

DELEGITIMIZING AUTHORITY THROUGH FOLKLORE

The Impeachment of South Korean President Pak Kün-hye

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Discussions of participation in democratic governance often emphasize voting as the primary way that citizens engage with the democratic process. Yet, the role of folklore as a mechanism to engage the public and call for action may be just as big or bigger. Although recent political events around the world have shown how they can be manipulated, rumors, images, popular songs, and live performances still create legitimate vernacular spaces where members of the public can express their views on current issues and influence policymakers to consider the will of the people. In Seoul, South Korea, as in many other places around the world, street demonstrations, rife with these forms of political folklore, have been common and significant. The many street demonstrations that have taken place in the past hundred years have sometimes involved more than a million participants at a time, making these events a notable force in South Korean politics. One such mass protest in 2017 brought about the impeachment of President Pak Kün-Hye. Although this event has been thoroughly discussed in political terms, it is my task here to talk about it as a

folklorist—focusing on what unfolded through the lenses of tradition, performance, and expressive creativity.

In this and other instances of demonstrations, the masses have been motivated to take action through emotionally impactful forms of communication, in which various folklore genres and vernacular creativity can be identified. While mainstream media are expected to provide accurate and fact-checked news concerning the government and the elites, folklore enjoys more creative freedom. Rumors, caricatures, and proverbs contribute to intensifying the dramatization of events, particularly in cases involving corruption and government failures. As a result, the actual events are often discussed by the public using a blend of facts, narratives, and exaggerations, especially in situations where transparency is lacking, as seen in various aspects of South Korean policy processes.

President Pak, who represents the political right, was democratically elected to the presidency in 2012. In 2017, she was impeached after a series of corruption scandals and breaches of trust were exposed, leading to a police investigation and weekly demonstrations of over a million participants in downtown Seoul. Subsequently, the parliament voted to remove her from office. Despite her refusal to step down, claiming the impeachment was illegal, the Constitutional Court of Korea ruled, after several more months of protests, that she could no longer serve as the president. The entire process was accompanied by public outcry on the streets, in the media, and throughout the internet.

The public support for her impeachment was particularly significant since it was unusual. Other corrupt presidents in South Korea have usually been prosecuted several years after their terms ended, and without the amount of public demonstration that marked Pak's impeachment. Yet remarkably, the protests that took place every Saturday in the winter of 2016–17 were organized by a loose network of associations, groups, and individuals, rather than being guided by a central party or organization.

While perhaps unusual in their focus and organization, these demonstrations nevertheless fit squarely into the robust tradition of street protest in South Korea. This tradition substantially shaped the way that the 2016–17 impeachment protests unfolded. Street

demonstrations in Seoul have become cultural performances that attract the attention of millions, and that exercise major influence in the politics of the nation. Folkloric forms of expressiveness have become common and normative during the demonstrations; folklore is at the heart of political life in South Korea.

TRADITION

The impeachment protests in Seoul included participants of different ages and social positions and were mostly moderate and nonviolent. Information was primarily shared through online social networks, and the media coverage of the political events increased the number of people taking to the streets from time to time. Additionally, the massive protests in Seoul were accompanied by large-scale protests in other parts of the country. In fact, with the exception of the role played by social media, the channels through which these protests were organized and promoted were similar to those that have been employed in Seoul since its first mass demonstration in 1919.

In the past hundred years, there have been mass protests in Korea that achieved encouraging results and contributed to the creation of a historical cycle of protests, where each protest cites its predecessors as a point of reference for hope and optimism. This implies that when activists reference past successful historical demonstrations in their speeches, the audience gains a sense of assurance that investing efforts into expressing their cause is meaningful. The conviction that a united and vocal community can influence policy-making proves advantageous in challenging the prevalent notion that the government disregards public aspirations. Cycles of protest have been an effective means of mass mobilization, especially if the historical events continue to resonate in the public's memory as successful, heroic, and meaningful to national identity.¹ For example, on March 1, 1919, a million people demonstrated in Seoul against the Japanese occupation. They remained on the streets for weeks despite brutal repression, the imprisonment of tens of thousands, and the death of several thousand protesters at the hands of Japanese soldiers.

