

Candlelight and the Yellow Ribbon: Catalyzing Re-Democratization in South Korea

Nan Kim

Abstract

As an outcome of the ongoing re-democratization movement in South Korea, the recent success of the Candlelight Revolution provides valuable perspective for those grappling with the crisis of democracy in the U.S. Tracing an unexpected material link to the 1986 People Power Revolution in the Philippines, this article also seeks to explain the relationship between the 2014 Sewol Ferry Disaster and the Candlelight Movement, a connection readily taken for granted among most South Koreans but often perplexing to those outside of Korea.

Keywords

democracy, re-democratization, protest movements, Sewol disaster, Candlelight Revolution, impeachment, material culture, Korea

Given the recent resurgence of democratic activism in South Korea and the current sense of crisis regarding the state of democracy in the United States, that contrast provided an ironic framing to last month's summit meeting when South Korean President Moon Jae-in visited Washington to meet with his U.S. counterpart Donald Trump on June 29-30. For his first overseas trip since being elected to office, Moon's decision to travel to the United States was a customary choice among new presidents of the Republic of Korea. Although the U.S. traditionally holds the upper-hand in such negotiations with its Northeast Asian ally, in this case Moon brought to the table some notable assets: strong approval ratings in South

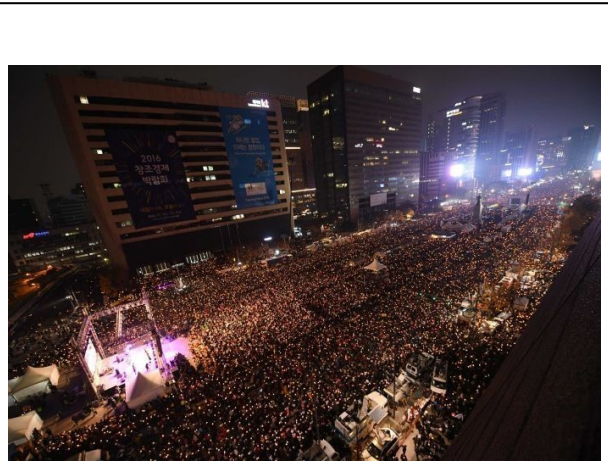
Korean national polls and an unusually high level of political legitimacy at home and abroad. In the snap election held on May 9th, Moon won by a landslide, taking 41 percent of the vote, in a national election that the non-partisan Asia Foundation called "a model of best practice": transparent, efficient, peaceful, and credible.¹ Moon's term started immediately thereafter, and the honeymoon period has seen approval ratings that currently stand at an estimated 83%. If one considers Moon's background as a seasoned human rights lawyer and his reputation as a pragmatic down-to-earth politician who has already made headway in pursuing a popular anti-corruption mandate, the contrast between Moon and the brash and impulsive Trump could hardly be more stark.

Moon's recent U.S. trip therefore provides a timely occasion to assess the popular South Korean citizens' movement that opened a path to the presidency following the ouster and prosecution of his disgraced predecessor Park Geun-hye. Beginning on October 29th, weekly anti-Park protests were held on an enormous scale for 17 consecutive weeks, filling the streets at the center of Seoul and continuing throughout the bitter cold of winter. Participants in the candlelight vigils grew to hundreds of thousands in the ensuing weeks and eventually numbered in the millions by mid-winter. At their height in early December, the total estimate of people who joined the protests on a single day exceeded 2.3 million people across the country - with 1.6 million in Seoul alone - on December 3rd, when simultaneous demonstrations occurred in the capital city and in provincial urban centers. Though predominantly youthful,

participants in the weekly Saturday rallies came from a diverse range of age groups, backgrounds, and walks of life, including many who had never participated in protests before. Intermingled among them were parents with young children in tow, artists and writers who had been blacklisted, groups of alumni buddies, irregular workers, retirees, middle-aged union members, and students at all levels, including high school and middle school.

The cascade of events that removed Park from power was the culmination of South Korea's Candlelight Movement, which paved the way for Moon to ascend to the presidency with a compelling anti-corruption mandate. The name evokes the movement's signature candlelight vigils, whose enormous scale was made evident in iconic photographic depictions. The dramatic aerial night-shots reveal a vast expanse of lights that blanketed a broad urban thoroughfare. In these vigils that doubled as mass protests, "candlelight" also refers to the direct participation by individuals, each bearing a candle - or its smartphone-app equivalent - and adding their embodied presence to the collective action. The main site of protest was Seoul's central arterial road extending from City Hall plaza through an area known as Gwanghwamun, a publicly accessible area directly adjacent to the more secluded neighborhood where the Blue House is located. The candlelight protests of 2016-2017 were organized by a coalition made up of more than 1500 civic organizations, which used social media networks and existing personal connections to come together as the loosely affiliated "Emergency Public Campaign for the Resignation of the Park Geun-hye Administration." Taking a page from music festivals and mainstream political rallies, the protests combined social-media savvy and creative visual panache with the nitty-gritty of large-scale logistical operations behind the scenes.² That is, while retaining some of the spontaneity of activist interventions, the rallies also required extensive coordination to manage

the details of holding enormous public assemblies that started in the afternoon and continued for hours to last well past nightfall. Truly, the term "street protests" can be misleading as a description of these well-organized events, which featured professional-grade sound stages, reams of semi-gloss printed placards, and a network of crews to handle set-up, distribution of materials, and clean-up. Also crucial was the fact that the progressive Park Won-soon is the current mayor of Seoul, and having a friendly city administration made a difference in securing timely permits that allowed the protests to take place.



