the Sŏhae ferry in 1993 (with 323 victims on board) and the collapse of Sŏngsu Bridge in 1994 (which killed 32). They also compared the current disaster unfavourably with the collapse of the Samp’ŭng department store in 1995, which left 502 dead and 937 injured. In the Samp’ŭng disaster, the owners were tried and imprisoned; rescue efforts were hailed for bravery; the media seriously criticized the ‘Republic of Disasters’; and, as a result, the government conducted safety inspections on all buildings in the country. The public felt that justice had been done and did not take to the streets. The mother of a Sewŏl victim mentioned this in a news interview: ‘When Samp’ŭng collapsed, I was in my 30s. I cried a lot for the victims but didn’t do anything. Younger people should act, do something, otherwise when they reach my age they might have to cry for their lost babies like me’ (Kim 2014). Several parents of victims from these and other past accidents supported the Sewŏl parents, and many protesters recalled such past disasters as a lost opportunity to put pressure on governments. This time, they wanted to make up for their lack of activism in the past. They believed that officials would more readily support other elites than the general public.

These differences between the activism patterns after the Sewŏl and Samp’ŭng tragedies are related to the democratization process that Korea has undergone since the early 1990. The Samp’ŭng department store collapsed in 1995, at the beginning of this process, when Koreans were less aware of the possibilities that they had for safe individual activism. Their experience of the democratization demonstrations during the 1980s associated activism with danger and violent punishments. After more than 20 years of stable democracy, Koreans have grown to view protesting as their legitimate right for self-expression. The citizens’ internalization of democracy is apparently not an immediate response to an official opening up of societies to political agencies. Similarly, around the same years a highly bureaucratized democracy was being established in Albania but took time

to become grounded because trust between government and citizens took time to become established (Prato 2018, this volume).

In the analysis of such trust construction processes in Albania, Korea, and other case studies discussed in this volume, legitimacy was established through the public's feelings towards the governing elites and was not strictly related to the legal dimension. Personal credibility and public accountability proved essential in the process. When these did not exist, grass-roots activism was a typical result, as long as the dissent was held in a safe democracy, where people were not afraid to express discontent with their rulers. It was seen, for example, in Canada, when the Viger Square in Montreal was reconstructed with little consultation with its users, who turned to a variety of methods, including meetings, co-signed newspaper editorials, public speaking, and public consultation to express their objections. One of the central issues was moral legitimacy, beyond the legal rights of the authorities (Boucher 2018, this volume).

In the Korean context, the president's legitimacy began dropping after the Sewöl incident, because she was seen as passively failing to exert her power to maintain the safety of her people. Pardo (2000: 5) asserts that there are two main types of immorality in government, 'the immorality of downright dishonesty' and the 'more graded immorality of neglect of duty.' Pak Kün-hye has been accused of both. While the second is related to aforementioned shipping industry regulations, the first is related to her treatment of the bereaved families, as the case of the abandoned classrooms tells.

ABANDONED CLASSROOMS AND OFFICIAL INTERVENTIONS

Two hundred and fifty senior students from Tanwön high school in Ansan were among the tragedy's victims. Ansan is a lower-middle-class and blue-collar suburb west of Seoul. The suffering of this school's families has been linked to their disadvantaged status, which prevented them from pulling strings in the administration for better rescue and investigation. Their fiercest battle was against emptying Tanwön classrooms of their dead children's desks.

The empty classrooms turned into spontaneous commemoration sites even before most bodies were found and the list of missing dwindled. At first, friends and acquaintances wrote notes of hope to find the students alive. Prayers and wishes for the safe return of the students were scribbled on the blackboards. Later, visitors created small altars for students' spirits

by placing food, flowers, photographs, favourite drinks, and personal notes on the deserted desks. Visits to the site included not only family and friends, but also other interested Koreans, sometimes organized as tour groups with a local volunteer guide.

Early in 2016, the local education ministry decided to begin reusing the structure and announced that it would dismantle the desk altars. This act, while lawful, was deemed immoral by the bereaved families and their supporters and reignited civil unrest around the Sewŏl issue. Similar to the aforementioned Viger Square reconstruction project, the perceived rights of the place's users made the planned changes a public matter regardless of the legal ownership (Boucher 2018, this volume). Many parents and protesters stated that the Tanwŏn classes should not be cleared until the ferry was pulled out of the water. They also felt that the tragic loss would have been less painful had it at least brought about significant changes. The empty classrooms symbolized this failure. Parents of the missing students did not even have a gravesite to visit, and the classrooms offered several of them a place to mourn and express their sentiments. They felt that clearing the classrooms symbolically denoted the death of their children. They had hoped that, during the wreck's salvage, the bodies might be found and a proper funeral be made possible, with a casket being carried through the school as many others had been, expressing the presumed wish of the spirits to say a last farewell to their classrooms, but the Ministry of Education did not wait for that. Several parents slept in the school to protest the decision and, when the final date was set for July 25, 2016, some of the volunteers feared that violence might erupt. Officials stated that the classrooms would be emptied with or without the parents' cooperation. A serene and sad ceremony was prepared through collaboration between several churches, Buddhist orders, and new religion groups.