Although these protests did not achieve the independence Koreans had hoped for, they led to a shift from an aggressive military policy to the more moderate Cultural Policy (*bunka seiji*) by the Japanese, at least until the start of World War II in Asia. For contemporary Koreans this was an inspiring achievement, especially considering the general understanding that the Japanese empire was strong, cruel, and unforgiving in most of its conquests and colonization projects. Activists in Seoul have often referred to their predecessors, who fought for independence from the Japanese, as the fathers and mothers of the nation. They express sincere emotions of gratitude when discussing the March 1 movement and pledge to continue fighting for the freedom and well-being of all Koreans. Similar emotions are attached to the mass demonstrations that have taken place after independence as well.

In 1960, after gaining independence from Japan and after the ensuing Korean War (1950–53), hundreds of thousands took to the streets in Korea to protest against prolonged military rule, corrupt leadership, and the resulting economic downturn. The protest began with thousands of students marching on the streets of Seoul, protesting police violence toward protesters. As the police shot at them, many citizens from all walks of life swelled the ranks of the increasingly angry protest. About 180 protesters were killed during two weeks of intense demonstrations. Eventually, the police refused to continue shooting at the protesters, and, as a result, President Yi Sŭng-man resigned and went into exile, and democratic elections were declared.

Regrettably, the happiness was fleeting, as a military coup occurred a year later, unseating the democratically elected president, Yun Po-sŏn, who had to vacate his office in under two years. The public, disheartened by the Yun administration's ineffectiveness, acquiesced to the coup. In 1963, they participated in a democratic vote, ultimately choosing Pak Chŏng-hŭi, the general responsible for initiating the coup and the father of South Korea's previously mentioned impeached female president, Pak Kŭn-hye. However, Pak Chŏng-hŭi did not hold democracy in as high regard as the public did. In 1972, he instituted a new constitution that effectively bestowed upon him limitless power. Even his death, following an assassination by the chief of his intelligence agency in 1979, did not bring the desired democracy to the country.

This legacy of anti-democratic regimes is still widely remembered in Korea. When Pak Kŭn-hye's corruption was discovered in 2016, her critics were quick to compare her rule to that of her father's, in its disregard for democracy and the will of the people. Once more, this sentiment is rooted in the vernacular rather than verified fact. Pak played a pivotal role in South Korea's politics following the democratization of the late 1980s and was not implicated in any formal attempts to undermine democracy until she became president. The idea that she might have inherited her father's cruelty was spread through rumors and folklore narratives intended to preserve the memory of the dictatorship's atrocities. As such, these have fostered resentment toward the dictator's daughter even though she was not actually involved in these events, being too young to engage in political matters at that time.

In the protests of the 1970s and 1980s in Korea, thousands were killed by the authorities, and hundreds of thousands were arrested, detained, and disappeared. Dozens of protesters resorted to extreme acts, such as self-immolation and suicide on protest stages, but to no avail.² In 1987, just before the Seoul Olympics, the protesters seized the world's attention, which was focused on South Korea, and millions took to the streets of Seoul in a series of demonstrations. The Olympic Committee was concerned that street violence would necessitate a change in the Olympic venue, despite the extensive and expensive preparations already made, and thus the government had to respond delicately. In order to calm the masses and hold the Olympics as planned, they announced democratic elections. Since then, South Korea has been a country where free elections are held, free expression is allowed, and street protests on various issues are enacted with the approval of the government and the police.

These three mass protests (in 1919, 1960, and 1987) loom large in the memory of protesters in the twenty-first century; they are framed as a political tradition, one which creates the expectation that when people take to the streets, leaders must listen. This idea rests on the historical successes (even if partial) of the demonstrations held in the past hundred years in Seoul. The successful mass mobilization and strong emotional impact that such demonstrations have achieved are closely related to the performative norms that this tradition has established and that have been harnessed to create shared feeling among the protesters and the public.

PERFORMANCE

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, there were numerous protests in Seoul, but they generally involved tens of thousands of participants at most. For the most part, the public was pleased with the democratization that followed the 1987 protests and did not take to the streets en masse. In the twenty-first century, a novel form of demonstration has emerged, characterized by widespread participation and political impact, all achieved without resorting to violence. This shift is closely tied to the public's increasing recognition that democracy entails not only the act of voting and the freedom of expression but also a consideration of public sentiment regarding various issues.