During the Candlelight protests, the central stage made the scene resemble an outdoor music festival, but in addition to musical performances, the program of events also included rally speeches by representatives of various civic organizations as well as time allotted for spontaneous remarks from members of the audience.



Candlelight protest on November 5, 2016. Photo by Seong Nae Kim.

Throughout the contested election campaign that ensued, Moon Jae-in as a presidential candidate signaled his personal alignment with that broad-based citizens' movement by wearing an emblem of personal identification with the Candlelight protesters. However, the tell-tale solidarity symbol was not a literal representation of candlelight per se, but rather a small enamel lapel pin in the shape of a yellow ribbon. Such semiotic gesturing took on an added flourish during Moon's victory celebration on election night when someone attached to his opposite lapel a second yellow ribbon, a whimsically oversized version that was even brighter and bigger than his usual pin. Prominently visible against his dark blue suit jacket, that additional celebratory yellow ribbon seemed to put an exclamation mark on the polling outcome.

Although colored-ribbon campaigns have been used worldwide for all manner of causes, the yellow ribbon in South Korea has come to hold layered meanings that can help to trace the trajectory from "post-democracy" under Park, to the breakthrough in re-democratization that was the Candlelight Revolution. Above all, yellow ribbons are worn in South Korea - and in the Korean diaspora - in remembrance of the

Sewol Ferry Disaster of April 16, 2014, which killed 304 people, including five victims whose bodies so far remain unrecovered. During the last three years of the former Park presidency and beyond, yellow ribbons - in tandem with other things colored vivid yellow³ - have also been used in South Korea among progressive activists across diverse social movements to visually define spaces of protest and to project a personal identity of political resistance. Why the yellow ribbon, and what did it mean for the Candlelight Revolution? Analyzing a key aspect of the material culture of re-democratization in South Korea, this article seeks to shed light on the far-ranging civic movement galvanized by a broader sense of common cause that was signified by the yellow ribbon. Despite facing repeated setbacks and repression during the Park era, that movement nonetheless persisted in conveying sustained wide-scale dissent and successfully secured the achievement of thorough-going political change in a peaceful and orderly transfer of power.



Moon Jae-in greeting supporters on the night of his landslide election victory, May 9, 2017.

While foreign coverage of these protests has understandably drawn attention to the precedent of South Korea's June Democratic Uprising of 1987, such analysis can result in a misrecognition of the contemporary social transformations that brought about the

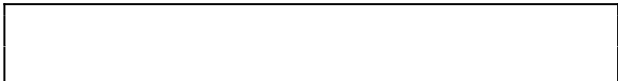
Candlelight Revolution. On the one hand was the precedent of a series of earlier large-scale candlelight protests in downtown Seoul, beginning in 2002 with periodic intense but short-lived recurrences in the decade that followed. Jiyeon Kang describes these earlier candlelight vigils as having established “Internet-born youth-driven protest as a new repertoire for activism,”⁴ whereby such activism managed to break out of stereotyped perceptions of dissent movements of the past, as the vigils did not easily fit into established ideological frames. On the other hand was the fact that, prior to the groundswell of events since last autumn, the generation of digital natives in South Korea has generally been known for an aversion to engage in either traditional politics or street protests. They were called the “Apathetic Generation” or the “Spec Generation,” beset by financial burdens while having internalized the labor market’s ruthless competitiveness.⁵ Assumed to be largely indifferent to politics and macroeconomic trends, these young people have largely been tied up by the imperative to accumulate “specs” (i.e. qualifications), leaving precious little time or energy to devote toward building community. This past year’s Candlelight protests therefore marked a turning point for direct political participation by youth - as well as other formerly depoliticized South Koreans - on a scale unprecedented since the 1987 Democratic Uprising, and that development can be directly and indirectly traced to the Sewol Ferry Disaster of 2014.

The significance of this shift must also be weighed against the challenges posed by a contemporary social and political order in South Korea that had been in keeping with “post-democratization,” a process with clear parallels to the current crisis facing progressive coalitions in the U.S. The South Korean version of post-democratization, as described by Jamie Doucette and Se-Woong Koo, signifies “a process whereby social rights are increasing subordinated to market logic

and state power [is] insulated from popular challenges.”⁶ This can be true alongside the ostensible traits of a democracy, such as the holding of elections and formal guarantees of free speech. Post-democratization thereby represents “an erosion of democracy in the sense that key political and economic decision-making powers as provided within the democratic framework are monopolized by a small elite” while “political disagreement is treated as a disturbance to public order and targeted with the same logic as a police operation.” Published last year, Doucette and Koo’s analysis provides valuable recent retrospective insight regarding obstacles that had faced pro-democracy activists in South Korea. Particularly in light of how the former Park Government actively engaged in the tactic of targeting and criminalizing dissent, it also provides a diagnostic for appreciating how the South Korean Candlelight Revolution succeeded in overcoming obstacles similar to those now increasingly deployed in the U.S. under Trump.