When I arrived at Tanwŏn High School on the morning of evacuation day, the bereaved family members and a few hundred supporters stood tensely, waiting to see how the day would evolve. Some had packed the personal belongings of the deceased students and the desk altars dedicated to them, while others refused to do so, and so their children's desks were left untouched among the cardboard boxes (Fig. 13.2). Most parents eventually cooperated, because they feared that strangers from the ministry might do the work with less respect and care. The packing was mostly silent. Some mothers and grandmothers began sobbing and walked out of the classes. Volunteers used white gloves, and many wore white attires similar to



Fig. 13.2 Unpacked desks of missing students among the boxed desk altars of other drowned classmates. (Photograph by author)

traditional funeral clothes. Emotions surrounding this event were extremely heightened.

The Ministry of Education created a new commemorative site in its own complex, about a mile away from the school. It cleared one building of its original offices, transforming ten rooms into smaller, museum-like classrooms, where the original tables, personal drawers, and blackboards were to be installed in the same position as in the original classrooms. Meticulous care was taken to document and map the classrooms before their dismantling in order to create the replicas.

Certainly, the Ministry of Education had the legal right to clear the classrooms. However, its actions were perceived as disrespectful and cruel. This view was written on posters held by several family members who slept in the school, refused to pack the desks, and on the day that the classrooms were finally packed took their own children's boxes home, refusing to participate in the substitute commemorative site.

When all the other boxes had been packed, they were carried to a large area covered with plastic mattresses. Religious rituals were held there, with different religious leaders reading sacred texts and incantations for the

spirits of the dead. Volunteers in funeral attire beat traditional drums, and many in the audience wept. After the desks were loaded onto several trucks, the parents carried the boxed items on foot to their new location. The procession was arranged as a symbolic funeral, with drummers and flag bearers in front, then the family members carrying the boxes, and several hundred volunteers and supporters marching behind them. The procession progressed slowly on the main road, as the police had blocked the streets from the school to the district office. Media crews videotaped the event, but little was broadcast on mainstream television channels. The footage was mostly shown on Internet channels related to the protest movement. Such exclusion from the public broadcasting system was evident throughout the protests and created more suspicion towards the authorities and trust in alternative online media (Song and Son 2017).

In the classroom evacuation ceremony, mourning was expressed through protest and vice versa. Anger towards the authorities was central to the planning and production of the event, which had become in many aspects a political demonstration. Demands to salvage the shipwreck, investigate the sinking, and treat the families with respect were constantly uttered, with blame directed towards President Pak and her administration. Even though everyone knew that the Ministry of Education owned the school building, parents were perceived as having a moral claim on the classrooms, the last place where the drowned children had stayed for extended periods. The school was not to blame for the ferry's sinking, but the Ministry of Education was implicated as part of the government and the corrupt elites. The behaviour of education officials was thus perceived as within 'ambiguous realms of action which are perfectly legal but are identified as (morally) illegitimate' (Pardo 2000: 19–20). In contrast, the actions of parents and protesters were perceived as 'unofficial, even illegal, behaviours which are regarded as improper but desirable because they are seen to address real problems without seriously jeopardizing shared moral imperatives' (Ibid.). Within a few weeks of the classroom evacuation, the extent of President Pak's corruption unfolded in the media, and the demonstrations intensified.

CORRUPT OR IMMORAL?

In the weeks following the ferry's sinking, many protesters and bereaved family members hoped that President Pak would resign and take responsibility for the disaster. In Korean culture, resigning is a common way to express personal responsibility for the failures of one's subordinates.

However, ten days after the sinking, only Prime Minister Chung had announced his resignation as a way of apologizing for the government's regulatory shortcomings and its mishandling of the rescue operation.

