



ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ghat20>

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To cite this article: Chihyung Jeon, Scott Gabriel Knowles & Sang-Eun Park (2022) Disaster (continued): Sewol Ferry investigations, state violence, and political history in South Korea, History and Technology, 38:1, 84-106, DOI: [10.1080/07341512.2022.2094700](https://doi.org/10.1080/07341512.2022.2094700)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07341512.2022.2094700>



Published online: 11 Aug 2022.



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Disaster (continued): Sewol Ferry investigations, state violence, and political history in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

The Special Investigation Commission on the 4/16 Sewol Ferry Disaster offers a case in which the process of disaster investigation becomes a part, even a continuation, of the disaster for which it is created to bring closure. Placing the investigation in a longer temporality reveals obscured historical factors that shaped the investigation and its aftermath in surprising and crucial ways. Throughout the highly politicized process of deciding to investigate, what and whom to investigate, and how, disaster investigations can exacerbate the complexity of the disaster and the suffering of the victims and their families. What seems at first a technical and straightforward problem often turns out to be historically rooted and deeply contentious. In the case of the Sewol Ferry Disaster investigations, the process of creating an independent commission in a polarized political milieu unexpectedly formed a venue for evoking, drawing on, and re-experiencing state violence across generations. The Sewol Commission was modeled after earlier truth and reconciliation commissions in Korea, whose focus on individual ‘cases’ of political violence shaped how the Sewol investigation was conceptualized. As it turned out, the closure of the Sewol Commission closed nothing but the commission itself; the tragedy of the Sewol lingered.

KEYWORDS

South Korea; Sewol Ferry; investigation; slow disaster

In Seoul, South Korea on the morning of 1 July 2016, victims’ families gathered in the lobby of the building that housed the Special Investigation Commission on the 4/16 Sewol Ferry Disaster (Sewol Commission). They cheered for the investigators who were still coming to work despite the government’s formal closure of the investigation the day before. Over the preceding months the investigators had seen every possible thing that can go wrong with a disaster investigation. Now the Commission staff were determined to keep working, even without pay, and to publish their findings. On July 27, Commission Chairman Lee Suk-tae went on a hunger strike, disputing the government’s legal interpretation of the closing date of the Commission, and protesting the government’s ongoing obstruction (see [Figure 1](#)).¹ In the end, however, out of money and under pressure from the government, the Commission was forced to disband; no final report was issued. It meant that South Koreans ended up having no official account of how and

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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Figure 1. Chairman Lee Suk-tae of the Sewol commission on a hunger strike in central Seoul. Photo used with permission of Yonhap News Agency.

why 304 people onboard a ferry headed to Jeju Island on 16 April 2014 died. What had begun as an earnest attempt to learn from the worst disaster in recent South Korean history quickly devolved into a politicized quagmire – a disaster, continued.²

In research conducted over the summer of 2017 and thereafter, we discovered that the Sewol Commission's success was in jeopardy from its first meeting in 2015, when the seventeen commissioners could not agree on their fundamental charge. (This observation is also compatible with the experience of one of the authors, Sang-Eun Park, who worked as a staff investigator for the Sewol Commission.) Commission members recommended by the ruling party (Saenuri Party, the predecessor of the People Power Party) were concerned that the Commission was a tool to discredit then-President Park Geun-hye. They argued that the Commission's primary task was to review the previous Sewol reports and correct factual errors. Members recommended by the opposition party and the families disagreed with this characterization. The Commission, in their view, was supposed to exercise its own initiative to investigate every aspect of the disaster and discover the deeper history and broader public safety implications of the Sewol Ferry sinking. How could an investigative body created by a special law, funded by taxpayers, and covered intensely by the media not even agree on its starting point? In this article, we examine what happened inside and around the Special Investigation Commission on the 4/16 Sewol Ferry Disaster, and ask what the failure of the Sewol Commission tells us about the nature of contemporary disaster investigations more generally.

The Sewol Commission offers a case in which the process of disaster investigation becomes a part, even a continuation, of the disaster for which it is created to bring closure. The investigation of disaster may produce new crises, new injury. Placing the investigation in a longer temporality reveals obscured historical factors that shaped the investigation and its aftermath in surprising and crucial ways. Throughout the highly

politicized process of deciding to investigate, what and whom to investigate, and how, disaster investigations can exacerbate the complexity of the disaster and the suffering of the victims and their families. History of Technology and Science, Technology, and Society (STS) scholars have contributed to a deeper understanding of this process by demonstrating the functions that formal disaster investigations play in societies where trust in technology runs hand in hand with trust in political, economic, and legal institutions and in democracy more generally. What seems at first a technical and straightforward problem often turns out to be historically rooted and deeply contentious. In the case of the Sewol Ferry disaster investigations, the process of creating an independent commission in a polarized political milieu unexpectedly formed a venue for evoking, drawing on, and re-experiencing state violence across generations. Instead of resolving critical issues in any effectual way, disaster investigation can create a wretched feeling for the victims' families and for the public that the disaster has not ended or indeed may never end. As it turned out, the closure of the Sewol Commission closed nothing but the commission itself; the tragedy of the Sewol lingered.

Disaster investigations in context

In the most recent *Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, Fortun, Knowles, et al. generalize from particular disaster investigations, to advance some principles on the role that such inquiries play in sense-making and policy formation in society. This discussion draws on a tradition of STS scholarship advanced by Sheila Jasanoff, Stephen Hilgartner, Diane Vaughan and others interested in the authority of expertise in disaster. The authors find that 'disaster investigations are an expected, necessary stage in the life cycle of a technological disaster – a normal outgrowth of the very technoscientific mode of thinking that brings high-risk technological systems into existence in the first place'. Disaster investigations may help 'soothe public fears and restore faith in experts; yet, investigations may reveal negligence that opens the door to sustained critiques of corporate, regulatory, and/or governmental leadership'.³

Under any circumstances, disaster investigations involving large institutions and multiple stakeholders are difficult. The immediate rush to discover truth and 'learn lessons' gives way to the political realities of entrenched, powerful interests jostling for control of the disaster narrative and its public policy ramifications. Merely deciding exactly what disaster is to be investigated may seem obvious if viewed from afar, but in effect often proves highly contestable. In the case of September 11, for example, was it the failure of the aviation security system, in which planes were hijacked and crashed, that required investigation? Was it the failure of the counter-terrorism system, in which crucial information was not picked up or shared? Or was it the failure of building and fire safety systems, in which these technologies could not extinguish high-rise fires in time to save those trapped in the World Trade Center towers? Broadening the scope, how was the disaster related to postwar American foreign policy in the Middle East? In the end, the 9/11 Commission focused on the first two questions and not the last two, choosing not to address deeper history or the building safety question in detail.