Remarkably, within months after the Candlelight protests started gaining traction among South Koreans in mid-autumn 2016, the politics of the street in Seoul would not only alter public discourse but also led to formal changes in power through the functioning of South Korean democratic institutions. It was only last October when the Choi Soon-sil scandal exposed a complex and vast scheme of graft that was breathtaking in its brazenness. While political corruption is nothing new in Korea, the shocking details of the scandal revealed the extent to which corruption had proliferated under Park, which ignited simmering public outrage and gave rise to massive street protests. Choi, confidante of the former president, has since been prosecuted for conspiring with Park and using her influence to amass a personal fortune worth tens of millions of dollars, funneled from South Korea’s largest companies through bribery and extortion. Despite the fact that Choi held no

official position and had no experience in policy-making, she was given the power by Park to shape national policy without accountability. In a story first broken by the independent South Korean media - including The Hankyoreh daily newspaper, TV Chosun, and the JTBC network - a stream of evidence pointed to how Choi had secretly wielded enormous influence over state affairs. Not only did Choi secure senior government positions for her friends and associates, she effectively had the last word in presidential statements on national policy, by having the power to vet and edit presidential speeches - in some cases making changes just hours before Park was scheduled to deliver an official address. Adding to the outrage in the eyes of the public was the fact that Choi had used her influence to secure a spot for her daughter Chung Yoo-ra at Ewha Womans University, a leading university in Seoul, despite the fact that Chung lacked the qualifications, let alone the inclination to attend classes. In opposing questionable university policies that later turned out to be linked also with Choi, Ewha students are credited with launching the forerunning campus protests that prompted the investigation by JTBC reporters and other journalists, which eventually unravelled the larger scandal centered on Park and Choi. Amid the scandalous revelations, Park's public-approval ratings plummeted to a low of 4 percent, as a near-consensus among the electorate agreed that she was unfit to serve as president.



Regarding a crucial piece of evidence in the investigative coverage of the Choi-Park scandal, JTBC reporter Shim Su-mi explains in a December 8th broadcast how she found a tablet computer that belonged to Choi Soon-sil in an office that Choi had abandoned.

After weeks of debate, on December 9th the South Korean National Assembly voted to pass an impeachment bill, which held that the President had violated her oath of office as well as core tenets of the Constitution and laws governing the operation of the presidency. With 234 out of 300 lawmakers casting ballots in favor of the bill, the National Assembly voted by an overwhelming margin to impeach Park, a move that led immediately to the suspension of her presidential powers. However, the National Assembly vote did not automatically remove Park from office. For the ouster of the president to take effect, judicial review was required to confirm whether the National Assembly members had followed due process in the impeachment proceedings. During the subsequent limbo, with Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn designated acting president, the prospect that Park would be reinstated to power remained a possibility. After all, the final decision would fall to the Constitutional Court, a judicial body dominated by conservatives. Six of the eight justices had been beholden to Park in some way, either appointed by Park or her predecessor or nominated by her party.

For three months following the National Assembly’s impeachment vote, Park became a recluse in the Blue House, as if living out a caricatured version of her reputation as aloof and disconnected from the public. Although Park had earlier agreed to cooperate with the investigations, she refused to appear at any of the 17 hearings held by the Constitutional Court during that period. Instead Park dispatched one of her lawyers to read a prepared statement in which she vehemently denied any wrongdoing. As public opinion continued to turn against Park, South Korean progressives became cautiously hopeful that the court would validate the legislature’s vote to impeach her. An affirmative verdict required a supermajority of six justices, the minimum needed to prevent the National Assembly’s impeachment vote from being overturned. Meanwhile, political conservatives were confident in their opinion that, with the court stacked in their favor, no more than five justices would validate the impeachment, meaning the motion would be rejected and Park would soon be returned to office. If Park were to serve out the rest of her five-year term until next February, that would in turn bode well for the far right to retain control of the Blue House in next year’s election, as hard-line conservatives had been in power for the last decade. Given the uncertainty and tremendous stakes, the atmosphere was charged when the Constitutional Court justices finally appeared on March 10th in a live broadcast on national television to announce their verdict. It turned out that neither side’s prediction of a split vote came true. Instead, the decision was unanimous: 8-0 in favor of upholding the National Assembly vote for impeachment.

Acting Chief Justice Lee Jung-mi read the Constitutional Court’s ruling in a resolute but dispassionate tone, stating that Park’s action had “seriously impaired the spirit of ... democracy and the rule of law.” Reading the text aloud in Korean, she said:

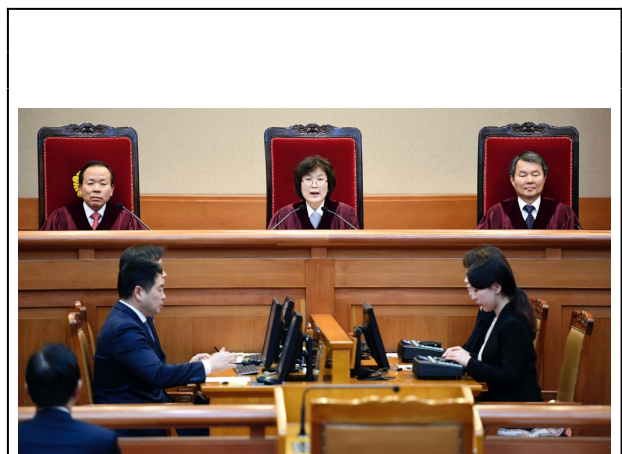
“The president must use her power based on the Constitution and the law, and must make her work transparent so that it may be evaluated by the public.

“But Park concealed completely Choi’s meddling in state affairs and denied it whenever suspicions...emerged and even criticized those who raised suspicions.

“Judging from [Park’s] words and deeds, there were repeated unlawful activities, and a failure to show a determination to abide by the Constitution.

“In the end, the president’s unconstitutional and illegal activities betrayed the people’s trust, and she carried out illegal activities that cannot be tolerated for the sake of protecting the Constitution.”⁷

With its verdict, South Korea’s highest court reaffirmed that constitutional law applies to all and that no one is above the law, including the President.



Lee Jung-mi (center), Acting Chief Justice of the South Korean Constitutional Court, reads the court’s final ruling on the impeachment of Park Geun-hye.