Extraordinary in their size were the million-person protests against the free trade agreement (FTA) with the United States in 2008. In these protests, new norms of nonviolent protest were established. Instead of throwing Molotov cocktails and pushing the police, as was common during the dictatorship era, the protesters in the twenty-first century chose to carry burning candles as a symbol of their peace-seeking. The protests against the trade agreement led to a temporary suspension of its signing but ultimately did not change the government's policy on foreign economic matters. Inspired by the mass participation in the FTA demonstrations, the protest against President Pak Kün-hye, which began as a specific plea from families of disaster victims, grew to include more than a million participants as well.

Despite her success in the 2012 elections, President Pak's popularity plummeted in 2014, following the Sewöl Disaster. On April 16, 2014, the Sewöl ferry sank near the shores of Korea, killing 304 people, including 250 students from a high school in the city of Ansan near Seoul. They were on an annual field trip and were trapped inside the sinking ship after the captain instructed them not to evacuate. President Pak was perceived by the public as directly responsible because she did not appear in the media or government offices during the seven hours following the sinking. As a result, she did not coordinate an organized rescue effort, and it seems that in her absence, decision-making was lacking during critical hours, costing the lives of many. Additionally, in the months following the tragedy, she refused to establish a significant investigation committee and change safety regulations in the country. The ferry was left at the bottom of the sea for three years.

As this tragedy was unfolding in live broadcasts, thousands of people, mostly strangers to the ferry's passengers, flocked to downtown Seoul to light candles and pray for survivors. "I am a mother myself. I cannot just sit and watch children suffer," a young woman holding her infant said onstage during one of the first protests at Chŏnggye Square. "I want to make this country a better place so that my son will grow up safely." While she spoke, her baby played with the microphone, interrupting the speech several times. His playfulness made his mother and the audience laugh and cry at the same time.

In these early public demonstrations, emotions took the form of material representations, which engaged the people of Seoul in ever-expanding circles. It commenced in the aftermath of the disaster, as grieving families marched to the Blue House (the presidential residence in Seoul) clutching framed photographs of their deceased children. This poignant display symbolized their feelings of resentment and accusation and unfolded on the city's main thoroughfares. The media extensively covered this event, prompting thousands of unrelated individuals to converge downtown in a show of solidarity. Two years later, during the impeachment demonstrations, the bereaved families came to the gatherings and held candles and photographs of their children, and several parents held virtual commemorations that attracted much support. The continuous material remembrance of the young lives lost due to the government's mishandling of the event served as an unceasing reminder that measures needed to be implemented to enhance public safety.

In the months following the disaster, various volunteer groups began to create related projects online and in downtown squares in front of the Seoul city hall and the Kyŏngbok palace. In comparison with other twenty-first-century protests in Korea, the Sewŏl demonstrations attracted crowds from more diverse backgrounds, political agendas, and lifestyles.

For five years, a protest encampment remained active in Kwanghwamun Square, in central Seoul, with the mayor's permission. Deep grief was channeled as anger toward the president and government. A wish to prevent similar disasters in the future attracted multitudes of people to join the protest which continued until Pak's removal from office in 2017, and further into 2019, in demands for improving

safety regulations. In the 1990s, the government changed the rules to allow passenger ships to be thirty years old instead of the previous twenty-year limit. The *Sewöl* was eighteen years old when it had been purchased from Japan, after being retired from service there. It was then remodeled to accommodate more passengers without the addition of proper safety devices. The law did not require that every ferry be inspected before leaving port, so the cargo in the hold of the *Sewöl* was not fastened. Moreover, the law did not require that crew members receive proper emergency training. As for the rescue operations, these were mostly in the hands of an unsupervised private business, and therefore the coast guard was unable to do its job properly.³