The main formal product of the conventional disaster investigation commission is its final report released to the public. A disaster investigation report can garner public trust, bringing closure to the disaster sense-making process in a community of interest, a closure that then enables the formal process of public memorialization. An investigation report can also serve as a basis for policy action. The *9/11 Commission Report* was a best-seller in the United States, for example, and it triggered the creation of the largest US federal government agency formed since the Cold War – the Department of Homeland Security.⁴ The formation of three major public memorials followed close behind. The separate technical report on the collapse of the World Trade Center buildings generated the creation of new high-rise building codes.⁵ The scale of change that resulted from the 9/11 investigations demands its own careful historicization, but we can see that each brought some measure of political consensus and closure that led to intensive post-disaster policy reforms.

What caused the Sewol Ferry to sink? With historical precision, we might better ask: What possible causes did investigators entertain in order to explain the sinking? Like any disaster investigation, what might seem like a technical question opened quickly into debates over the power of the state and the media, the unjust suffering of victims and their families, and even the nature of disaster itself. For example, was the Sewol Ferry Disaster an event that happened on a single day, or was it one moment in an ongoing process of public dispute in South Korea over technological risk and industry regulation, over the proper role of the government in protecting public safety? One's position on that question offered a preview of the type of investigation the Sewol demanded, and an outcome that might be deemed *truthful*. The case of the Sewol Ferry Disaster investigations adds new empirical data that historians and STS scholars must consider as they try to understand the many ways that disasters both reveal and re-structure power in society. The disaster investigation – like a courtroom – may provide an appearance of impartiality and final judgment, but it bears with it the same structures of injustice and vulnerability that exist outside the doors of the investigative chamber.

The structures of power reproduced or altered by a disaster investigation are inseparable from the factor of time. In the case of catastrophes experienced as tightly bounded by hours or days – as with a hurricane or a mass shooting – the governmental, cultural, and scientific structures attendant to disaster sense-making function in familiar ways. Slow disasters like climate change unfold across longer stretches of time, punctuated by recognizable events, but unspooling damage at a different pace, with a different calculus. Investigative analysis of the Sewol Ferry Disaster demands a study of the sinking of the ship as an event in time, but also entails understanding the accumulated impacts of previous disasters in South Korea, and the structured processes of risk taking and regulation. Furthermore, the suffering of victims from previous disasters was not irrelevant to the community of support that formed around Sewol victims and their families. Trauma unfolding over time is an essential feature in the creation of a case for the moral authority of victims' families after a disaster. The uneven timelines of these different factors all intersect at the Sewol Ferry investigation, with predictably bewildering complexity. Investigators and victims' family members were frequently operating from different starting points, and ultimately found themselves distrustful of the process and uncertain of a definitive outcome.

Of particular applicability here is the idea of ‘slow disaster’, the unfolding of a damaging process over time that reveals social and technological vulnerability.⁶ Defying manifestation as a single event, a slow disaster confounds the normal ‘event-based’ spatio-temporal limits that governments often place on disasters. A slow disaster is not so neat and tidy, so easy to categorize, or clear in its causality. Climate change due to industrial activity is a paradigmatic slow disaster, though the concept may also be used to describe war and episodes of state violence, in which unresolved aftermaths coalesce later into episodes of continued violence and the incomplete restoration of justice. The Sewol Commission revealed the unexpected continuity of a slow disaster in South Korea – a long and unresolved history of democratization and technological transformation that has given rise to multiple individual disruptions and disasters, including the Gwangju Democratic Uprising of 1980, the Sungsoo Bridge Collapse of 1994, the Sampoong Department Store Collapse of 1995, and the Daegu Subway Fire of 2003.

In the wake of the Sewol, we can connect a long string of seemingly unrelated events and wrap them into a broader continuity: a period of time in which innumerable losses of human rights and lives under authoritarian regimes stimulated popular movements for democracy at the same time that a state-led rush to economic growth spawned corruption and failures of public safety. Since the democracy movements in the 1980s, whether and how the state should be held accountable for both political atrocities and safety failures has emerged as a legal, epistemic, and technical challenge. Explaining the causality of disasters, when it was attempted at all, was never straightforward, as it required overcoming political and legal obstacles and legitimizing new organizations and procedures. It is within this historical context, therefore, that we can see how the methodology of the Sewol Commission ended up following that of the post-democratization truth and reconciliation commissions on earlier state violence and killings. This continuity is not an aberration; it is a clue towards understanding the broader era of political and technical disasters in which Sewol occurred.

Sewol is an exemplary case in which the investigation process itself becomes entangled with a broader process of political unrest and reform. By the time of its forced closure in the summer of 2016, the Sewol Commission had become a continuation of the disaster, or another disaster, prolonging the stress and violence focused on victims’ families and undermining public confidence in the government. The ultimate collapse of the Commission reveals the complicated and contentious nature of the Sewol disaster as well as the political and epistemic challenges that most disaster investigations face. It was therefore both remarkable and expected that when the scandals at the Blue House (the Korean President’s office and residence) were first exposed in October 2016 and Korean citizens started to take to the street, many people were making a reference to Sewol as one of the major factors that influenced their thinking about the Park government and the legitimacy of the state.⁷ The investigation was not a technical process bracketed off from the normal actions of politics, or an apolitical process that somehow became infected by politics. The Sewol disaster and its investigations produced politics.

The Sewol investigation raises a further possibility, one suggested by its duration, uncertain ending, and the chartering of additional investigations to follow – one of which will close in September 2022. Is it possible that disaster investigation in South Korea will serve as an extension of the state – charged by elected officials to explore difficult

technical matters and settle the pressing matters of credit and blame? Recent scholarship on third sector governance, private standard-setting and regulation, and disaster investigations worldwide points to the increasing demand in capitalist, democratic societies for quasi-governmental and ad-hoc governmental bodies to address technological uncertainties that pose hazards to lives and markets.⁸ The Sewol case may very well be a manifestation of the need for a new governmental function, a function not satisfied by any existing entities, public or private. As an extension of South Korean governance and politics in a new but no less contested venue, the Sewol investigation can be a harbinger of governmental approaches to address slow disaster in the framework of a high-tech democracy.