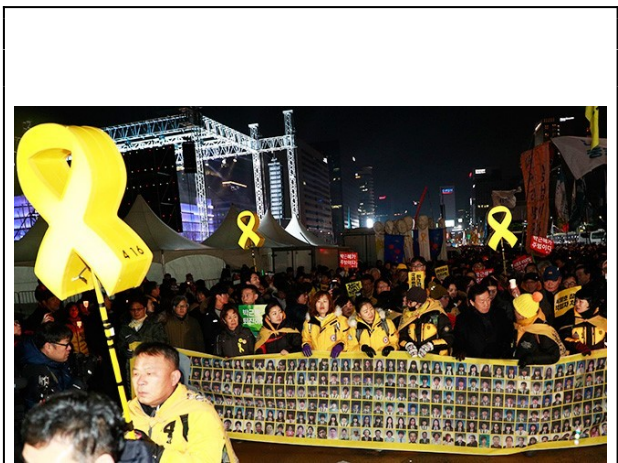
The court’s decision triggered a presidential

by-election within 60 days. The ruling also stripped immunity from Park, who was subsequently arrested, imprisoned, indicted, and prosecuted on charges of corruption and abuse of power. Choi met a parallel fate, and is now serving a prison sentence after criminal prosecution on charges of bribery. Perhaps in the most remarkable turn of all, the scandal has embroiled the country's largest multinational conglomerate, Samsung, whose heir Lee Jae-yong was arrested and now faces multiple charges including bribery and embezzlement in what has been called the "Trial of the Century."

How Can You Call This a Country? People Power, Sovereignty, and the Drive to Hold a President Accountable for Incompetence

For all its meticulous analysis of evidence, the March 9th Constitutional Court ruling excluded from the grounds for impeachment the issue that figured highly into the Candlelight protests: the former president's handling of the Sewol Ferry disaster. The National Assembly bill in December recognized the issue among the reasons for impeachment, stating that Park was derelict in her duty and failed to protect the lives of the disaster's victims. The families of the Sewol victims and their advocates had been at the forefront of the movement that first brought widespread attention to the issue of Park's incompetence. It was therefore surprising that the Constitutional Court excluded their claims from the ruling, which stated that political incompetence did not constitute sufficient grounds for a presidential impeachment. Countering this view were public perceptions of how the Sewol disaster had factored into Park's ouster, as summed up by Sim Sang-jung, National Assembly member and leader of the progressive Justice Party: "The [Constitutional] Court did not include the Sewol ferry issue in the reasons for her removal, but it is the No. 1 cause in the people's mind. April 16, 2014, is when Park's collapse began. She tried to hide her incompetence, which could not

be hidden, and tried to avoid responsibility, which could not be avoided, resulting in her political demise."⁸ As Sim's explanation makes plain, this is not to say that Park's opponents alleged that the former president was herself responsible for the ferry sinking. Rather, Park's handling of the disaster was the beginning of her own political demise because it hardened the determination of a wider public to hold Park and her administration accountable for their incompetence, which was exemplified by the Sewol crisis while also reflected in several other highly contentious controversies.



Parents and relatives of the Sewol victims were prominently involved in the Candlelight protests in Seoul and elsewhere. They carried a banner with images of the victims at the rally on January 7, 2017, two days before the 1000-day commemoration of the ferry sinking. (Korea Times)

The sinking of the MV Sewol has been widely described in South Korea as a national trauma. In its aftermath, the disaster left South Koreans shocked and traumatized by the inability to save hundreds of trapped passengers in a situation where deaths should have been avoidable. Teenage high school students on a field trip accounted for 250 of the passengers who drowned or otherwise died because they

could not escape the capsized ferry. After initial misleading reports had given the impression that all passengers were rescued to safety, that account was soon disproven and gave way to the horrified realization that precious hours at the outset of the disaster had been squandered by a disorganized response and attempts to cover up mistakes committed by the Coast Guard and other government officials. In the ensuing days, a bleak tableau showing the inverted hull of the ferry dominated ongoing live national broadcasts, which also featured a tally of how many had been saved and how many were still unaccounted for. The number of the missing would later translate to the disaster's death toll, which represented nearly two-thirds of the passengers.

One of the most outrageously unconscionable aspects of the tragedy was the fact that passengers could have jumped into the water to be rescued, had they not been instructed to stay onboard. Closer examination into the causes behind the ferry sinking uncovered practices of reckless greed, which also accounts for the degree of crew incompetence given that the Sewol's management company largely staffed the ferry with poorly trained irregular employees. It was later revealed that Chonghaejin Marine, the firm that operated the Sewol, prioritized stabilizing the ship for the sake of attempting to recover the cargo onboard, and the inexperienced crew was ordered against a sudden evacuation of passengers, which might have accelerated the capsizing. Without guidance or experience in a chaotic emergency, crew members followed the manual and made hapless announcements over the public-address system telling passengers to stay in their cabins for their own safety. Soon afterwards the captain - himself an undertrained irregular worker - and several crew members abandoned ship without notifying the passengers to escape. The captain was later sentenced to life in prison for murder, but others who unquestionably bore

responsibility for the disaster were never arrested. For example, Chonghaejin Marine had completed illegal renovations that violated restrictions by dangerously raising the center of gravity, adding floors of cabins to increase the capacity for more passengers. The firm's owner Yoo Byung-eun also ignored repeated warnings about the risk of the Sewol capsizing. On the Sewol's fateful last journey, there was not enough ballast water to stabilize the ferry because Chonghaejin illegally discharged hundreds of tons of ballast water prior to launching in order to compensate for the overloading of cargo, which was also poorly secured. Even at times when they were operating within mandated standards, Yoo and his company were allowed to systematically put profit over safety due to government standards that had been relaxed by deregulation.⁹ In the wake of the ferry sinking, Yoo disappeared and evaded arrest despite a nationwide manhunt. Several weeks later in a remote field in the southernmost part of the country, a decomposed body was found that reportedly matched Yoo's identity, and he was never tried or brought to justice.

