

Book Review

No Myeongu 노명우, Kwon Myeonga [Kwon Myung Ah] 권명아, Yi Gwangho 이광호, Yi Hyeonjeong [Lee Hyeon Jung] 이현정, Jin Taewon 진태원, Kim Dongchun [Kim Dong Choon] 김동춘, Cheon Jeonghwan 천정환, Kang Buwon 강부원, Kwon Changgyu 권창규, Heo Gyeong 허경, Jeong Wonok 정원옥, Oh Yeongjin 오영진, and Yun Yeoil 윤여일. 2015. 『팽목항에서 불어오는 바람: 세월호 이후 인문학의 기록』 [Wind from Paengmok Port: A record of humanities after the Sewol ferry]. Seoul: Hyeonsilmunhwa 현실문화. 376 pp. ISBN: 9788965641155 (8965641152) ₩14,000

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It was another mundane evening. From my home in the United States, I was watching South Korean television news reporting that the Sewol ferry, which carried 476 passengers, including 250 high school students, was sinking near Paengmok Port in the southwest corner of the Korean Peninsula. It was around 9:00 am Korean time and 8:00 pm in the States; two hours later, several Korean news outlets, including MBC (one of the biggest South Korean television and radio network companies), announced that all passengers had been rescued. Because of this update, I was able go

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to sleep like any other ordinary night. The next morning, however, I found out that the news had been misinformed. The ferry sank in the ocean with passengers still onboard.

The day of April 16, 2014, when the Sewol ferry disaster occurred, left a traumatic memory for most South Koreans because 304 people could not be rescued. Furthermore, for several days and nights after the incident, South Koreans had to witness the deaths of young students and other passengers through live streaming news. The Sewol ferry disaster has had widespread social and political repercussions within South Korean society because the tragedy revealed systemic social problems that contributed to the boat's sinking. The Sewol ferry case was not "just a ferry accident" in the way that George Floyd's 2020 death was not an accident—it was the result of systemic racism against Black people in the United States.

Wind from Paengmok Port examines the historical, political, and societal causes and effects of the Sewol ferry disaster by drawing on critical perspectives from the humanities and social sciences. Throughout this book, thirteen intellectuals ask what the role of knowledge should be, how intellectuals can write about this shameful event, and why our society must remember this tragedy—how we, as humans and survivors, can live on after April 16, 2014. As Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher, famously said: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today" (Adorno 1983: 34).

This book is divided into three parts. The first section of *Wind from Paengmok Port* is composed of four chapters that focus on humanity and memories. The second part has another five chapters, which critique the societal and political causes that led to the Sewol ferry disaster. In the third part, divided into four chapters, the book explores the possibility of a new subjectivity in Korean civil society through our experiences of this tragedy.

Wind from Paengmok Port asks how, why, and what we have to remember from the Sewol ferry tragedy. In the first chapter, No Myeongu insists that we have to acknowledge the suffering of April 16, 2014, which, as Adorno said, "has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream" (Adorno 1973: 598, cited in No, p. 31). No emphasizes that we must remember our suffering, especially when the social system does not work, as when the South Korean government failed to rescue the Sewol ferry's passengers while President Park Geun-hye was allegedly missing for seven crucial hours. In the second chapter, Kwon Myeonga discusses the

shame of being human by citing Primo Levi, who survived the Holocaust. Kwon emphasizes how writing about shame can resist systemic violence. In the next chapter, Yi Gwanho focuses on the moral responsibility of literature. Yi asks how literature can find language between the moral imperative to remember and the frustration of not having accurate words to express pain. Yi explores his questions through Korean literature and poems that remember social minorities who used to be forgotten. In the final chapter of the part one, Yi Hyeonjeong critiques the normative family ideology deeply rooted in Korean society through the controversies related to the Sewol ferry disaster. For example, some of the bereaved families suffered because of rumors resulting from their status as divorced, single, or remarried. Therefore, their mourning and sorrow were doubted. Also, Yi argues that Korean society did not pay attention to victims from mixed-race and multicultural families, failing to remember their deaths due to normative ideologies about family. In summary, the first part of this book leads us to have painful but important conversations about what we have to remember and why we need to engage the pain and suffering from the Sewol ferry tragedy.

The second part of this book explores the societal and political issues surrounding the Sewol ferry disaster. In the first chapter of this section, Jin Taewon demonstrates that the sinking of the Sewol ferry was not an “accident” since it was caused by an incompetent state that is only interested in how to control and police its citizens rather than considering how to protect their lives and dignity or how to increase democracy. From a Marxist perspective, Jin insists that the Korean government’s ineffectiveness results from its class hierarchies; as a result, some people are protected and others are abandoned, like the victims of the Sewol ferry disaster. Therefore, Jin emphasizes that this event left us with urgent questions about what kind of state we want. In the next chapter, Kim Dongchun also critiques the government’s incompetence, expanding on Jin’s perspective by discussing neoliberalism and the politics of hate. Kim examines how the Park administration (2013–2017) tried to frame the Sewol ferry disaster as an isolated, sad accident in order to avoid responsibility. The government manipulated the media to create hateful discourses against victims’ families who raised their voices for justice and truth, framing their demands as irrational or seeking to benefit from the tragedy. In the following two chapters, Cheon Jeongwan and Kang Buwon discuss corrupt media, fake news, and rumors on social media, explaining how politicians drive the

polarization of society and how people have lost their ability to empathize. In the last chapter of part two, Kwon Changgyu critically expands the book's discussion of state incompetence, asking if officials *could not* rescue the victims or if they purposely *did not*. He argues that the capitalist state creates non-desirable citizens when individuals are deemed not effective or productive enough. The Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–2013) privatized shipping industry regulations, so safety inspections were entrusted to the private sector in service of economic efficiency and freedom. However, this privatization was not able to consider citizens' safety. Therefore, Kwon insists that privatization that only prioritizes efficiency and productivity creates vulnerable citizens in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and gender—people who are unworthy of rescue. President Park stated that to keep talking about the Sewol ferry disaster or the “irrational” demands of victims' families would negatively affect the economic advancement of South Korea. In response, Kwon asks us to consider the responsibility of the humanities in the era of capitalism and to work to resist its discourse.

The third part of this book explores the possibility of a new subject who can resist the societal and systemic causes of the Sewol ferry disaster. Heo Gyeong begins by emphasizing that this tragedy allows us to realize how the state's most important duty is to protect the lives and property of its citizens. In the next chapter, Jeong Wonok examines the candlelight protest in the city of Ansan, where the victims' high school is located. Jeong understood this protest as using the politics of mourning to pursue the truth of about the Sewol ferry and justice for its victims. Through this gathering, the community opposed capitalistic values. In the last two chapters of part three, Oh Yeongjin and Yun Yeoil try to find healing for this societal trauma through literature.

Writing my review of this book was not easy because even though 7 years have passed since 2014, the memory of that day remains with me. I believe this scar and suffering will stay with us for a long time. However, *Wind from Paengmok Port* discusses how to live with the guilt and shame we feel as survivors and witnesses to this tragedy, reminding us why we cannot and should not forget. The writers of this book give us perspectives from the humanities and social sciences to interpret the causes and results of the Sewol ferry disaster. However, the last part of this book on the possibility of a new subject does not have as nuanced or diverse a discussion compared with parts one and two. This is probably because we do not yet have enough words to discover hope and possibility from the Sewol ferry

tragedy. To come up with such language out of suffering will be the next responsibility for the humanities, social sciences, literature, and all of us.

References

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