The sinking of the Sewol: an accident becomes a disaster

On 16 April 2014, the Sewol ferry sank near the southwestern tip of the Korean peninsula, as the entire nation watched on a live broadcast. While the ship was quickly flooded and sinking deeper into the water, the Marine Police tragically failed to rescue the passengers onboard. The death toll kept increasing, eventually reaching 304, out of a total of 476 passengers and crew. Immediately thrown into chaos and despair, the nation waited, in vain, for any good news. The search for the missing and the recovery of bodies continued for seven months, while the citizens mourned for the dead and the missing. The most shocking fact about the victims was that a cohort of 250 students from the Danwon High School in the city of Ansan on a school trip died in the accident. Ten classrooms in one high school suddenly became almost empty.⁹

From early on, Sewol was perceived not only as a singular tragedy, but also as a slow disaster, one that exposed the flawed workings of incompetent institutions, lax regulations, and irresponsible practices, which had been normalized for the sake of economic growth and profit and at the expense of safety. The term ‘social disaster’ was also employed to describe the Sewol disaster as involving both technical and institutional systems and to distinguish it from ‘natural disaster’. In the immediate aftermath of the sinking, therefore, reference was made frequently to earlier large-scale accidents such as the Sungsoo Bridge collapse in 1994, the Sampoong Department Store collapse in 1995, and the Daegu Subway fire in 2003. In these accidents, and Sewol too, technical systems failed catastrophically in combination with faulty design and construction, inadequate regulation, and an obvious emphasis on speed and profit over public safety.¹⁰

The demand for a special legislative act and an independent investigation commission also came from the perspective of the recent history of South Korean disasters. In the immediate wake of the sinking, it was pointed out that the Korean society had never made a thorough investigation of catastrophes such as building collapses or large-scale fires.¹¹ When investigations did take place, they were usually limited in scope, did not get to the essence of the deeper problems, and often ended up punishing those at the lower end of the bureaucratic or corporate hierarchy. Moreover, whatever reports the investigations produced were badly archived and unavailable for learning and reference afterwards. The families of the victims in these earlier catastrophes knew this problem better than anyone else. In August 2014, four months after the Sewol sinking, these families formed the ‘Family Association of Disaster and Safety’ and supported the Sewol special

act for ‘establishing the truth and punishing the people in charge’. In a press release on August 12, they claimed that ‘there has never been a genuine truth finding so far and we need the Sewol Special Act with a mandate to investigate and prosecute’.

A strong public discourse emerged around the fact that the government, or even the President, should be held responsible for the disaster. As seen on the cover of a weekly magazine *Hankyoreh 21* published soon after the sinking, a strong response to the sinking was to call out the state’s responsibility in disasters (see Figure 2). Here the ship was being left to sink with no serious efforts for rescue by official state agencies. The question posed was: ‘You call this a state?’ The question of state responsibility and the doubt about the legitimacy of such an incompetent state were unavoidable, because of the utter failure of rescue operation on a calm sea under clear weather conditions. For both failing to regulate the marine industry and failing to rescue the passengers, the victims’ families and their supporters questioned the very legitimacy of the state, raising the call for investigation well beyond the confines of a narrowly technical examination.

By contrast, the ruling Saenuri Party tried to contain the political damage from the Sewol. Starting from the summer of 2014, several congressmen from the party began to circulate a different characterization of the disaster: the Sewol was ‘basically a traffic accident’. Defining the Sewol sinking as a traffic accident meant that no extraordinary



Figure 2. The cover of the weekly magazine *Hankyoreh 21*, vol. 1008, published on 28 April 2014, posed a question: ‘You call this a state?’ Note the black margins of the cover, indicating that the magazine was mourning the dead. Photo used with permission of *Hankyoreh 21*.

political or legal measures were needed to deal with its aftermath. With this definition the ruling party attempted to take the ship, that is, the technical system, out of the regulatory, organizational, and political contexts within which it had been designed, modified, and operated.¹² This was a rhetorical strategy implemented to protect the government, and most importantly the President, whose whereabouts during several hours after the sinking have to this day never been released to the public.

The political standoff on the special act to create a special investigation commission was set against these opposing conceptualizations of Sewol: a traffic accident versus a slow disaster of the state. The victims' families and their supporters were infuriated by the Sewol-as-traffic-accident discourse. And they came to focus even more on the state's responsibility for letting the citizens die by not rescuing them. The civil society groups and the media critical of the government were sensitive to the distinction and tended to call the Sewol 'disaster' or 'catastrophe' rather than 'accident'. Refusing the rhetorical frame of the traffic accident, many citizens adopted an articulate definition made by novelist Park Min-gyu in his widely circulated essay: 'The Sewol is an *accident* ("sago" in Korean) in which a ship sank as well as an *incident* ("sageon") in which the state did not rescue its people'.¹³ The emphasis, to be sure, was on the latter. By 'incident' (sageon), he meant an occurrence that involved intention, harm, and responsibility as opposed to an 'accident' that could be considered unfortunate, unexpected, and unintentional. In other words, the state was to be held accountable for what happened to the Sewol victims.

Sewol disaster as state violence

As the political struggle intensified, the victims' families and the citizens critical of the government's handling of Sewol came to characterize Sewol as a case of 'state violence'. Defined this way, Sewol served as a link between two categories of events that had seemed different, but in fact both functioned to erode public confidence in the modern South Korean industrialized state. Instead of being only a technical disaster like the building and bridge collapses of the previous decades, Sewol was put in the lineage of suspicious and unaccounted for deaths under authoritarian regimes, human rights infringement on political dissenters, and most strikingly the 1980 Gwangju democratic uprising, in which the Korean army and special forces beat and shot hundreds of civilians to death (see Figure 3).

There had been numerous cases of 'suspicious deaths' (deaths with unknown causes) in the 5.18 Gwangju Uprising (1980) and other democratic movements against dictatorship, in which the state was the very suspect of violence or killing. The families of the victims killed in Gwangju reached out to the Sewol families, sharing their experiences of state violence and then the state's reluctance to reveal the truth for the past three decades. The Sewol disaster began to be represented as another tragedy that resembled the Gwangju killings. For example, a newspaper cartoon, published in May 2014 and also displayed in the Sewol 'memory classroom' – a memorial for the Danwon high school victims consisting of their perfectly preserved classrooms – made a clear connection between the Sewol and the Gwangju democratic uprising. The image of a soldier beating a young man was re-drawn from an iconic historical photograph taken during the Gwangju uprising and put alongside the image of students mourning for the Sewol.



Figure 3. 'A spring day' by Hee-Je Lee. Young students mourning for the Sewol victims take a glance at a soldier beating a citizen in Gwangju. The Gwangju democratic uprising occurred in May 1980. This cartoon was printed in the daily newspaper *Hankyoreh* on 20 May 2014. Reproduced with permission of Hee-Je Lee.