I had been living in Seoul that spring, and during the days and weeks in the wake of the Sewol disaster, a palpable sense of depression was all but ubiquitous. What surprised me was how common it became for everyday conversations to start with expressions of not only sorrow but also guilt over the loss of so many young lives. I remember asking a friend what she made of this spontaneous and pervasive guilt complex. On top of anger at those responsible, she described an anguished sense of regret for having tolerated the kind of society that had allowed this disaster to happen and a feeling of personal responsibility for not having done enough to fight corruption. While the perception of responsibility for the Sewol disaster was diffuse and complex from early on, the disaster's political impact was not immediate. That is, it had seemed inevitable that the pervasive shock about the disaster

would affect the outcome of the local elections, which were to be held in early June, only six weeks after the ferry sinking. Instead, the then-ruling party handily won most of those races, which included elections of provincial governors, metropolitan mayors, and local legislatures. With that electoral victory, former President Park appeared to emerge from the disaster with her reputation intact as “Queen of Elections.”

Yet, disturbing questions about Park’s whereabouts during the emergency would continue to dog her presidency for months and then years afterwards, amid ongoing efforts by her administration to squelch that scrutiny rather than accede to public accountability. Those questions from Park’s critics focused on her unexplained absence for seven hours in the crucial period immediately after the ferry’s capsizing, when those trapped inside still had a chance to survive. Although officials had sent Park notification by text at 9:24 AM at the outset of the crisis - and then by a written report roughly a half-hour later - she was nowhere to be seen all day until 5:15 PM, when she finally appeared at the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters. Upon arriving at the disaster-response headquarters, her first question was, “The students are wearing life-vests, so why aren’t they found yet?” While the rest of the nation had been riveted for hours by the increasingly desperate emergency, Park’s own words revealed that she had not even bothered to follow the breaking-news broadcasts aired by every major national news outlet. Instead she was oblivious to the day’s events. Those would prove to be fateful hours, and for the rest of her term in office, Park’s failure to account for her actions that day drew ongoing heavy criticism. At the 11th weekly candlelight protest in Seoul on January 7th, 20-year-old Jang Ae-jin spoke as a representative of those who had survived the ferry disaster. “If the president had been receiving briefings and giving instructions during the seven hours when she did not

appear on the day of the accident, and if we had been told to get off the ferry immediately instead of staying in our seats, there would not have been as many victims as there are today. This obviously needs to be investigated,” Jang said.¹⁰ In the face of the government’s refusal to launch a full investigation into the circumstances surrounding the ferry sinking, critics focused on the leadership vacuum that had exacerbated the disaster amid a disorganized and ineffective response.



At the site of the 11th Candlelight protest on January 7th, a public installation of 304 life jackets paid tribute to the victims who died in the Sewol Ferry Disaster. Photo by Seong Nae Kim.

Perhaps Park could have eventually lived down her incompetent handling of the Sewol

disaster, but rather than owning up to those errors, the Park government went after its critics. In October 2016 came the revelation of a blacklist, published by the daily newspaper *Hankook Ilbo*, which showed how the Park Administration had targeted creative professionals who were seen as anti-government. The blacklist included over 9,000 visual artists, writers, film directors, musicians, actors, playwrights, and others, with a notable focus on those who had been critical of the government's handling of the Sewol Ferry disaster or supported Park's rivals. It was yet another confirmation that Park's leadership style emulated the authoritarian orientation of her father, former President Park Chung-hee, who had come to power in a military coup in 1963 and imposed a military dictatorship on South Korea until his assassination in 1979.

Evoking a similar sense of throwback to the country's authoritarian past, over the past several years there had been a steady regression of the hard-won political gains from Korea's struggle for democratization in the 1980s. Meanwhile, national security was used as the pretext to challenge all forms of dissent, as well as criticism of the government, including the continuing calls for investigation by the bereaved Sewol families and their advocates. When activists raised their demands to an unresponsive government, they would routinely be painted as pro-North under the logic that any form of protests would disturb the social order and thereby could undermine national security. This accusation also extended to people who had been fighting for other social causes in South Korea including: opposition to the deployment of the THAAD anti-missile system; criticism of the nationalization of textbooks that had mandated the teaching of a state-approved interpretation of the country's history; protests against the government's deal with Japan that had professed to resolve the so-called "comfort women" issue while ignoring the terms set forth by the actual survivors of that WWII-era

system of sexual slavery; and demands for justice for the family of Baek Nam-gi, the farmers' rights activist who died from complications related to brain injuries after being knocked down last November by high-powered water cannons as part of a police crackdown of a wide-scale anti-Park demonstration in Seoul.

The Choi Soon-sil scandal was the tipping point that brought together various protest movements and tapped into widespread political frustration and simmering outrage. Contrary to the preoccupation in the Western media with the figure of Choi Soon-sil herself, what the scandalous revelations largely signified to South Koreans was how multiple controversies were connected and how a series of anti-democratic power-plays by the Blue House could be explained by how Park was beholden to the shadowy influences of Choi and also Choi's former husband Chung Yoon-hoi. The scandal brought activists of diverse causes to join together under a common banner challenging the Park government's legitimacy, best captured by the meme, "Ige Naranya?" which translates to "Is this a Country?" or "How can you call this a Country?" The Choi scandal provided this window for breakthrough because it revealed that the true national-security threat at hand was not dissenting citizens exercising their right to free speech and their right to assembly. Rather, as the scandalous revelations accumulated, it became clear that the most serious threat that had undermined the security and integrity of the nation was President Park herself along with Choi Soon-sil and her cronies.





