

BOOK REVIEW

The Truth Foundation Sewol Ferry Documentation Team 세월호 기록팀, ***Sewol Ferry: Revisiting the Record of April 16, 2014*** 세월호, 다시 쓴 그날의 기록 (Seoul: The Truth Foundation, 2024), 880 pp.

Seulgi Lee[†]

Sewol Ferry: Revisiting the Record of April 16, 2014 (hereafter, *Revisiting the Record*), focuses on *how*. The fact that the Sewol Ferry set sail in a dangerous condition on April 15 was not a coincidence or bad luck, but the result of the actions of many people, organizations, and institutions accumulated over a long period (787).¹

Revisiting the Record was published in April 2024, ten years after the Sewol Ferry disaster (April 16, 2014) claimed the lives of 304 people. The book is also a revised edition of *Ferry Sewol, Records from That Day* (hereafter, *Records from That Day*), published in 2016. *Revisiting the Record* (2024) is not an academic book per se. Nevertheless, the book provides insights into the intertwining truth, fact, and memory within the realm of disaster investigations, themes that are of interest to historians of science and technology and science and technology studies (STS). Historians of disasters and disaster investigations do not seek to narrate disasters as spectacular and dynamic events. Instead, they reveal the chain of choices made by institutions, policies, customs, or cultures that had existed in the past, slowly and intentionally.

The Truth Foundation—the publisher and platform that supported the preparation of *Record from That Day* (2016) and *Revisiting the Record* (2024)—was founded with the state compensation awarded to victims and their families who had been wrongly accused of pro-North Korean espionage under South Korea's authoritarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s. These fabricated accusations were part of a broader pattern of political repression during the country's military rule. The very fact that

[†] Ph.D. student, Graduate School of Science and Technology Policy (STP), Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), lsg523@kaist.ac.kr

¹ I would like to note that the English book title here is The Truth Foundation Sewol Ferry Documentation Team's own translation.

the foundation published these two books in succession invites readers to reflect on the structural and governmental violence embedded in the Sewol Ferry disaster. For example, the authors—Chihyung Jeon, Sang-Eun Park, and Scott Gabriel Knowles argue that the Sewol Ferry disaster is not simply about the sinking of the ship, but rather a prolonged form of disaster that includes the government's obstruction of the investigation and the suppression of bereaved families.²

Following the sinking of the Sewol Ferry in 2014, the first disaster investigation, known as the Special Investigation Commission on 4/16 Sewol Ferry Disaster (Sewol Special Investigation Commission), was established by the Korean government and launched in 2015. *Record from That Day* (2016) was written for the purpose of contributing to this official investigation. However, the Sewol Special Investigation Commission was unable to release its report due to the internal political divide. The two following investigations—Sewol Investigation Commission (SIC) in 2017, which focused on the cause of sinking with scientific and technological expertise, and Special Investigation Commission on Humidifier Disinfectants and 4.16 Sewol Ferry Disasters (i.e. Special Commission on Social Disaster Investigation) active during 2018–2022—concluded with the publication of reports.

A disaster investigation commission is generally expected to construct a coherent account of a given incident by drawing on scientific, technical, legal, and societal evidence to help the public make sense of what happened. The revised book *Revisiting the Record*, published after the previous investigation reports in 2017 and 2022, raises a critical question: why, as its title suggests, was it necessary to revisit the record of that day in 2024? According to the authors, one reason is that the book integrates additional findings uncovered by two subsequent commissions since the first edition of book in 2016, thereby offering a more comprehensive reconstruction. More significantly, the persistence of competing interpretations surrounding the cause of the sinking indicates that no prior investigation completely succeeded in producing a narrative that reflected, if not formed, widespread social consensus. The book thus serves not only as a supplement to previous official reports but also as a response to the ongoing failure to stabilize the meanings of the disaster in public memory.