The cartoon was directly referring to the controversy on the use of a particular song in the Gwangju memorial event of 2014 and the suppression of mourning and protesting for the Sewol. The sentiment underlying the cartoon, however, was that the state did not simply fail to save the victims' lives; it was involved in letting them die or killing them in the Sewol, as it was in Gwangju.

It was within this frame of state violence that the Sewol victims' families suspected that the state would never be willing to find and reveal the truth, let alone acknowledge its complicity in the disaster. Their suspicion was confirmed when the Prosecution Service released the result of its investigation in October 2014. Among those involved in the Sewol case, 154 people were arrested and put into custody and 399 people in total were booked on charges, including the captain and crew, the owner and senior members of the ferry company, and marine safety managers and inspectors.¹⁴ The senior leadership of the coast guard, however, were not indicted, and only one field commander on the scene was indicted. The victims' group was not satisfied with this result, since it did not pursue those in power and failed to answer all of their questions. It seemed to repeat the Prosecution Service's role in the past to be part of state violence or covering it up.

As this early legal investigation failed to earn public trust, the demand for a special act to establish an independent commission grew higher and louder. The petitions for the Sewol special act had begun as early as May 2014. The Sewol families and their support groups collected millions of signatures in support of the special act and presented them to the National Assembly.¹⁵ The civil society groups in support of the victims' families, the opposition party, and the media sympathetic to the families, on one side, criticized the government for covering up the truth of the Sewol disaster and obstructing the early efforts for fact-finding. The ruling party and conservative media, on the other side, did not see much need for a long and expensive investigation and simply wanted to move on. Even after both sides agreed on creating the commission, the political battle was intense over what to include in the special act and how to organize the special commission. For example, the families wanted the Sewol Commission to have prosecution power on its

own, instead of having to rely on the Prosecution Service in determining who should be punished. The families, citizens, and lawyers in support of the special act took this agenda seriously because of their experiences with the earlier commissions on state violence, where the lack of such authority had hampered the commissions' work.¹⁶ It was not surprising that the government and the ruling party were most opposed to this demand in the special act. After intense contestation and negotiation, the Sewol Commission was denied the power to prosecute. For the victims' families, this was another sign that the state was not willing to find the truth, but concerned only with protecting itself and President Park.

It needs to be noted that, for the victims' families, 'state violence' was not just a conceptual framework to situate Sewol within Korea's political history. In the course of making their demand on the special commission, the families themselves became victims of state violence. When they took to the street to appeal to the state and then to publicize their case for the special act, they faced the state in the form of police blocking their way. On the night of 8 May 2014, only three weeks after the sinking, the families walked toward the Blue House, asking for a meeting with the President, but had to spend the night on the street surrounded by the police.¹⁷ On 18 April 2015, one year after the sinking, when the families and citizens gathered in central Seoul, mourning for the dead and the missing, and criticizing the way in which the government implemented the special act, the police set up a 'wall of buses' to block their routes, sprayed 'tear liquids', and even shot water cannons against them. The police deployed about 14,000 officers to handle about 30,000 grievors-turned-protesters and arrested about one hundred of them, including some Sewol family members.¹⁸ The Sewol families would experience similar confrontations with the state until the end of the Park administration.

In desperate attempts to find the truth while confronting government hostility and violence, the Sewol families came to organize the most united, enduring, and proactive disaster victim group in Korea. The sheer number of student victims (250) enabled their parents to act together as a core group for all the victims' families.¹⁹ Turning grief into action, the Sewol families committed themselves to finding out why their children died and who was responsible for the death. Wherever the Sewol disaster was addressed, the families showed up in their yellow clothing and with yellow ribbons on, the color that had come to symbolize a collective wish for the victims to return. The Sewol families also set up several tents in the Gwanghwamun Square, the nation's central place for political and social gatherings, where they distributed hand-made yellow ribbons to citizens, collected signatures for the special act, and held memorial events. With such perseverance and patience, the families dedicated their moral authority as parents who lost a child to passing the Sewol special act and creating the investigation commission. The 4/16 Sewol Families for Truth and a Safer Society made it their official aim to 'salvage the ship intact, recover all the missing victims, find the truth thoroughly, and build a safe society'.²⁰

The framework of 'state violence' as understood by activists and lawyers and as experienced by the families helped turn the Sewol-related activities into a social movement. As more citizens and activists joined forces to call for truth-finding, the idea of Sewol as state violence let them identify who needed to be held accountable, that is, those who ordered and executed the state violence, as in the case of the Gwangju democratic uprising. But when the framework of state violence was carried over to the design of the Sewol Commission, it had the effect of limiting the scope of investigation to finding who

deserved (legal) punishment. Truth-finding in Sewol was equated with uncovering what the Prosecution Service – and the state behind it – had refused to reveal. Under the weight of political past and present, the Sewol disaster investigation became a fight against the violent and anti-truth state.²¹

‘A Golden Ratio’, or how the Sewol commission was designed to fail

The Special Act on Investigating the Truth of the April 16 Sewol Ferry Disaster and Building a Safe Society was passed on 7 November 2014, and put into effect on 1 January 2015. The act stated that the tasks of the Commission were to include: 1) investigate the causes of the disaster; 2) investigate the problems in the laws, policies, institutions, and practices that contributed to the disaster; 3) investigate the failure of rescue operation and the government’s response; 4) investigate the media in terms of the fairness and appropriateness of the Sewol reporting (e.g. defamation of victims); 5) offer policy recommendations for creating a ‘safe society’; and 6) evaluate the support system for the victims and their families.²²

The Sewol Commission was composed of seventeen members, five of whom were ‘standing commissioners’ (who worked full-time for the commission) and the rest were non-standing commissioners. The special act stipulated that the National Assembly would select ten commissioners (including two standing); the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and the President of the Korean Bar Association would each nominate two commissioners (including one standing), and the victims’ family association would select three commissioners (including one standing). Among the ten commissioners allotted for the National Assembly, five were nominated by the ruling party, which was not supportive of the commission in principle, and the other five were nominated by the opposition parties, which were generally supportive of the commission.

This mechanism for commissioner nomination by multiple entities (5-5-2-2-3) produced what some expected to be a ‘golden ratio’.²³ For those who supported the commission and considered themselves to be on the victims’ side, this meant that the composition of the commissioners as stipulated by the special act would give them a slight advantage in voting power within the commission, while appearing to maintain political balance. The five commissioners nominated by the opposition parties were expected to cooperate on most agenda items with the three nominated by the victims’ families. If these eight commissioners could bring just one more commissioner to their side when voting on a contentious agenda, they would win the majority vote. This structure, if utilized cleverly, would have enabled the commission to proceed despite the expected non-cooperation or obstruction from the ruling party and the government.