Even though these regulations predated Pak's presidency, she was depicted as immoral and irresponsible for failing to change them. Moreover, while the *Sewöl*'s captain and crew members had to serve long prison sentences, the political figures viewed as responsible were spared. When several corruption scandals and breaches of trust involving Pak emerged in winter 2016, hundreds of thousands took to the streets to protest. The protest tents of the *Sewöl* ferry victims' families became the physical and symbolic center of the demonstrations. Numerous rumors circulated about why Pak was hesitant to carry out a comprehensive investigation into the sinking. Some claimed that illegal toxic substances intended for military use were aboard the vessel, and she had allegedly authorized this shipment, prompting her desire to conceal her involvement. Others speculated about potential explanations for her whereabouts during the hours following the incident, positing scenarios such as undergoing a cosmetic procedure, being under the influence of drugs, or simply lacking interest. While none of these rumors have been confirmed, they added a touch of intrigue to the conversations about Pak's character and her fitness for her role as the nation's leader.

Mass participation transformed the cityscape. The entwinement of mourning and protest through material icons proved effective in inspiring activism beyond mere commemoration. Symbols such as the yellow ribbon were at the center of any gathering of the activist groups, kept the disaster fresh in the public memory, and prompted action from many who were not yet engaged in public dissent. The yellow ribbon serves as an exemplar of how folklore imagery and

symbols undergo transformation through the engagement of diverse social participants. The genesis of this trend can be traced back to a student group that, in the days following the sinking, substituted their social media profile pictures with images of yellow ribbons.⁴ This initiative was inspired by the portrayal of tying a yellow ribbon while awaiting a soldier, reminiscent of a scene from the 1949 American film *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, directed by John Ford. The film's theme song encapsulates the sentiment with the lyrics: "Round her neck she wore a yellow ribbon / She wore it in the winter and the merry month of May / When I asked her, 'Why the yellow ribbon?' / She said, 'It's for my lover who is far, far away.'" The trend of adopting a yellow ribbon as a profile picture spread rapidly in Korea, and evolved into a symbol of solidarity with the grieving families and their cause.

The role of images in persuading so many to allot time and effort to this quest cannot be overlooked. The Sewöl protesters did not necessarily know the victims before the disaster, but these symbols created a shared identity. The endurance of spontaneous Sewöl memorials in the city, and their symbolic transformation of grief and mourning into hope, strengthen Harriet Senie's assertion that "all spontaneous memorials are democracy in action."⁵ The democratic aspect of public memorials stems also from their accessibility to anyone, as discussed by Robert Dobler.⁶

While a significant portion of this dissent found expression online, the impact stemming from the physical presence of the masses played a pivotal role in achieving their objective: convincing the parliament to impeach Pak. The ribbons and photographs of the deceased students maintained an enduring presence at the downtown protest camp for years after the disaster. This constant display served as a means of preserving the tragedy in the collective memory and strategically placing Pak's responsibility for it at the forefront of the prevailing negative sentiments against her. Moreover, protesters used the public spaces in and around the semi-permanent Sewöl protest camp to express their discontent with her on broader issues. They created dozens of street-art installations, caricatures, statues, and large screens with related video productions to attract the attention of passersby. Moreover, the activists devised various small tokens that were given or sold, and became decorations on backpacks, wrists, and clothes.



Figure 1. The mourning families' protest camp at Kwanghwamun Square, July 2014.

These tokens carried the pleas of the protest outward from its physical center to a broader public.

EXPRESSIVE CREATIVITY

As the activists prepared unique and creative signs and symbols that received extensive media coverage, an aesthetic emerged that came to be associated with this movement. The most eye-catching items were multitudes of yellow ribbons that volunteers distributed in the city, along with permanent-ink markers so people could write personal dedications and prayers for the victims. These ribbons were tied to every pole, railing, and tree in the downtown area, and remained there for months, creating a yellow landscape of mourning and commemoration that kept the memory of the tragedy fresh (Figure 1). A unique art installation called *huimang chotbul* (candle of hope), which was erected in 2016 at Kwanghwamun Square, combined the impeachment and Sewöl issues. It was a thirty-foot-tall candle statue, whose base was covered in yellow ribbons, on which people wrote their dreams for a better society and messages to the Sewöl victims' spirits. Altars for the dead appeared in several places in the



Figure 2. Volunteers and passersby at Kwanghwamun Square commemoration altar, bowing and placing flowers below the victims' photographs, April 2018.

city, including City Hall Square and Kwanghwamun Square. Some of the altars had photographs of the deceased, and others were walls of flowers (Figure 2). Passersby could leave small offerings, such as flowers, food, or notes on shelves in front of the altars. Notes with wishes for the spirits of the dead were also collected by volunteers in boxes decorated with *sotdae*, wooden birds believed to be a point of connection with the afterlife.