President Pak said nothing about her own responsibility and remained in her post. The media reported on the bereaved families' reaction to Pak's choice:

A father of a missing ferry passenger—a girl—called Chung's resignation 'meaningless.' He and the girl's mother and sister are outraged at the government about what they say is a disorganized rescue operation. '[Prime minister] Chung doesn't want to take responsibility for this mess,' the mother told CNN's Nick Robertson. She felt that if President Park Geun-hye [Pak Kün-hye] were to resign 'that might actually do something.' (Fantz et al. 2014)

The president's refusal to assume responsibility was contrasted also with the suicide of the high school's Assistant Principal, Mr Kang Min-gyu, who had been on the ferry. He left a note expressing guilt over the tragedy and regret for his own survival. Many sympathized with his act and paid their respects to his family (Park and Kim 2014). Likewise, the Sewöl's captain and crew were serving long prison sentences while the political figures who were viewed as responsible faced no legal consequences.³

When President Pak was finally impeached in 2016 in the wake of the Choi-gate scandal, people credited the mass demonstrations around the Sewöl protest camp. The CNN headline read, 'Park [Pak] impeachment: Bittersweet victory for families of Sewol ferry victims' (Griffiths and Han 2017).

'Recover the Sewol ferry! Recover the truth!'

The crowd shouted the words defiantly, yards away from South Korea's seat of power. Thousands had gathered outside the Blue House, South Korea's executive mansion, to celebrate the demise of President Park Geun-hye [Pak Kün-hye], after a Constitutional Court upheld a vote to impeach her Friday (Ibid.).

³The captain was guilty of breaking several laws, including the Korean Seaman's Act, which requires a captain to stay on a sinking boat until all the passengers have been saved (Stampler 2014).

Indeed, my email correspondents, social media pages, and other news venues in Korea expressed the same idea. The president's support had been declining steeply since the ferry sank, and many perceived her impeachment as the bereaved parents' justified revenge. After the impeachment, several newspaper pages covering the event were placed on the commemoration altars at Kwanghwamun Square, as if telling the spirits of the drowned passengers that the struggle on their behalf had succeeded.

Previous presidents in Korea accused of corruption received gentler treatment at the hands of the authorities than did Pak. She was arrested before trial, and recently her lawyers resigned to express protest against the conditions in which she is being detained. In contrast, past presidents guilty of mass death in the Kwangju Massacre in 1980 were brought to trial almost 15 years later and were released after a short while. Presumably this difference was due to the emotional tone of public dissent after the Sewŏl tragedy. Such sentiment is evident in the impeachment motion's fifth part, entitled 'The Violation of the Duty to Safeguard the Citizens' Right to Live.' The text that follows announces:

The president has the duty to safeguard the lives of the citizens.... President Pak Kŭn-hye, who was expected to take national catastrophe and crisis under control, was nowhere to be seen.... Afterwards, President Pak, in spite of the numerous requests by the citizens as well as the press to disclose her whereabouts during the so-called 'Sewŏl Ferry 7 hours,' continued her persistent refusal to cooperate and her cover-ups, violating the citizen's constitutional right to know.... President Pak's response as described above is closer to abandoning her duties as the president of Republic of Korea to protect the citizens' lives and guarantee their safety and thereby violates the duty to safeguard life as guaranteed by Article 10 of the Constitution. (Translation by Chung Bora)

The impeachment motion, which mostly deals with the president's violation of laws, discusses her actions during and after the sinking of the Sewŏl as unacceptable. It mentions the public's right to know and the president's constitutional duty to safeguard citizens, but it does not assert that Pak broke any specific laws. Instead, the text describes in some detail how Pak failed to act as the country's leader.

This impeachment text demonstrates several points related to the blurry line between illegal and immoral action by political leaders. According to the Korean constitution, the president is required to 'safeguard life.' This

phrase could be interpreted in diverse ways, and Pak's supporters suggested that she was not the one directly responsible for any loss of life. Yet, by failing to inform the public about what was happening, the president allegedly violated 'the citizen's constitutional right to know.' While the impeachment motion does not clearly state that the Sewöl tragedy was related to the Ch'oe-gate corruption scandal, the public connected the two events (Seo 2016; *The Guardian* 2016). Moreover, the motion describes Pak's perceived responsibility for the deaths of the drowned students in more emotional terms than her corruption in the business sector. For Koreans, these two scandals were symbols of the tyranny of the rich and powerful over the poor and powerless. The Sewöl scandal decreased support for the president and raised questions about her moral legitimacy as a ruler. Then, when the extent of her corruption became known, and her actions could be proven illegal, the public took to the streets to demand impeachment. The Sewöl tragedy ignited the process, which the impeachment completed.