In terms of actual investigation, however, this ‘golden ratio’ composition was a recipe for conflict and failure. According to one of the commissioners we interviewed, ‘it was really bad, as the commission became something like a debate forum’. Rather than functioning as the ‘golden ratio’, the commissioner said, the scheme ‘messed the whole thing up’. The seventeen commissioners did not have a chance to have a candid discussion among themselves about the general direction of the commission, as they saw one

another only in formal meetings and had no informal communication venues. When the commissioners did talk outside official meeting rooms, those gatherings were divided by the party line, leaving out some members in the middle.²⁴

Some of the commissioners, namely those recommended by the ruling party (at the time) believed that the blame issue had already been settled on the seemingly greedy shipping company Cheonghaejin Marine and that the explanation of the event had already been done reasonably well by the Prosecution Service. They were concerned that the commission was created purely to fix blame again on a political basis, specifically to implicate the President.²⁵ For this group of commissioners, the entire to-do list of disaster investigation was unnecessary, and they didn't want to engage meaningfully in any of these tasks. They had had to agree to establish this commission due to the strong pressure from the public to pass the special act. But they pursued a closure, rather than an investigation, with this commission. They would have preferred to reach a closure without the Sewol Commission by affirming the previous investigations by the Prosecution Service and the Maritime Safety Board. Once the Sewol Commission was created, they instead worked to get closure as quickly as possible.

From the perspective of the Commission and staff investigators, the investigation work faced obstruction in various dimensions. First of all, there was a tug-of-war even before the commission's opening about the size of staff and budget. Tensions began to appear when one high-ranking member of the ruling party said in January 2015 that the special commission was a 'tax thief'.²⁶ This comment was intended to pressure the government into reducing the staff and budget. On 27 March 2015, less than a month before the first anniversary of the Sewol disaster, the Ministry of Ocean and Fishery announced the enforcement decree for the Sewol special act, which differed considerably from the commission's request.²⁷ The Ministry would reduce the number of staff from 120 to 90, lower the proportion of investigators recruited from the civil sector while increasing the number of government personnel, and reduce the budget substantially. The Commission and the Sewol families protested against this decree, as they considered it as an attempt to 'render the special commission powerless'.²⁸ The Ministry and the Commission had to negotiate the terms of the enforcement decree, and it was decided that the Commission would begin with 90 staff members for the first six months and then hire 30 more. This whole process of standoff and negotiation had the effect of delaying the Commission's actual work.

The Commission began to hire staff and the money began to flow in summer 2015, but the work of investigation could not proceed smoothly. For example, it took much time and patience to request and receive Sewol-related documents from various government organizations, such as the Prosecution Service, the Board of Audit, and the courts. Having to photocopy or scan tens of thousands of pages from each organization, the newly hired investigation staff could not even begin to review the records for a while.²⁹ Doing its own part in obstruction, the Blue House did not approve the nomination of a bureau chief to be in charge of actual investigation work until the very end of the Commission, creating a void in the organization.³⁰ Meanwhile, the staff investigators faced formal and informal obstructionism in their daily work. A team whose task was to investigate defamatory practices against the Sewol victims on the Internet could not begin their work immediately, because of the rules for government employees that banned their access to social media. Those who were dispatched from the Ministry to

support the Commission's work did not bother to find solutions to these problems, but instead cited the rules repeatedly. The administrative staff from the Ministry tended to demand excessive paperwork for the investigators who were hired from the civil sector and not familiar with the bureaucratic system. In the midst of all the obstructions, the investigators worked around the edges, some developing archiving practices and others working on sub-reports in lieu of waiting for a final report to take shape.

The biggest difficulty for the Commission was the fight over the duration of the Commission's operation. The special act stipulated that the Commission would operate for up to 18 months and then spend three months on writing a final report. The question was exactly when the Commission *started* to operate. The government's interpretation was that the Commission started on the day the special act went into effect, that is, 1 January 2015. The Commission's position, by contrast, was that it started to operate on 4 August 2015, when the budget was first transferred to the Commission. The investigators were not sure about which schedule they should follow in making plans for investigation and the commissioners had to spend much time in negotiating the duration of work with the government. Contrary to the expectation of the commission staff, the government steadfastly maintained its position to end the Sewol Commission on 30 June 2016, exactly eighteen months after the special act came into effect.³¹

The case method and the legacy of political history in the Sewol investigation

It would not have been difficult for the Commission members to agree that one of its main tasks was to explain the event. It was not obvious to everybody, however, what 'explaining the event' meant and how it could be done. The task was often phrased as 'truth finding' or 'revelation of the truth' or 'establishment of the truth'. The social justice framework of truth finding and attributing responsibility had been implemented in previous investigation commissions on political cases. 'Truth finding' in those cases often meant, implicitly or explicitly, fixing the blame or determining who's guilty rather than obtaining a full account of the entire process of the tragedy. As for the Sewol Commission, there existed two different but complementary demands for investigation: to enable thorough legal punishment and to uncover 'structural causes' not limited to legal wrongdoings. The Sewol Commission faced a difficult and delicate task of determining what kind of truth is to be found or explained.

The partisan composition of the Commission made it almost impossible, from the very beginning, for its members to work together and produce an investigation plan that everybody could agree on. The fear of political attack, whether internal or external, made the Commission wary of all frames of analysis and stick to the elusive idea of objectivity. Unable to push its own investigation plans to agreement, the Sewol Commission proceeded to work on the individual cases of inquiry submitted by the families. Working on these submitted cases seemed to protect the commissioners and investigators from politically motivated criticism. This 'case method' was modeled on the approach used by the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (2005–2010) that had worked on the cases of state violence or suspicious deaths under the postwar authoritarian regimes in South Korea.