These tributes to the Sewöl victims enabled people in Seoul to engage with the disaster as a community, a situation that can be hard to achieve in urban settings. The use of Korean folklore and symbols intensified the feeling of unity among the protesters. President Pak Kün-hye did not participate in these commemorative acts. She remained remote, did not meet the bereaved parents as expected, and barely discussed the tragedy in the media. She also never wore the yellow ribbon on her clothes, in contrast to the opposition leader, Mun Chae-in, who made clear his support for the protest by decorating his dark suit with a large pin of a yellow ribbon in all his public appearances.

Another example of the way in which both commemoration and protest were materialized involved the ten abandoned classrooms of the drowned students. These classrooms were not used after the

disaster, although the school continued to use other structures. For students and staff in the Ansan school, the abandoned classrooms were a constant, tangible reminder of the disaster. Within weeks, the desks had been turned into altars covered with offerings of food and notes. The blackboards filled with messages from classmates and relatives. Yellow ribbons were everywhere. Family and friends visited the classrooms often, and many of the funeral processions of the deceased students stopped there, as a final opportunity for the dead to say farewell to an important site of their short lives. A volunteer group led guided excursions to the classrooms.

The school and the Ministry of Education sought to remove the deceased students' personal effects and the improvised altars from the school, but the families and their supporters objected. The mourning of children by their parents is perceived as unnatural and unfair in modern Korean society.⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that so many have joined the parents in their demand to keep the classrooms intact. In August 2016, despite fierce protests, the classrooms' contents were moved to the annex building of the Ansan Department of Education, where space was allotted for the desks of each classroom to be set up. The significance and emotion attached to the desk altars by the community were acknowledged by the state, and the same objects that had been placed on them originally were placed on them again. The controversy over the classrooms was widely covered in the media and added to the disdain that many felt for President Pak and her government's mistreatment of the bereaved families.⁸

In November 2016, the media published documents found on the computer of the president's friend, Ch'oe Sun-sil, exposing the president's corruption. The documents provided evidence that Pak engaged in consultations regarding government secrets without the necessary clearance, and that she played a role in facilitating the acceptance of Ch'oe's daughter into a prestigious university. These actions appeared to be reciprocation for legal and financial support received from major corporations. The downtown demonstrations became massive. More than a million people attended each Saturday protest at Kwanghwamun Square.⁹ The vivid narrative surrounding rumors about the president's alleged connection with a Christian cult led by Ch'oe took on a mocking and politically incorrect tone

in protest caricatures. President Pak was portrayed as a marionette, manipulated by her friend who was depicted as a puppeteer dressed as a mystic shaman. These images were widely disseminated through banners and online social networks, even though the extent of Ch'oe's influence on policy remained unverified during that period. Through this approach, the creative use of folklore imagination played a role in fostering significant public resentment that extended beyond the confirmed facts made known to the public.

The organization engendered by the ferry disaster was effective in delegitimizing President Pak not only because of its emotional impact but also because protest organizers already had lists of many volunteer groups, people who had signed up for shifts at the protest camp, and volunteer artists and performers. The same volunteers staffed not only the social media headquarters and the organization groups but also the cleaning teams during the extensive mass impeachment protests. This pre-event coordination significantly bolstered the effectiveness and triumph of the impeachment movement. The volunteers discussed their participation in these teams as an expressive act of good citizenship and morality.

