

Book Review

Yi Jaeyeol [Yee Jaeyeol] 이재열, Hong Chansuk [Hong Chan-Sook] 홍찬숙, Yi Hyeonjeong [Lee Hyeon Jung] 이현정, Kang Wontaek [Kang Won Taek] 강원택, Bak Jonghui [Park Jong Hee] 박종희, Sin Hyeran [Shin HaeRan] 신혜란. 2017. 『세월호가 묻고 사회과학이 답하다』 [The Sewol ferry disaster: Social science perspectives]. Seoul: Oruem. 288pp. ISBN 9788977784727 ₩15,000

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The social sciences study human social phenomena and have the power to enhance our ability to interpret the complex world as we encounter it. *The Sewol ferry disaster: Social science perspectives* reminds us of the definition and role of social sciences at this general level. The preface by anthropologist Yi Hyeonjeong frames the volume as “a small tribute from social scientists to the victims of the Sewol ferry disaster.” The Sewol ferry disaster reminds us that it is our duty as social scientists to continue to critically interrogate various phenomena and characteristics of South Korean society. Volume contributors are researchers in the fields of sociology, anthropology, politics, and geography, and they have utilized social-scientific methodologies to understand, analyze, and interpret the social issues revealed through the Sewol ferry tragedy. The authors have not used the disaster to provide answers regarding what South Korean society should have done in the past,

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should be doing at present, and should do in future. Rather, the authors highlight the fact that South Korean society still needs to question the Sewol ferry disaster, which is already fading from people's memories.

This book takes us back to the time of the Sewol ferry disaster and uses the tragedy as a lens to magnify various phenomena in South Korean society. On the morning of April 16, 2014, the Sewol ferry, on route from Incheon to Jeju, sank near Gwanmaedo Island in Jindo-gun, South Jeolla Province. Out of 476 passengers, 304 died or went missing. Published in April 2017, this book presents materials from a symposium hosted by the Center for Social Sciences at Seoul National University in 2015, a year after the disaster. The book consists of six chapters by various authors from Seoul National University.

Chapter 1 by Yi Jaeyeol, "The cause and countermeasure of the Sewol ferry disaster based on system theory," analyzes the problems that led to the disaster at a systemic level. The accident model and the methodology of accident mapping based on the system theory of Jens Rasmussen (1997) is interesting because they systematically dissect an accident. The Sewol ferry disaster and rescue failure are analyzed via the Swiss Cheese Model of accident causation, as a result of incubated accidents (accumulated situations in which dangerous situations are misrecognized as safe). For instance, one never knows when a loosened shelf, which still holds and is still recognized as safe, might fall and cause an accident. Such an analysis is a step toward analyzing the causes of the disaster, which have become over-politicized.

In chapter 2, "Risk disaster, information spreading media, and becoming 'national disaster' of the Sewol ferry disaster," Hong Chansuk draws on Ulrich Beck, Niklas Luhmann, and Walter Benjamin to analyze mass media discourse on the Sewol ferry accident and to explain how it became understood as a national disaster and the politics of that recognition. In chapter 3, "Social Suffering after the Sewol ferry sinking: On representation, experience, and intervention," Yi Hyeonjeong takes an anthropological point of view to analyze the multi-layered suffering caused by the Sewol ferry disaster and to identify developments that intensified this suffering. In particular, by pointing out that our experiences concerning others' pain are dominantly influenced by the consumption of image goods as well as the mass media, which has specific political and moral agendas, Yi's analysis raises a question to the readers: what kinds of lenses should we use for understanding our complex world through social-scientific perspectives?

In chapter 4, “Social issues and political conflicts: Focusing on the Sewol ferry disaster,” Kang Wontaek argues that although the Sewol ferry disaster was a major maritime accident (151), the tragedy was a byproduct of the South Korean presidential system and winner-take-all, two-party structure. The chapter analyzes how the disaster expanded into political conflicts, confrontations, and traumas. In chapter 5, “Why was the Sewol ferry disaster extremely politicized: Dilemma of disaster politics,” Bak Jonghui deploys the theory of disaster politics and, from the perspective of the signaling game, tracks how the Sewol ferry disaster became extremely politicized. It concludes that extreme politicization (partisan politicization) was a matter of political forces and the administration pushing responsibility onto each other. The discourse analysis shows how then-ruling party Saenuri (currently, People Power party) politicized the issues and framed the meanings of the accident and victims in a certain way to cover up the party’s mistakes. Chapter 6 by Sin Hyeran, “Territorialization of memory: Making a place of memory for the Sewol ferry accident,” explores spaces where the Sewol ferry disaster is spoken of, and it considers those who speak about the Sewol ferry disaster and how they speak of it (230). To this end, the formation of memories surrounding the Sewol ferry disaster and the interaction of various commemorative spaces are analyzed, centering on the Memory Classroom of Danwon High School, Gwanghwamun Plaza, and Memory Space on Jeju Island.

The authors bring multiple perspectives from different disciplines within the social sciences to focus on a difficult topic. The result is a highly readable volume that offers various ways to understand, analyze, and interpret the Sewol ferry disaster. Even in 2021, seven years after the disaster, the narratives of that time and the consequent issues raised still resonate powerfully.

The problem of suffering is particularly relevant because, due to COVID-19, we are all experiencing a painful time in history as victims (or potential victims). This book presents us with a record of direct actions (or inaction) taken at the time of the Sewol ferry disaster. The authors commonly believe that suffering experienced in the course of the Sewol ferry disaster was aggravated by how the media handled it—the live breaking news broadcast as the disaster was unfolding and initially misinforming South Koreans that everyone was rescued. The reporters insensitively asked a survivor, “Do you know your friends are dead?” (125) and added to the pain by describing Ansan, where most victims were from,

derisively as a city of the working class, a city of immigrants. Pain was also inadvertently caused, authors show, by intervening experts, such as visiting psychotherapists inquiring after bereaved family members' intentions of suicide. One of this book's main contributions is its invitation for us to think together about how to analyze South Korean society and how to resolve the painful issues that the Sewol ferry disaster exposed.

However, although this book approaches the Sewol ferry disaster as a research topic, it was frustrating to this reader that all the chapters are political or politically biased, creating an impression that the authors share similar political convictions. Naturally, our lives are inevitably political, and it is difficult to think about individual and social issues without politics. Nevertheless, the political position taken in this book is not comprehensive enough to be helpful in resolving the issues that South Korea is now facing nor in comprehending the Sewol ferry disaster in a more social-scientific way.

Another of the book's limitations is its lack of a unifying conceptualization of the Sewol ferry incident; different contributors refer to the incident as "an accident," "an event," or "disaster" without further explanation. It is not the number of deaths that makes an accident a disaster, and social scientists would do well to guide others with precise terminology and clear justification.

There is no doubt that the Sewol ferry incident was a national disaster, and understanding it is even more important today, considering the current global disaster of COVID-19. The echoes of the Sewol ferry disaster continue to ask us questions about the present.

References

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