The public would not have thought at first of the Sewol Commission as a continuation of the truth and reconciliation commission model. But some of those who worked on drafting the special act for the Sewol Commission were working in the frame of ‘past affairs’ commissions, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Truth-Finding Commission on Suspicious Deaths, on which they had worked before. (Some of these lawyers were to become members of the Sewol Commission or the Social Disaster Commission to be discussed below.) In moving this direction, the character of the Sewol investigation veered away from an investigation of a large-scale accident to that of state violence and killing. The cases investigated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were about how and why a certain individual – a soldier, a labor activist, etc. – had been found dead without a clue or an explanation. Each case of suspicious death was assigned to one or more investigators, who were asked to work on this individual case without having to consider other cases simultaneously. In other words, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s work was a compilation of many individual cases distinct from one another.³²

Following this model, the Sewol Commission accepted requests for investigation from the victims’ families – only the families could submit requests. Once a case was submitted by a family, a sub-committee in the Commission reviewed its legitimacy and approved the case to be investigated. As in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the victims and their families had a right to submit individual cases that they thought deserved official investigation. For each case submitted and then approved for investigation, the Commission had to respond by assigning the case to specific investigators and having them write a case report after finishing the investigatory work. All of these case inquiries came to the Commission separately, and it was hard for the investigators or the Commission to combine these cases into a bigger picture that would help them to explain the Sewol as a whole. And the cases were of different scopes and at different levels of difficulty. While working as an investigator at the Sewol Commission, for example, Sang-Eun Park was assigned to a case inquiry about the relationship between the shipping company (Cheonghaejin Marine) and the Korean government, a rather large topic to investigate. Another case was about whether the Sewol was sailing with her stern ramp open, a rather narrow question.

An alternative mechanism for investigation would have been for the Commission to have its own plan and come up with a set of questions to answer, which would then lead to a comprehensive understanding of the ship’s sinking and rescue failure. But in the midst of political stalemate, the Commission gave up devising its own investigation plan, so the families had to figure out what needed to be investigated and submit their cases. As a result, the Sewol Commission ended up with 211 cases submitted by the families. Among them, 103 were about rescue failure, 71 about the causes of sinking, and 21 about the media coverage of the disaster.³³

In the case method framework, the Sewol disaster became a collection of individual cases to be investigated separately. An implicit belief was that combining all these cases or inquiries would lead to ‘comprehensive truth’ of the Sewol disaster. In practice, this case method resulted in compartmentalization or fragmentation of the investigative efforts. Despite the purported claim of the Commission to investigate the structural causes of the disaster, these individual cases did not add up to a coherent or comprehensive narrative of what went wrong or through the agency of which actors. As the investigators persisted through political and bureaucratic obstructionism, they often lost sight of the big picture of the investigation. The question about the identity of the special investigation

commission was left unanswered. In terms of the roles generally assigned to disaster investigations – telling a comprehensive narrative, pointing to clear causes and effects, establishing a blame structure – the case method was uncharted territory. While the case method might be described as a democratic mode of investigation that respects the concerns of the victims and their families, it ended up weakening the authority of the Commission as a producer of comprehensive analysis and trustworthy judgment about the Sewol disaster.

Walk-outs and work-ins: the Sewol commission implodes

The commission members recommended by the ruling party clearly feared from the beginning that the Sewol investigation would actually become a referendum on the Park presidency. And they were right to a certain point. It was an inescapable aspect of the ways this investigation was shaped, especially the turn towards the case method. Once the Sewol Commission began its investigation work, it was only a matter of time before the behavior of the President was questioned. This was a red line for the ruling party commission members. There was a hope among some members, and even some liberal ones, that the case would not be brought before the Commission, because they knew that the moment the Commission started to work on it political turmoil would boil over. Chairman Lee knew that the case was coming soon from the families, so he had to deal with it. But the Commission, or the chairman, would not have started on its or his own to investigate the whereabouts of the President.³⁴ The commissioners from the ruling party walked out when the Commission decided on 23 November 2015 to investigate the whereabouts of the President during the day of sinking.³⁵ After that moment it was hard to imagine that the Sewol Commission would successfully finish the investigation and release a report.

At the end of June 2016, as described in the beginning of the article, the Sewol Commission was forced to shut down by the government, which had been hostile to the Commission all along. What is more remarkable than the forced closure of the Commission was the fact that it was closed without releasing a report. No official report of the findings was published after almost a year of investigation (though a couple of case reports were submitted and approved at the all-member meetings). That an independent commission established by a special act came to an end without a report would be recorded as an unprecedented episode in the history of disaster investigation; one may call it a master class of how to obstruct a disaster investigation (by the very government that set it up). However diligently or passionately the investigators worked to find materials and interview people, the results of investigation are not available for the public to read, as the records ended up in archive boxes or hard drives.

After the forced closure on 30 June 2016, most officials who had been dispatched to the Commission from government ministries returned to their home organizations. Many investigators from the civil sector, however, continued to come to the Commission office and chose to work without pay. They tried to do what they could, requesting materials to unresponsive government organizations and making self-funded trips to interview witnesses, but achieved little progress. The chairman and the investigators staged a hunger-strike relay, demanding that the Commission be given a full period of operation per the special act. At the same time, they prepared to hold the third public hearing of the

Commission on September 1–2.³⁶ The critics of the Commission claimed that the third public hearing had no legal basis because the Commission's period of operation was officially over. It was also difficult to find a space for a public hearing due to, as many suspected, the pressure from the government not to provide space. With no Commission budget available for investigation work, the chairman and some commissioners decided to fund the public hearing out of their own pockets. (Unlike the investigators, the commissioners were paid for additional three months for their administrative work for closing the Commission.) When the hearing was finally held, most government officials refused to testify. After the hearing, the investigators spent their last month organizing the records of investigation work with the hope that they would be used sometime in the future.³⁷

Politics shapes disaster investigation; disaster produces politics

Around the same time as the final closing of all the Sewol Commission activities, South Korea began to witness one of the largest political scandals in its modern history. In September and October 2016, exposé reports began to come out about President Park's closest private aide, Choi Soon-Sil, who had been intervening in the official business of the Blue House by, for instance, writing presidential speeches and steering policy decisions. Related stories of financial corruption followed as well. Starting in late October, college students, scholars, lawyers, and many civic groups released various versions of 'Declaration on the Current Situation', in which they criticized the wrongdoings of the president and her aide and called for the president's resignation. Citizens started to take to the street in hundreds of thousands, and the candlelight vigils and mass demonstrations continued every weekend throughout the winter. This popular movement was strong enough to push the National Assembly to pass a joint impeachment motion against President Park on December 9. Finally, on 10 March 2017, the Constitutional Court of Korea decided to uphold the impeachment of President Park, removing her from office immediately.