The Truth Foundation Sewol Ferry Documentation Team, which authored *Revisiting the Record*, brings together members from the three successive Sewol-related investigation committees (investigators, secretary generals, official report writers) and external contributors (journalists, lawyers) who engaged with the committees' activities. Drawing on their roles both within and beyond the official commissions, the authors blend formal investigative processes with informal, situated knowledge. As such, the book offers not only external critiques but also deeply informed insider

2 Chihyung Jeon, Scott Gabriel Knowles, and Sang-Eun Park, "Disaster (Continued): Sewol Ferry Investigations, State Violence, and Political History in South Korea," *History and Technology* 38:1 (2022), 84–106.

perspectives on the systemic failures of South Korea's disaster governance. Despite the existence of reports issued by investigative committees in which some of the authors themselves participated directly or indirectly at various levels, the reason for publishing an additional book exceeding 800 pages was likely due to the sense that "after the three rounds of the Sewol Ferry investigation committees, Korean society had lost its hope for societal improvement and reform through the clarification of the truth behind the tragedy" (9). In the Sewol Ferry disaster, the government's repeated failures and the committee's paralysis left the truth in a state where it could not be trusted by the public. Eventually, some citizens were more persuaded by the affective structure of alternative truths—such as the external force theory, which claims that the Sewol Ferry sank after colliding with an unknown submarine. This is not merely a problem of misinformation, but rather the emotional conditions of truth that arise when the state is not trusted. *Revisiting the Record* restores technical truth, but it also confronts the conditions under which that truth is not socially accepted. Rather than a simple report or a product of expert analysis, this book offers a powerful record of the politics of truth.

In disaster narratives, time becomes an instrument of authorial purpose. The way in which authors frame the temporal boundaries of a disaster and select the medium of storytelling directly constructs the chapter structure, impacting on which meanings are conveyed. The Part 1, "That Day, 101 Minutes," recounts the 101 minutes from the moment the ship began to tilt to that it was completely submerged. Reconstructing the timeframe of the occurrence of a disaster is an essential endeavor in the historical study of disasters.³ Kai Erikson's account of the 10 minutes around 8 a.m. when the dam collapsed during the 1972 Buffalo Creek Flood is a classic work. He intentionally extended 10-minute stories into a whole chapter by using quotes from survivors to depict the scene in multiple dimensions.⁴ Like Erikson's work, *Revisiting the Record* also features the voices of those involved. The difference is that in Kai Erikson's time, there were no dashboard cameras, cell phones, or computers, so he had to rely on interviews, but in 2014, the Sewol Ferry had them. The authors piece together these fragments of information to reconstruct the 101 minutes. After representing the 101 minutes, the book poses two questions: How did the Sewol Ferry become such a dangerous vessel that it ultimately sank? Moreover, how did the sinking of the passenger ferry Sewol escalate into a disaster that claimed the lives of 304 people?

To answer these questions, the authors suggest focusing on the history of the M/V Sewol itself as a scientific and technological machine system. The Part 2, "The Most Dangerous Ship in South Korea: How It Was Born," expands on the 101 minutes of the ship's tilting and capsizing described in the Part 1 by tracing the technical and

3 Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn, *102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers* (New York: Times Book, 2005).

4 Erikson T. Kai, *Everything in its path* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976).

institutional failures that led to the disaster. This structural choice emphasizes that understanding the vessel's material, technological, and regulatory history is essential to grasping the core argument of the book. Despite its significance, the inherent danger of the ship itself has remained underemphasized in Korean public discourse on the Sewol Ferry disaster. This gap in collective memory likely explains why the authors chose to revisit the ship and rewrite the narrative. In this part, the authors persuasively demonstrate that social responsibility and vested interests are embedded in the technical components and scientific data themselves. For example, scientific and technical concepts, such as stability value and draft, are the result of social consensus and show that, in the case of the Sewol vessel, this consensus was not upheld when the ship was rebuilt. In the Korean context, experts who grounded their explanations of disasters in technical data have frequently faced criticism for neglecting moral and human accountability. Yet the authors insist that technical knowledge is not a means of evasion, but rather a tool for revealing broken public trust, identifying those responsible, and understanding the systems that allowed such violations to occur.

The stability value reflects the interests surrounding the ship. Shipowners want to prioritize profits by loading as much cargo and many passengers as possible, while engineers want to design the ship with safety in mind, even if that means loading less cargo and passengers. The draft at the time of initial construction is the result of a compromise between the two sides with different interests, and significantly altering the ship would break that agreement. (218).

In the Part 3, "Why Did It Sink?", the authors state that "the sinking of the Sewol was not only a technical accident but also a social and historical event" (404), demonstrating how scientific and technological disasters were created in Korean society through layers of choices and practices: repeated overloading, inadequate verification of passenger numbers and cargo quantities during vessel operations, and classification surveyors who failed to conduct proper stability tests despite evidence of intent to overload the vessel through expansion. This section also investigates the mechanical jamming of a very small component—the solenoid valve (a direction control valve operated by electrical signals)—as a possible cause of the ship's abrupt turn. However, the authors emphasize that responsibility for the Sewol Ferry's sinking lies not in the solenoid valve that might have triggered the immediate event, but in "the people, organizations, and systems that allowed an extremely dangerous ship to set sail on the night of April 15, and the people, organizations, and systems that allowed the ship imported from Japan to end up in such a state" (404).

