



# Ambiguous Loss in MV Sewol Tragedy: Meaning of Body Retrieval to Korean Families

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## ABSTRACT

On April 16, 2014, MV Sewol capsized on its route and lost a total of 304 passengers, nine of whom are still missing. Families are strongly demanding the ship to be salvaged in hopes of reuniting with the bodies. Both cultural and psychological influences are assumed to play a role in their heavy emphasis on body retrieval.

## INTRODUCTION

Man-made disasters are not rare occurrences in modern Korea largely due to rapid modernization. Among the latest tragedies to strike the nation is the sinking of MV Sewol ferry on April 16, 2014. The vessel—carrying 476 passengers, most of whom were high-school students—capsized on its route and lost a total of 304 passengers.

Of the 304, nine still remain missing. Through the media and various social network platforms, Korean citizens are often reminded of the deep, unresolved grief the families of those nine missing victims are in today, while the families continue to aggressively demand for continued search of the bodies from the government. Nationwide protests have also been staged to call on the government to salvage the sunken ferry, which is expected to cost more than \$100 million. Many families still report to be in an unending emotional misery and grief, waiting every day in torture for the bodies to come back safely.

This research aims to elucidate both the cultural and psychological basis of the heavy emphasis these families place on the safe retrieval of the missing victims' bodies.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Why is the presence of a body important in resolving the loved one's death for Koreans?
- What is unique in the situation of MV Sewol tragedy?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Confucian Foundations on the Importance of Body

» “신체발부는 수지부모니 불감훼상이 효지시야요”  
(身體髮膚受之父母不敢毀傷孝之始也)

- Koreans believe that each one's body is sacred as it is given by our parents, an idea derived from filial piety (Jang, 2007).
- Any act that damages one body is considered to be unfilial.
- Could act reciprocally. The parents could have a sense of belonging for their children's bodies.
- Also the reason for low rates of organ donation in Korea (Kwon and Yoon, 2000).

» *Complexities of Funeral Ritual*

- Confucian teachings dictate that complex rituals are needed to finalize a family member's death. To do otherwise would result in grim consequences for both the deceased and the family.
- The Book of Rites, a core text in Confucian canon, states, “Funeral and sacrificial rites serve to inculcate benevolence and love... [W]hen the mourning and sacrificial rites are clearly understood, the people are filial” (Deuchler, 1935).
- The inability to hold a proper ritual with a body could bring a sense of anxiety and depression.

### Ambiguous Loss (Boss, 2002; Boss, 2006)

- Termed in 1999 by Pauline Boss, defined as “an unclear loss - a loved one missing either physically or psychologically, results from various situations of not knowing if a person is dead or alive, absent or present, permanently lost or coming back.”
- An extremely stressful, confusing, and debilitating form of loss. Immobilizes individuals and relational systems.
- The lack of clarity generates “conflict, ambivalence, depression, and anxiety.”
- The victims should receive therapeutic help to live with ambiguous loss in a more resilient way.
- Families need encouragement and support for efforts to find some meaning in their loss.

## METHOD

- Analysis of literature and interviews on similar past cases in Korea (e.g. 1995 Sam Poong Department Store collapse, 2003 Daegu subway fire)
- Review of current literature on ambiguous loss in different contexts (e.g. 9/11)
- Interviews with families from the Sewol tragedy whose loved ones were once lost but now found.

## EXPECTED FINDINGS

- The importance of “closure” and physical resolution of grief to the Korean culture.
- How the underwater setting brings an additional layer of ambiguity in the Sewol tragedy.
- Whether recovery of body actually brings the closure to the families, or if ambiguous loss is internalized with no means of closure.

## IMPLICATIONS

- Unfortunately, given the history of Korea, this will not be the last man-made disaster resulting in mass casualties with lost bodies.
- There must be specialized guidelines in place for Korean therapists to help these individuals suffering from ambiguous loss.
- Wider awareness of why retrieval of bodies holds such great significance would help to form a more informed perspective among the public on the government's decision to salvage the ship.

## LIMITATIONS

- Difficulty in interviewing families of Sewol victims (a recent event, ethical issues, small population size).
- The high sensitivity toward the issue by the general public may engender a hostile, unwelcoming attitude toward scholarly research of the subject.

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# Understanding the Gap: Autism and Public Education in China

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## Introduction

This summer I will be working at Beidouxing Autism Center in Chengdu, China. I will be serving as care provider and teacher for children with autism. With the ASIA 451 class on East Asian family dynamics, I could better research the intersection of culture with autism education.

## Goal

To better understand the expectations of the Chinese public with regards to public education for children with autism. To explore if and to what extent the gap in educational resources is reflective of traditional Chinese values of education and filial piety, as well as East Asian norms of conformity.

## Methods

- 60 interviews conducted across 3 urban, 5 rural elementary schools
- Qualitative interviews with 3 groups: public school teachers, parents of children with autism, parents of children who are typically developing
- Pre-interview questionnaire on knowledge of autism disorder
- Thematic analysis focusing on cultural values

## Implications

- Model for other East Asian countries with similar cultural values
- Asian immigrant families may retain similar assumptions
- Model for other high functioning disabilities
- Future research needs to examine the role of teachers
- Future research needs to determine if children with autism in Chinese integrated classrooms necessarily succeed

## Literature Review

- Relatively recent first diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders in China in the 1980's
- 2 Key Legislations: 1986 China Compulsory Education Law, 1990 China Protection of Persons with Disabilities
- Government provides special education schools and public schools
- However, lack of public educational resources for children with autism, burden falls on family and parents
- Confucianism in China promotes filial piety, high value of education
- Cultural desire for child's success through education uniquely affects parents of children with autism

## Research Questions

- What are the attitudes of the public, specifically parents of children with autism, parents of children without, and teachers, towards the inclusion of children with autism in public education?
  - What are their experiences?
  - What are their opinions on integrated classrooms?
  - What is the value and goal of public education to these different groups?
- Who is responsible for the education of children with autism?

## Expected Findings

- China's current public education system reflects Confucian value of education, education as means to success
- Clash of ideologies between parents of children with autism and 2 other groups
- Parents of children with autism desire public education as means of conformity
- Parents of typically developing children want public education as means for success for child and family
- Teachers fear integrated classrooms detract from success of students

## Limitations

- Sample size
- Lack of awareness, esp. rural areas
- Difficulty identifying, interviewing parents
- Families and teachers might not represent public opinion

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