The Sewol disaster and the families stood, literally, at the center of the rallies against the president. Sewol victims' families were frequently asked to speak on the stage to the citizens who gathered in public spaces, both cheering and mourning for the families. Even some Sewol survivors came out to speak about their experiences and the president's responsibility. The Sewol families also walked at the very front of the crowd, holding pickets that denounced the president and demanded truth of Sewol. Many citizens invoked the Sewol as an important reason for them to come out for demonstrations and to demand the president's resignation. What connected the Sewol and the ongoing political scandal was the recurring question about the legitimacy of the state: 'You call this a state?'³⁸ The significance of the Sewol disaster in this rapid political transformation can be found in the fact that the president's mishandling of the Sewol disaster was included in the impeachment motion as one of the president's violations of constitutional duties. Although this specific item in the impeachment motion was not cited in the Constitutional Court, the president's political fate was intertwined with the continuing disaster of Sewol.³⁹

'Park Geun-hye Goes Down! Sewol Comes Up!' was one of the slogans that could be heard at the candlelight vigils and demonstrations throughout the winter of 2016–2017. The Sewol families saw the president and her government, which had been suppressing their demand for truth, go down in dishonor. At the same time, *MV Sewol*, which had been underwater for almost three years, was being prepared for salvaging. The project for salvaging the Sewol had started in 2015 at the consistent demand from the families and civil society, but the progress had been notably slow. On 15 March 2017, five days after the Constitutional Court ruling, the Ministry of Ocean and Fishery announced that the Sewol would be salvaged before the third anniversary (April 16) of its sinking. The ship was raised to the surface on 23 March 2017. Then, on March 31, while the salvaged Sewol was arriving at the port of Mokpo, the former president was arrested and put into prison on charges of bribery and other crimes. Whether it was considered coincidence or inevitability, the symbolism was unmistakable.

By the time of salvaging the Sewol, new politics and new disaster investigation were being forged together. In the absence of any official investigation commission, the salvaged vessel was going to present itself as the most crucial evidence for investigation. Therefore, as the nation was waiting for the Constitutional Court ruling in early 2017, the political parties agreed to establish a new investigation commission with a focus on technical examination of the vessel and passed the special act on the Sewol Investigation Commission (SIC) on March 2. (Whereas its English name implied a comprehensive investigation, the official Korean name for SIC included the word for 'a ship's body', giving a more accurate description of the new commission's work.) Unlike the first Sewol commission that had been subject to political battle throughout, the creation of SIC raised little controversy as it proceeded in the midst of the unprecedented political turmoil of impeachment. The SIC started its work on April 11, the day when the salvaged Sewol was finally transferred onto the land at the port of Mokpo.⁴⁰ Soon the SIC started the search for human remains of the nine missing victims within the vessel as well as detailed examination to find the causes of sinking. At the same time, political campaigns for the newly scheduled presidential election on May 9 were starting as well.

The practice of appointing commissioners as recommended by political parties continued with SIC. Among the eight commissioners including the chairman, two were recommended by the ruling party (President Park's party), three by the opposition party, and three others were recommended by the Sewol victims' families. In contrast to the first Sewol commission (2015–16) dominated by lawyers, the SIC had only two lawyers and its six commissioners had expertise in naval architecture and marine navigation and transportation.⁴¹ The SIC deserves its own historical and sociological analysis, but suffice it to say that it could at least publish its final report on the capsizing and sinking of the Sewol at the time of its closure in August 2018.⁴² As of spring 2022, the SIC final report remains the only official report about the Sewol disaster released by the Korean government.⁴³

While the SIC was conducting a technical investigation of the Sewol sinking, another special act for Sewol investigation with a more comprehensive scope was proposed in 2017. Although this new commission was the third official entity to be established for Sewol investigation, the media, families, activists, and politicians usually referred to it as 'the second Sewol Special Investigation Commission' because it was considered as a proper extension of the first commission that had been forced to close by the previous

government. As the idea for the ‘second’ Sewol commission went through legislative negotiations in the National Assembly, it was combined with another disaster that called for a special commission: more than one thousand deaths from toxic humidifier disinfectant that had occurred since 1994. As a result, the special act was passed in November 2017 to establish the Special Investigation Commission on Humidifier Disinfectants and 4.16 Sewol Ferry Disasters.⁴⁴ Also called ‘Special Commission on Social Disaster Investigation’, this new commission started its two-year investigation period in December 2018.⁴⁵ Once again, the nine commissioners were recommended by political entities, such as the Speaker of the National Assembly, the ruling party (of the new president Moon Jae-in), and the opposition party (of the ex-president Park Geun-hye). Created under the new political regime sympathetic with Sewol victims, the ‘social disaster commission’ has not suffered from overt or covert obstruction by the government, as had the first Sewol commission, but political, organizational, and epistemic tensions within the commission have not disappeared. Disaster investigation is never free of politics; the disaster commissions are always a political arena.

Conclusion

What kind of organization is a disaster investigation commission? How should a disaster investigation commission be set up? What forms of ‘truth’ can and should the disaster commission seek and what are the best methods to do so? These questions are not so easy to answer in the case of the Sewol, or in any historical case of disaster investigation to which we might apply the same historical scrutiny we have done to the Sewol. The victims’ families may have been very clear about it throughout, but various groups of people involved in opening, negotiating, and conducting investigations on the Sewol ferry disaster had different ideas about disaster investigation and the commissions created for the purpose. All agreed that something had failed catastrophically before, during, and after the sinking of Sewol, but there was no consensus on what exactly had failed and how an official commission to investigate it should be organized. The disagreement was a political one, to be sure, but an epistemological one as well.

The case of Sewol shows that the very process of conceptualizing disaster investigations and designing disaster commissions is shaped by the political history of the nation in which the disaster is situated. It was perhaps not the fact of sinking itself, but certainly the government’s response afterwards that prompted the families, activists, and lawyers to connect Sewol with cases of state violence (or killing) in recent Korean history. Given what they had to suffer in dealing with the hostile government, the use of the concept of state violence by the Sewol victims’ families may very well have been justified, but when the concept was used as a principle for organizing actual investigation work (such as the ‘case method’), it produced a new harm, constraining the scope and nature of disaster knowledge that the Sewol Commission was supposed to generate. In the political environment where earlier incidents of state violence such as the Gwangju democratic uprising are still contested between political parties, it is not surprising, albeit certainly unfortunate, that the commissioners recommended by these same parties could not even agree on what to investigate and what counts as truth in the Sewol disaster.

For disaster researchers with a history-of-technology perspective, this case merits close and continued study, as it reveals the slow disaster of political violence as an ongoing process, manifesting itself in domains often thought to be separate. Similar phenomena are evident in recent disasters like Hurricanes Maria or Katrina in the United States, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power disaster in Japan, or the 2010 Earthquake in Chile. In each instance, episodes of state violence, segregation, colonialism, and war have resurfaced in contemporary domains like ‘natural disaster’ and ‘technological disaster’. These slow disasters of political violence are easily entangled with the ongoing efforts to investigate disasters, restore justice, and console the victims, as we have witnessed in the Sewol Ferry investigation.