On December 9, 2016, two months after the incriminating documents were revealed, the National Assembly voted to impeach Pak. She denied all accusations, but on March 10, 2017, the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment. Many protesters asserted with pride that the impeachment would not have happened if they had not been able to capture the public's attention through demonstrations and social media campaigns, and thus pressure legislators. Indeed, because of massive and broad-based participation in the candlelight vigils, 234 members of the National Assembly voted in favor of impeachment, including more than sixty of Pak's own party members. Many people called this moment the *chotbul hyŏngmyŏng*, or Candlelight Revolution.¹⁰ This perspective was expressed by Mr. Chang, a student protester who told me in the summer of 2017, "When I first came to the square in 2014, I was so frustrated by politics. My parents told me that there is no way to have power over politicians because they are corrupt, and they always have been. But now I have proved them wrong. We stood in the square in the cold nights, and we won."

In the only previous case where the National Assembly voted to impeach a president, in 2004, protests played an equally powerful but opposite role. In that case, President No Mu-hyŏn was accused of calling on voters to support his party in elections, in violation of the constitutional requirement that the sitting president must remain impartial during elections. The National Assembly's vote to impeach resulted in mass demonstrations supporting the president, perhaps because the reason for his impeachment was broadly perceived as minor. There was little if any folklore creativity during that protest, yet the demonstrations were said to play an important role in the Constitutional Court's decision to overturn the impeachment and reinstate No as president in 2004.

The people who attended the protests demanding Pak's impeachment were not necessarily opposed to all of her government's policies, nor were most of them habitual activists. This was in contrast to the 1980s, when "[d]uring the authoritarian era, casual participation in politics had been unimaginable—Koreans had no choice but to accord with the binary of pro- and anti-government activism."¹¹ In 2016, protesters could express their discontent with a specific leader over specific issues, notably the ferry disaster, the corruption scandal, and the president's impersonal stance, without fear of retribution. Clearly, not every public concern receives such massive support. The emergence of Pak's corruption channeled the public's grief, anger, and disappointment over her handling of the Sewŏl tragedy into a political upheaval centered on ending her presidency. The impact of the events was further intensified and emotionally resonant through the utilization of caricatures, symbolic performances, and narratives rooted in imagination.

Similar to the FTA demonstrations in 2008, the impeachment protesters also circulated messages online broadening the circles of affect, and constructing a politics of captivation.¹² This form of politics evolves through a process wherein images evoke emotional reactions, subsequently prompting action due to their ability to capture the undivided attention of the public. Although the candlelight vigils avoided the violence of the 1980s pro-democracy clashes, they often honored leaders of those earlier demonstrations, as well as martyrs



Figure 3. A pro-Pak demonstrator in Seoul Station proudly displaying his plea to release Pak from prison, July 2019.

who died as a result of police violence. The mother of Yi Han-yŏl, a student protester who famously died in 1987, sometimes participated in the Sewŏl demonstrations, and audiences applauded her.

Throughout the impeachment protests, there were smaller protests, often held in front of City Hall and Toksu Palace, where Pak's supporters voiced their objection to the impeachment. Their numbers usually ranged from a few hundred to tens of thousands, but they made sure to be loud and noticeable, waving huge Korean flags and installing loudspeakers in the protest areas and on cars (Figure 3). The pro-Pak demonstrators that I interviewed often stated that the Sewŏl victims' family members were greedy people looking to gain from their children's deaths. They were sure that the bereaved families were paid large sums by the opposition parties to fuel anti-Pak sentiment.

Similar statements were expressed by Sewŏl protest activists regarding the pro-Pak protesters. The bereaved parents believed that no citizen could support Pak, especially after the corruption scandal, unless they were paid by her party to do so. However, after interviewing around thirty people in each of the two protest camps, I concluded that both movements were based on authentic feelings about Pak. I rarely encountered indifferent protesters. It is true that protesters of

all kinds tend to distribute pins, drinks, snacks, and the like, but these never seemed to be the main reason for mass participation. The protests and counterprotests were centered around emotions, and became a struggle over affect, with both camps aiming to express their ideas and either legitimize or delegitimize the president.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE IMPEACHMENT PROTESTS

After her impeachment, Pak was eventually arrested on charges of corruption.¹³ Police continued investigating and discovered that, among other things, Samsung had illegally transferred money to an organization run by Pak's closest friend. Pak was tried in April 2018 and sentenced to twenty-four years in prison. Her supporters were enraged. They argued that she had been unjustly discriminated against and that earlier presidents suspected of corruption had been allowed to finish their terms before being tried. On March 1, 2018, during a national holiday (*sam-il-jöl*), Pak's supporters marched to the candle statue at Kwanghwamun Square, which symbolized the movement that had led to their leader's ousting, and dismantled it. The object that caused most people to sympathize with the Sewöl victims' families acted as the opposite kind of affective symbol for Pak's supporters.