The Part 4, "Why Couldn't They Be Rescued?", exposes the irresponsibility of the crew, vessel traffic service centers, the coast guard situation room, and the command headquarters. The authors show that the ship was not only a mechanical and physical entity but also a network of individuals whose responsibilities and roles

formed a small society. Within this network, individuals avoided accountability for failures that occurred in the course of their duties, reinforcing an organizational culture of irresponsibility. A similar dynamic is explored in Diane Vaughan's *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risk Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA*, where she traces how a small component—the O-ring—came to represent a critical failure point that ultimately jeopardized the entire space shuttle program. Vaughan argues that over at least four years, NASA's decision-making culture normalized risks it could not ultimately manage.⁵ Likewise, *Revisiting the Record* urges us to confront the many hidden choices and (ir)responsibilities that accumulated over time, making it possible for a small component—the solenoid valve—to sink the entire ship. In both cases, the technical failure was the spark, but the fuel had been laid by years of organizational decisions, structural negligence, and cultural indifference to risk.

The authors' accounts, situated at the intersection of internal and external spheres, reveal the position of knowledge producers who are not entirely accepted by either the state system or civil society, thereby exposing the limitations inherent in truth-making based on science and technology. In this sense, this book does not merely seek to clarify "what is true," but also poses the question, "what are the facts we are ignoring?" From this perspective, it can be seen not as a scientific book that clarifies the truth, but rather as a record and narrative sent to a society where scientific facts are not accepted. This dual role—as both an inquiry into overlooked facts and a message to a resistant society—comes into sharp focus in the final section, "Returning to That Day," where the team summarize the lessons to be learned and explain why this book had to be written. In the same vein, this book is a case study of collective scientific citizenship by the authors who are boundary-crossing knowledge producers, demonstrating the work that could not be completed by the bureaucratized investigative committees tasked with uncovering the truth. In situations where the state has failed to resolve a significant technical debate and create a shared narrative, this book demonstrates how citizens can construct the truth.

Memory work in the context of disaster is often scientific, technical, and forensic. *Revisiting the Record* adopts a practical approach to such memory work demonstrating how knowledge can be produced beyond official institutional channels. *The Korean Journal for the History of Science* has previously explored the intersection of disaster memorialization and scientific practice in its special issue, "Disaster, Memorials, and the History of Science."⁶ *Revisiting the Record* is not merely a technical report restoring the truth. It is a practical intervention that seeks to reconstruct the social and emotional conditions necessary for reaching the truth amid failed investigations and gaps in official memory with scientific, technical, and forensic facts.

5 Diane Vaughan, *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1996).

6 Scott Gabriel Knowles, "Disaster, Memorials, and the History of Science," *The Korean Journal for the History of Science* 45:2 (2023), 295-297.

For Anglophone academia, it is worth noting that *Revisiting the Record* resonates with Naomi Klein's discussion of the "mirror world" in *The Doppelganger*. Klein traces how Naomi Wolf, mistaken for Klein herself, drifted into conspiracy thinking during the pandemic, revealing a structure in which truth and emotion can be inverted.⁷ In a parallel dynamic, the authors of *Revisiting the Record* confront a troubling trend: some advocates of the Sewol Ferry truth movement have embraced conspiracy theories about the sinking, such as the claim that the ship collided with a submarine. The book responds to this challenge through what might be called memory work: a historically grounded effort to confront, structure, and recover truth in the face of political resistance and contested narratives. Here, "the record of that day" becomes not a closed archive but the ongoing site of an unfinished struggle for truth, one that persists long after the disaster itself. Confronting a tragedy shaped by the accumulated choices of individuals and institutions who misunderstood or neglected their roles, the authors act from their own expertise to resist the erosion of truth. This is, ultimately, both a record of and a call for sustaining the labor of truth-making in the present.

Truth generally floats in ambiguous and complex forms, eluding a firm grasp. Only when those with resolve collect, organize, interpret, analyze, and verify records and data to establish individual facts, and then strive to weave them into a larger picture, can we begin to approach the truth. (810).

7 Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (New York: Random House, 2024).