In conclusion, an investigation mounted to discover the facts of one of the worst disasters in South Korea was unable to discharge its duties. Instead, the investigation became a venue for dispute, revealing in the process a slow disaster of unresolved political tensions carried forward since the democracy movement of the 1980s and the rapid technological modernization of South Korean society. The investigation was an attempt to explain the disaster and bring closure – it did neither, but instead provoked political change. In particular, the emergence of the ‘case method’ at a moment of gridlock for the investigation shows us the crossover point between what were thought separate: industrial society and state violence. Working under the highly antagonistic environment, the designers and the members of the Sewol Commission did not find a way to navigate through these entangled histories and sufferings. Failure of a disaster investigation is another disaster, wrapped in a longer history and containing a lesson for the future.

Notes

1. For Korean names, we follow the Korean convention of putting one’s family name before the given name, as in Lee Suk-tae (Lee is the family name). When a Korean person appears as an author of a publication, however, we follow the English convention of putting the family name at the end.
2. Jeon and Knowles, “Second Sewol Investigation Commission.” This op-ed about Sewol investigation by Jeon and Knowles in a Korean newspaper served as a starting point for this journal article.
3. Fortun, Knowles, Choi, Jobin, Matsumoto, De La Torre III, Liboiron, and Murillo, “Researching Disaster,” 1014. On disaster investigations, see also Jasanoff, ed., *Learning from Disaster*; Hilgartner, “Overflow and Containment”; Knowles, “Learning from Disaster?”; Knowles, “New Directions in Disaster Investigations”; Vaughan, *The Challenger Launch Decision*; and Vaughan, “The Dark Side of Organizations.”
4. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*.
5. National Institute of Standards and Technology, *World Trade Center Towers*; National Institute of Standards and Technology, *World Trade Center Building 7*.
6. Knowles, “Slow Disaster in the Anthropocene”; also Nixon, *Slow Violence*.
7. Authors’ Interview with Seok Dong-Hyun, 24 July 2017; Sung, “In Front of the Blue House”; Yang et al., “Marking One Thousand Days.”
8. See, for example, Lytton, “Competitive Third-Party Regulation”; Russel, *Open Standards*; Cheit, *Setting Safety Standards*; Silbey, “Taming Prometheus.”
9. The most readable account of what happened on 16 April 2014 is *MV Sewol: A Chronicle of the Day*, published in 2016 by the Truth Foundation.

10. Shin, "Recurring Human-Made Disasters"; Kim, "The Side Effects"; Yoo and Kim, "Ignoring Safety"; People's Committee for the Sewol Ferry Tragedy, "What We Need to Do."
11. Kim, "Korean Disaster Studies."
12. Jeon, "An Isolated Ship."
13. Park, "A Nation of the Blind."
14. Oh, "154 Put into Custody."
15. Korean Bar Association, *4.16 Sewol Disaster White Paper*.
16. Kang, "Issues and Criticism."
17. Kim, "To KBS and Blue House."
18. Heo and Hong, "Water Canons and Tear Liquids."
19. Yu, "The Political Condolences."
20. The 4/16 Sewol Families for Truth and a Safer Society website. <http://416family.org>.
21. While this article was under review at *History and Technology*, one of the authors, Sang-Eun Park, finished her master's thesis in sociology on Sewol investigations, which offers a similar perspective on the Sewol Commission's focus on legal punishment. Park, "Disaster Epistemology."
22. The 4.16 Sewol Disaster Special Act.
23. Authors' interview with Park Jong-Un, 25 July 2017.
24. Authors' interview with Kim Sun-Hye, 25 July 2017.
25. Authors' interview with Seok Dong-Hyun, 24 July 2017.
26. Lee, "Kim Jae-Won Criticizes."
27. Cho, "Enforcement Decree Ignores."
28. Kang, "Sewol Commission Protests."
29. Personal communication with Hwang Gwang-Suk, whose task was to organize and archive records for the Sewol Commission, 3 August 2017.
30. See above 24.
31. Kim, "The Court Rules"; Kim, "Prosecution Service Helped."
32. Hong, "Presidential Truth Commission"; Kim, "Liquidation of the Past."
33. Special Investigation Commission on the 4/16 Sewol Ferry Disaster, "Interim Investigation Reports." These interim reports are not official publications of the Sewol Commission, although they were made available for downloading on the Internet by the Commission.
34. Authors' Interview with Lee Suk-Tae, 24 July 2017; Authors' Interview with Kim Jin, 18 July 2017.
35. Kim, "Sewol Commission Decides."
36. Park, "Third Sewol Public Hearing Held."
37. In October 2016, 43 investigators of the Sewol Commission brought a lawsuit, demanding that their status as the Commission staff be recognized and they be compensated for their unpaid salary since the forced closure. In September 2017, the court ruled in favor of the investigators. In doing so, the court interpreted that the beginning date of the Commission was not January 1, but 4 August 2015, as the Commission had long argued. This ruling effectively confirmed that the Sewol Commission had been "forced to close" by the government.
38. Han, "Candles and Squares."
39. Impeachment Motion against President Park Geun-hye, passed on 9 December 2016, available at: https://likms.assembly.go.kr/bill/billDetail.do?billId=PRC_F1Y6J1D2R0N3D0H4Z1Q2W2P0W8R1T1; Constitutional Court decision on the impeachment of the president, 10 March 2017, available at: http://search.court.go.kr/xmlFile/0/010400/2017/pdf/e2016n1_1.pdf.
40. Sewol Investigation Commission, *Sewol Investigation Commission White Paper* (2018). Note that this is a white paper of the new commission for technical investigation (SIC) that operated from 2017 to 2018.
41. Ibid.

42. For a sociological analysis of the SIC, see Park, “Disaster Epistemology.” Recent STS analyses of the technical investigations of the Sewol disaster include: Park, “Sewol Ferry Investigation”; Kim, “Declination of Debate”; Hwang and Hong, “Controversy over the Stability”; Kim, “Communication Actor-Network.”
43. Sewol Investigation Commission, *The Final Report of the Sewol Investigation Commission*. The final report is written in Korean with a short summary in English. Among the authors of this article, Jeon and Park served as writers for the SIC final report.
44. Special Act on Investigating the Truth of Social Disasters and Building a Safe Society.
45. In December 2020, an act was passed to give the social disaster commission an extension of 18 months, according to which the commission is required to finish its final report by September 2022.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank two anonymous reviewers, the editorial staff, and the editors of the journal for their intellectual rigor. We also thank Heewon Kim for her work in support of interviews and translations that made the article possible. Thanks also to Drexel University and KAIST for financial support that facilitated travel and writing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) grant funded by the Korea government (MSIT) (NRF-2018R1A5A7025409).

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