A solidarity rally took place on November 12th in Berlin to show support for the Candlelight protests in Korea. Serving as a backdrop was a hand-painted mural, a montage visually connecting three controversies that had fueled popular protest against the Park government: the Sewol disaster, the excessively violent crackdown on a popular protest as symbolized by the death of Baek Namgi, and the South Korean government’s handling of the “comfort women” issue.
Photo by Dasom Yi.

Viral Hope and Diverging Paths of the Yellow Ribbon

The yellow-ribbon campaign in Korea for Sewol victims was originally started by a coalition of students from various South Korean universities in Seoul. A few days after the ferry sinking, members of the group discussed the idea of the campaign as a way to express compassion and support for those affected. The campaign’s theme was inspired by an offhand remark by the mother of one of the organization members, who recalled that yellow ribbons express the hope for someone’s safe return. Seven members took up the task of buying materials to make 500 yellow ribbons, which they handed out on the street to passersby in Sinchon, a university district of Seoul. As the campaign quickly spread through

social media, the yellow ribbons went viral beyond anything the students could have imagined.

Yet, what had begun as a token of hope was by then understood as a symbol of mourning and remembrance. Although the press had initially reported that the passengers were all saved, it would soon become clear that none of those trapped inside the ferry would return alive. During the weeks that followed the ferry sinking, yellow ribbons could be seen throughout the country, as they also became a tribute of support for Ansan, the community where many of the victims had grown up. For example, yellow ribbons covered a large multi-part public installation that made up an official memorial altar in Seoul’s Plaza in front of City Hall, which became converted into a space for city residents and other members of the public to share their grief and to pay their respects. Each of the ribbons was a personal tribute, individually tied and each bearing a handwritten message expressing condolence, sorrow, apology, or a combination of all three.



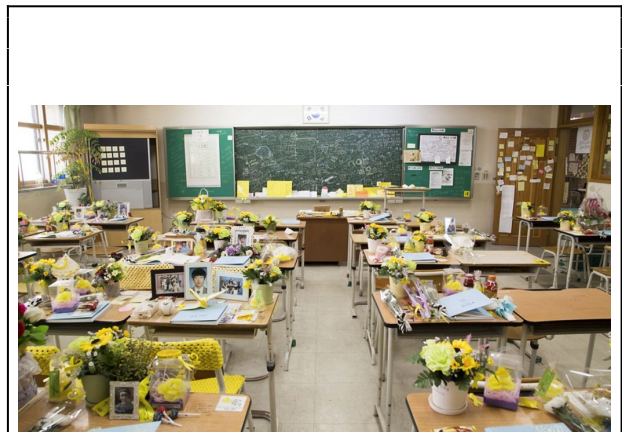
A public memorial altar remained in Seoul Plaza in front of City Hall for one month beginning on April 27, 2014.

The yellow ribbon would later be associated with the call for political and regulatory reforms to avoid such a tragedy from recurring, and more pointedly it came to signify the demand for a full investigation into the truth behind the disaster. As the yellow ribbon thereby took on increasingly loaded political meaning, the yellow ribbon had come to be regarded as an outward sign of rebellion, and those wearing the ribbon would be targeted for harassment by police in the areas near any commemoration event for the Sewol victims.¹¹ Even three years after the disaster, during the early weeks of the Candlelight Movement, a member of a conservative church in Seoul was castigated for wearing a yellow ribbon, resulting in his expulsion from the congregation.

At the same time, the yellow ribbon provided a public sign of remembrance and sympathy as well as an emblem of dissent among those who had defied the repression under Park. Whereas buttons and similar items are used for fundraising for other social causes, advocates for the Sewol families regularly gave away yellow-ribbon items to fellow activists following marches and rallies supporting other causes, with the request to keep the Sewol issue visible and viable. These items in turn have circulated as gifts among progressive activists of various stripes in gestures of friendship and solidarity. They include not only yellow-ribbon pins, but also backpack-charms, bracelets, cell-phone stickers, keychains, and handmade linen brooches and other crafts, often featuring needlework depicting a yellow flower and the number 4.16 for the date of the ferry sinking, April 16th.

In Ansan, tributes covered with yellow ribbons would remain for months and then years afterwards at the “memory classrooms,” which transformed the school-desks and classrooms of the deceased Sewol victims at Danwon High School into handcrafted memorial shrines. Dense clusters of yellow ribbons still cover

chain-link fences and are fastened onto tree branches at other key sites of Sewol memory activism such as the vigil location at Paengmok Harbor on Jindo Island, the point on land closest to the location of the ferry’s sinking. Two other commemorative protest sites where an abundance of yellow ribbons are displayed in solidarity with Sewol families are: (1) the community cemetery at Mangwoldong in Gwangju, a site of pilgrimage among Korean democratization activists to pay tribute to those who died in the 1980 Gwangju massacre; and (2) the activist community in Gangjeong Villiage that oppose the newly constructed Jeju Naval Base, which the activists warn will increase the likelihood of a future war in a sensitive region of Northeast Asia. The ribbons appear alongside a familiar oath of commitment that is repeated among long-term South Korean movements rooted in the moral politics of remembering the victims of traumatic violence: “I will not forget.”



One of the Memory Classrooms where mementos and messages to lost classmates were preserved as handcrafted shrines at Danwon High School in Ansan.