In December 2021, President Mun Chae-in pardoned Pak, cutting short her jail sentence. The Sewöl families and activists felt betrayed, underscoring the direct connection between the disaster and anger at the impeached president. An article covering their response was titled "A Pardon for Park Is as Good as Killing Us': Families of Sewol Ferry Victims Decry Park's Pardon." It described how protesters demonstrated in front of the Blue House wearing yellow coats and holding signs protesting the pardon. One of the victim relatives said, "How is it that someone who didn't even feel responsible can be pardoned so unilaterally on Christmas Eve—a day we should have been able to spend with our children?"¹⁴ Other activists stated that the pardon was premature, as there had been no independent investigation of Pak's responsibility with respect to the immense death toll—even though the impeachment rested on unrelated grounds of corruption. These responses to the pardon

demonstrate that many viewed the jail sentence as a just punishment for Pak's involvement in the Sewöl tragedy, rather than for her corrupt administration, just as the earlier demonstrations calling for her impeachment were closely related to disappointment in her leadership during the tragedy.

With a significant tradition of mass demonstrations on the streets, the protests against President Pak in 2016–17 drew on a long and clear heritage of direct political power achieved through the collective action of the masses. As these impeachment demonstrations in Seoul occurred a few years ago, lessons can be learned from the processes they initiated in South Korea's democracy.

President Mun Chae-in, who had been an opposition contender against Pak in 2012, was elected in 2017. He showed a radically different leadership style from what Pak had displayed. He advanced diplomatic relations with North Korea, worked on laws to improve women's status, and tried to lead initiatives to combat corruption. Many of the protesters saw these actions as a proper response to their endurance in the freezing cold of Seoul nights when they protested against Pak. Nevertheless, the move toward liberal governance was halted as Yun Sök-yöl, the president elected in 2022, has taken the country back to more conservative policies.

On December 3, 2024, Yun declared martial law in a sudden move that surprised many within his party and the army. The declaration effectively suspended democratic rule until the law is lifted, granting the president sole authority over national decision making. In response, widespread demonstrations erupted employing established protest norms, as discussed in this article. Within a few hours, the parliament voted to cancel the martial law, but the demonstrations continued demanding Yun's impeachment and imprisonment. Demonstrators held candles, and the stage was used not only for speeches and political statements but also for various pop and folk performances. Rumors, images, and popular songs circulated broadly, engaging the public in a few months of vibrant and dynamic street demonstrations, as well as online protest. By February 2025, the parliament voted to impeach the president, and he was subsequently arrested and put to trial for unconstitutional

use of martial law. The extensive incorporation of folklore was also evident in the protests of 2024–25, highlighting its enduring role within contemporary urban civil discourse.

Notes

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2. Sun-Chul Kim, “The Trajectory of Protest Suicide in South Korea, 1970–2015,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 51, no. 1 (2021): 38–63.

3. Jong-sung You and Youn-min Park, “The Legacies of State Corporatism in Korea: Regulatory Capture in the Sewol Ferry Tragedy,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 17 (2017): 95–118.

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5. Harriet F. Senie, “Mourning in Protest: Spontaneous Memorials and the Sacralization of Public Space,” in *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 51.

6. Robert Dobler, “Ghosts in the Machine: Mourning the MySpace Dead” in *Folklore and the Internet*, ed. Trevor J. Blank (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2009), 177–78.

7. Tony Walter and Jeffery K. Hass, “Parental Grief in Three Societies: Networks and Religion as Social Supports in Mourning,” *Omega* 54, no. 3 (2001): 179–98.