The recent elections demonstrated the power of the Sewöl protests in forming a new era of South Korean ruling elites. Unlike cases where public disappointment in leaders led to disengagement from the democratic process (Pardo 2018, this volume), more than 80% of voters participated in the May 2017 elections. Mun Chae-in (Moon Jae-in), a liberal candidate who was not related to the right-wing Pak, won the elections. In one of the final election speeches, he declared he would be 'the president who never forgets Sewöl as long as there is spring and as long as April comes every year.' He promised he would work to reveal the whole truth about the sinking and make Korea a safer country. Symbolically, he chose Kwanghwamun Square for his final campaign speech.

Pak and Mun were both elected democratically and therefore maintained their authority through the legal-rational sanction of democracy (Weber 1968: 215). However, unlike President Pak's sources of legitimacy, which rested symbolically on her father's legacy in what Weber calls *traditional authority*, Mun can be described as a charismatic leader who was elected on the basis of personal qualities. While Pak was viewed as one who could handle the contemporary challenges of South Korea by reinstating nationalism and conservatism, Mun was viewed as a person with a new vision for Korea. Indeed, Mun insisted throughout his election campaign that he would change Korea and eliminate harmful corporatist legacies. In one such speech in 2017 he said: 'We need a national clean-up. We need to liquidate the old system and build a new South Korea. Only

then can we complete the revolution started by the people who rallied with candlelight' (Choe 2017). President Mun's rhetoric emphasizes his moral stance and a sense of responsibility for the well-being of Koreans, even when the driving forces of economic growth might be opposed to such changes. He has put much effort at establishing trust and relationships of reciprocal respect between himself and his voters, in a manner that Prato (2018, this volume) deems crucial for a legitimate leadership. He might need to pass new laws in order to fulfil his promise, but the Sewŏl protesters often suggest that much can be achieved even within the current constitutional situation.

CONCLUSION

This ethnographic research among the Sewŏl protesters reveals individual and group emotional processes that led to intense political involvement. Many hundreds of thousands of people participated in social and political turmoil over three years. The tragedy and its fallout raise enduring questions about power, legitimacy, and democracy. I examined the cultural and social forces at work by focusing on three moments during the process. The struggle to change the law in order to enable a proper investigation expressed the protesters' awareness of democratic governance and their expectation to personally affect their country's codes. The protest against clearing the dead students' desks suggested a blending of legal and moral assessments of formal institutions. Finally, the massive impeachment demonstrations around the Sewŏl protest camp revealed the interplay between personal morality, civic responsibility, and the law. The three cases together demonstrate how individual emotions and values led to actions that eventually generated significant changes in South Korea.

Contemporary urban clusters such as Seoul are especially fertile grounds for such mass protests. It is easy to arrive at downtown locations because they are well connected by public transportation, and the dense population allows thousands to respond to a call for action within minutes. Extensive usage of Internet and social media has also contributed to the effectivity of this dissent movement. As knowledge of the leaders' activities becomes widely available, and rumours and conspiracy theories are distributed through various face-to-face and online media, the legitimacy of leaders such as Pak Kŭn-hye can be eroded by the masses.

The public used space to claim a democratic right to influence its rulers. Protesters created a semi-permanent protest camp; they prepared,

distributed, and wore on their bodies protest symbols such as the yellow ribbon, and these became iconic, space-defining artefacts, delineating protest sites and personal identities. Such sacralization of commemoration sites proved powerful in other protests as well (Senie 2006). Space became a weapon of resistance.

Conflicting moralities often underlie economic goals and personal safety. In Korea, the president was viewed as responsible for both goals. As a leader, she was expected to satisfy large business conglomerates to ensure the country's economic prosperity and at the same time to take care of laws and regulations that would ensure personal safety for all. Yet safety regulations cost money that business owners often object to. In the case of the Sewöl ferry, had the country required every ferry to pass a meaningful inspection before leaving port, the cargo in the ferry probably would have been fastened. Moreover, the hired staff would have been required to undergo proper emergency training, and the rescue operation would not have been handed to an unsupervised private company. President Pak was personally accused for these irregularities. The protesters were well aware of the power of law, used lawyers as advisors, and worked mostly within the legal bounds to advance their cause. However, much of the discourse around the Sewöl tragedy treated morality as more important than simply adhering to the law.

Former President Pak paid with her position and reputation for her feeble handling of the event. The legal impeachment rested on the massive civil unrest that broke out as a result of that tragedy, and that was heightened when evidence of corruption began to surface. The individual actions of many Koreans brought about the political change that they had asked for. At last, the reality of 2017 fulfilled the wish that one of the bereaved mothers expressed to me in the early days of the protest in 2014: 'If the sacrifice we made will bring about the social improvement that we hope for, then we can bear the pain.'

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