Such embrace of the yellow ribbon by anti-militarist peace activists in South Korea may be surprising to those in the West, where the yellow ribbon is regarded as a symbol of

support for military troops in the U.S., Canada, and several Western European countries, including Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. The usage of yellow ribbons as a sign of hope for someone's safe return traces back to the 1973 hit song by Tony Orlando and Dawn, "Tie a Yellow Ribbon ('Round the Ole Oak Tree)." At the time, the first modern yellow-ribbon campaigns took off as soldiers were returning from the Vietnam War, but displaying yellow ribbons spread as a truly national phenomenon eight years later toward the end of the Iran Hostage Crisis (1979-1981).¹² Again in 1991, a phenomenon of "the yellow-ribboning of America" took hold during the Gulf War, when yellow ribbons were tied everywhere: trees, fences, doors, barns, light poles, traffic lights, and car antennae. At the time, the yellow ribbon stood for the slogan "Support Our Troops." Though the slogan and symbol are unquestionably endorsements of military culture, they are ambivalent insofar as it could also convey a divided sentiment that was critical of the war: "Support Our Troops/Oppose the War."¹³

Inspired by the same cultural touchstone, yellow-ribbon campaigns took a different trajectory in Asia. Beginning in the Philippines, yellow ribbons came to be associated not with members of the armed forces but rather with civilian activists for democratization. In 1983, when Benigno Aquino, Jr., returned to Manila from three years in exile, the streets were festooned with yellow ribbons by his supporters, who staged their own "Tie a Yellow Ribbon" take-off from the Tony Orlando song. A long-time opponent of then-President Ferdinand Marcos, Aquino was assassinated on the tarmac upon his return. Corazón Aquino would eventually take up the mantle of her slain husband's political legacy, using yellow ribbons as her primary symbol, eventually leading the People Power Revolution of 1986.¹⁴ Inspired by the events in the Philippines, South Korean activists during that same year also distributed yellow ribbons to those who had

signed the petition for direct elections, part of a process that would eventually help them achieve their own democratization in Korea.¹⁵

This explains how, decades before the yellow ribbon turned unexpectedly into a sign of protest in South Korea during recent years, the color of vivid yellow that had already been representative of leftist opposition politics since the turn of the millennium. In Korea, as in other countries, political alliances and realignments are commonly signaled by the adoption of signature campaign colors. The progressive center-left South Korean leader Kim Dae-jung used vivid yellow for his presidential campaign in a conscious move to emulate Aquino's use of that color in the Philippines.¹⁶ That color choice that was continued by his successor Roh Moo-hyun, as both Kim and Roh identified with yellow as a symbol of hope. Last year, the elision between the yellow ribbon and opposition politics became even more apparent following the April 2016 parliamentary elections, held just three days before the second anniversary of the ferry sinking. When the liberal Minjoo Party won an upset victory and gained a plurality of seats over the conservative Saenuri Party, the result was interpreted as a rebuke for the Park Administration's unresponsiveness to the public and its handling of the Sewol Ferry disaster. Posting of yellow ribbons via social-media platforms framed the sharing of news about that election upset, which itself laid the conditions of possibility for the impeachment vote by the National Assembly last December. One of the historical ironies about the yellow ribbon in South Korea, therefore, is that the symbol was initially circulated in 2014 not as a political symbol but as an apolitical gesture of hope after the Sewol disaster in Korea. Yet, it would eventually come full circle to provide an inadvertent material link that highlights mutual resonances among pro-democracy movements across Asia: the People Power Revolution in the Philippines in 1986; the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong in 2014, which drew momentum

from its own yellow-ribbon campaign¹⁷; and the Candlelight Revolution of 2016-2017.



Corazón Aquino speaking in Manila in 1986 during the popular demonstrations in the Philippines against state violence and alleged electoral fraud, a series of protests that would later be called the People Power Revolution for toppling authoritarian dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

Rather than protest an outright dictatorship, however, the Candlelight Movement successfully opposed an unrepresentative government in South Korea through a popular movement's rejection of a system of corruption that had become synonymous with a callous disregard of human vulnerability. Among those who embraced the yellow ribbon in Korea over the past three years, there coalesced a broad-based movement intent on changing the direction of South Korean society for the sake of the country's future and its youth, who like the Sewol victims had been forced to the point of despair and hopelessness wrought by endemic corruption. Indeed, South Korea has ranked at or near the top of global indices measuring the human toll of hypercompetitiveness stemming from the current neoliberal conjuncture, a toll particularly evident among young people. Suicide is the leading cause of death among

South Korean youth. The country has the highest rate of suicide among OECD countries, which is also the second-highest suicide rate in the world. Young South Koreans recorded some of the world's lowest levels of happiness and satisfaction with their society,¹⁸ second only to Japan - and they cited more economic equality as a way to mitigate their country's situation, as those under the age of 30 contend with an unemployment rate that is twice that of other age-groups in Korea. For all the flash and international appeal of South Korea's youthful pop culture, there has been a deeper story of an ongoing sense of despair over the future among the younger generations in South Korea, given the bleak prospects for anyone but wealthy elites.

The Sewol disaster drove the point home among youth that transforming a corrupt government and unfair society was not strictly the battle of an older generation, but one that was their own life-or-death cause. As Gooyoung Kim argues, beyond the government's inability to launch a successful rescue effort, the cause of the disaster could be traced to the government's own implication in neoliberal capitalist profiteering, including the push for deregulating safety standards.¹⁹ The disaster therefore amounted to making visible those forms of structural violence that were normally hidden. By violence here, I mean both the various ways that inaction and obstruction by the government resulted in the avoidable deaths of 304 people and also the repeated attempts by the government to stifle citizens' demands for a truth-seeking investigation through police repression against the bereaved Sewol families and their advocates. For those traumatized by witnessing the deaths of so many young people in real time on national television, the necessity to work for sweeping change could not be clearer or more compelling.