8. The temporary memorial, which was called Rememberable Classrooms, and which was open to visitors, was replaced in April 2021 by a permanent replica of the classrooms in the April 16 Institute of Democratic Citizenship Education in Ansan. In the permanent exhibit, the tables and blackboards from the original classrooms are arranged to look as they did in 2014. Yet they carry fewer commemorative items, are more orderly, and do not have the candies and soda cans that characterized them as altars for the spirits in their original, unsupervised site before 2016.

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14. Ji-yeong Park, "A Pardon for Park Is as Good as Killing Us': Families of Sewol Ferry Victims Decry Park's Pardon," *Hankyoreh*, December 28, 2021. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1025112.html?fbclid=IwAR3Z5SaaY3A_Xj69AgxsVmLMLbiIBnatQJFNVe-RGGvAWbLDVB1ffhtbEWs.

similar situation and, yes, folklore provides us with a strong basis for offering critique and hope for change.”³

In my essay “On Traditions of Goodwill,” I argue that if we look closely at everyday expressiveness, we find that any successful expressive act must be predicated on a shared set of norms, structures, and stances that allow communication to take place at all. In other words, even if we are communicating conflict, we can only do so successfully if a basic set of communicative ground rules exists between us. Moreover, successful expressiveness involves a high level of communicative skill and therefore must be cultivated through practice. And in fact, we spend a great deal of time and energy in our lives cultivating our abilities to express ourselves to others. Moving from a descriptive to an imaginative mode, I draw on insights from folklorists, sociologists, and moral philosophers to argue that what has been called “structural friendship” or “presumption of goodwill,” the basic stance that underwrites any successful act of communication, offers us a way of thinking about how we might foster the kind of rich, dialogic practice of communication that would, in turn, allow for the cultivation of empathy even as it preserves difference. Both this kind of communicative practice and an empathetic stance are necessary elements in building a thriving democracy.

Building on the focus of my essay on strategies for the cultivation of empathy in everyday practices, Jay Mechling draws on his decades-long research with Boy Scout groups to argue that by engaging in activities to teach and learn, play, act, provide care, or even fight, the children and adolescents who attend Boy Scout camps “acquire or enhance their capacity for empathy,” which is a crucial capacity for the cultivation of democratic discourse. Ultimately, Mechling argues “empathy cannot be taught, but it can be learned,” and that this learning is done most effectively not through formal instruction, but through informal everyday social experiences, both positive and negative, between children and adolescents.

Notes

1. For more on Paredes's life and work, see Christopher Schedler, "Inscribing Mexican-American Modernism in Americo Paredes' George Washington Gomez," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 154–76; José R. Lopez Morin, *The Legacy of Américo Paredes* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2006); Ramón Saldivar, *The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Manuel Medrano, *Américo Paredes: In His Own Words, an Authorized Biography* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2010); Richard Bauman, "'First Verses I Ever Knew': Américo Paredes and the Border Décima," *Journal of American Folklore* 125, no. 495 (2012): 5–22; José E. Limón, *Américo Paredes: Culture and Critique* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013); Lucy Biederman, "Border Songs: A Look2 Essay on Américo Paredes," *Ploughshares* (Summer 2016): 140–49, 151; Ilan Stavans and Derek Garcia, "Disputing Américo Paredes," *Aztlán* 41, no. 1 (2016): 349–76; Monika Kaup, "Revolutionary Shadows: Borderlands Identity in the Fiction of Américo Paredes," *Modernism/Modernity* 24, no. 4 (2017): 791–817; Takuya Matsuda, "Back with Butterflies: (Post-)World War II Fiction of Américo Paredes," *South Central Review* 38, no. 1 (2021): 37–57. The essays by Richard Bauman and Beverly Stoeltje (2012), two of the authors of the essay and dialogue on Paredes included in this book, were part of a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* dedicated to exploring the significance of Paredes's work fifty years after the first publication of his seminal folkloristic work, Américo Paredes, *"With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958).
2. Margaret Dorsey and Miguel Diaz-Barriga, with Richard Bauman, Norma Cantú, and Beverly Stoeltje, "Resilient Democracy: Folklorists, Our Border Counternarratives, and Américo Paredes," in *The Folklore of Democracy: Tradition and Democratic Culture after January 6th*, ed. Anthony Bak Buccitelli, <000>.
3. Dorsey et al., "Resilient Democracy," <000>.