In March, during the presidential campaign for the snap election following Park's ouster, the

Sewol ferry was finally raised from underwater to the surface. More than 1000 days after the ferry sinking, the raising of the Sewol's corroded hull from the bottom of the sea enabled a new search for the nine victims. Remains have so far been found to account for four of them, including two students and a teacher from Danwon High School and another passenger. After the political turmoil and uncertainty surrounding the scandal and the dramatic momentum of the Candlelight Movement, resuming the recovery of missing victims and the docking of the Sewol back on land provided a sobering denouement, if not full closure, to the saga of the ferry sinking.

Throughout that presidential campaign, Moon Jae-in and members of his security detail had each worn a yellow-ribbon pin, but since taking office, the new president no longer wears the symbol on his lapel. The decision was an apparent nod to Moon's own promise in his inauguration speech that he would be the president to all South Korean citizens, regardless of whether they voted for him or not. As with all politicians, he will inevitably fall short in some respects. Despite being swept into office on a populist wave of support catalyzed by political progressives, the liberal-leaning Moon is decidedly centrist.²⁰ This is not to imply that Moon's adoption of the yellow ribbon was sheerly a form of political opportunism. After all, as opposition-party leader, Moon had consistently shown a personal commitment to the issue in the past and had joined a hunger strike in 2014 for nine days to support the bereaved families of Sewol victims in their advocacy for legislation to investigate into the truth behind the ferry sinking.

Rather, in prevailing as presidential candidate, for Moon to wear the yellow ribbon was to acknowledge the movement that brought him to office, a recognition that he had arrived at that historic moment only thanks to the Candlelight Revolution. Back in the early weeks of the scandal last autumn, Moon's Democratic Party did not immediately undertake a vigorous opposition of the Park Administration. It was the continuing protests that successfully forced the hand of opposition-party legislators and other members of the South Korean parliament to step up and to overcome their timidity in dealing with the Park Administration.²¹ Indeed, the past several months in South Korea can serve as an answer to those who cynically question whether protests achieve anything constructive. In the case of the Candlelight Revolution, the protests did not directly topple the Park presidency. Instead, the Candlelight protesters achieved something far more durable and politically stabilizing by bringing public pressure to bear upon the working of democratic institutions to ensure that the checks instituted by their Constitution would successfully guard against a tyrannical president and one otherwise unfit for office.

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Nan Kim is Associate Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she is a fellow at the Center for 21st Century Studies. Her research focuses on contemporary Korea, traumatic memory, and transnational public history, and she is currently working on a project about long-term protest movements in South Korea. She is the author of *Memory*,

Reconciliation, and Reunions in South Korea: Crossing the Divide, Lexington. Last August, she co-organized an international conference entitled “Power and Dissent: Understanding Past and Present Challenges to Korean Society through Korean Studies” at Seoul National University’s Kyujanggak Institute.

Notes

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² Kim Ji-hoon and Park Su-ji, “[How million-strong candlelight demonstrations are being organized](#),” The Hankyoreh, December 6, 2016.

³ Jenny Choi, “[The Color Yellow](#),” Harvard Political Review, May 7, 2014.

⁴ Jiyeon Kang, *Igniting the Internet: Youth and Activism in Post-authoritarian South Korea*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016, p. 152. See also Sun-Chul Kim, “[South Korea’s Candlelight Protests](#),” East Asia Forum, February 7, 2017.

⁵ Cho Hae-joang, “The Spec Generation Who Can’t Say ‘No’: Overeducated and Underemployed Youth in Contemporary South Korea,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 23.3 (2015): 437-462; Lee Soon-hyuk, “[The Ironies of South Korea’s Digital Generation](#),” The Hankyoreh, March 19, 2013

⁶ Jamie Doucette & Se-Woong Koo, “Pursuing Post-democratisation: The Resilience of Politics by Public Security in Contemporary South Korea,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46.2 (2016), p. 200.

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¹³ George Mariscal, “In the Wake of the Gulf War: Untying the Yellow Ribbon,” *Cultural Critique* (1991) p. 98.

¹⁴ Elfren S. Cruz, “[The Yellow Ribbon](#),” The Philippine Star, February 26, 2016; Michael Francis C. Andrada, “Untie/Anti-the Yellow Ribbon,” *Philippines Humanities Review* 14.1 (2012) 49-73.

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¹⁶ Geum, Key-Sook and Hyun Jung, "Color Continuity and Change in Korean Culture," in *Color and Design*, edited by DeLong, Marilyn and Barbara Martinson, pp. 125-140, London and New York: Berg, 2012.

¹⁷ Matikas Santos, '[Yellow' is color of protest in Hong Kong](#),' *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, October 2, 2014.

¹⁸ Cho Il-jun, "[Survey finds South Korean youth among the unhappiest in the world](#)," *The Hankyoreh*, February 12, 2017.

¹⁹ Gooyoung Kim, "Eros Effect as Emergency Politics: Affective and Networked Politics of Agonistic Humanism in South Korea's Sewol Ferry Disaster," *New Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2016): 160-177.

²⁰ See Owen Miller, "[South Korea After Park](#)," *Jacobin*, May 18, 2017.

²¹ Ock Hyun-ju, "[Candle Revolution: How Candles Led to Park's Impeachment](#)," *The Korea Herald*, December 9, 2016.