

Hell Joseon and the Politics of Mourning in the Shin Hae-Chul Episode of *Hidden Singer*

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Abstract

This article examines the politics of public mourning after the death of South Korean celebrity Shin Hae-Chul and the Sewol Ferry disaster. I argue that grief became the impetus for meaningful political change, especially President Park Geun-hye's removal, when it branched out into a wider affective range in digital culture. I focus on Hell Joseon, a hotly debated internet meme at the time of Shin's fatal medical accident, and an episode of the television game show *Hidden Singer* memorializing Shin to identify alternative strategies of politicizing grief that thwart the government's efforts to silence critical voices.

Keywords: Hell Joseon, Shin Hae-Chul, *Hidden Singer*, Sewol Ferry disaster, mourning, grief, digital culture, Korean media

Introduction

A few weeks after former President Park Geun-Hye was removed from office following her historic impeachment trial, the *New York Times* ran an article about the catastrophic sinking of the Sewol Ferry, noting that “the government’s botched rescue operation was a central grievance voiced against the president” in widespread public demonstrations dubbed the “candlelight protests.”¹ While the protesters who gathered at Gwanghwamun Square and other public spaces certainly condemned Park and her inept administration, the expression of these grievances was also accompanied by a pervasive sense of grief. Tens of thousands of people visited the temporary memorial altar to the dead passengers—mostly high school students—in their hometown of Ansan while others tied yellow ribbons to fences at Mokpo Harbor, wishing for the safe return of the missing. Almost three years after the incident, yellow ribbons, a symbol of solidarity with the victims and families of the Sewol disaster, abounded during the demonstrations calling for Park’s impeachment.²

Mourning has often provided the necessary impetus for political action—for example, the *Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina and the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt based in the United States. In modern South Korean history, the deaths of Jeon Tae-Il in 1970, as well as of Park Jong-Chol and Lee Han-Yeol in 1987, ignited mass protests that had significant consequences for workers’ rights and the end of Chun Doo-Hwan’s military dictatorship respectively. Today, remembering these youths, who all died in their early 20s, is integral to the way that South Korea not only historicizes its painful process of democratization, but also contextualizes current efforts to protect its hard-earned freedoms. Perhaps the Sewol victims will serve a similar role in the future, especially since the incident has become inseparable from Park’s removal from office.

However, activism rooted in public mourning has taken on radically new forms in the age of digital media and the internet, influencing the ways that people share news and organize protests. Moreover, mourning is shaped by what Athina Karatzogianni calls the “affective fabrics” of digital culture, multiplying and fracturing into performances that do not

conform to traditional memorial rituals. Karatzogianni notes: “The same digitized account of events, the same image can become an object of shifting feelings: it appears once as truthful and heartbreaking evidence, and once as a skillful and evil deception; once as an outcry, and once as entertainment.”³ Public response to the Sewol incident was indeed varied over the past three years. Setting aside the fact that the government waged a secret media war to discredit and vilify the victims’ families, the constant stream of Sewol imagery in Korean culture—the blue tip of the ship’s hull vanishing into the gray sea, the frayed tents and banners that occupied public spaces for months on end, photographs of the victims’ faces frozen forever in their late teens—caused psychological fatigue for some and prompted political engagement for others. Disagreements about *how* to mourn Sewol and for *how long* came up repeatedly and were inevitable since people attended memorial events for diverse reasons and associated the yellow ribbon with different political agendas. Yet despite the growing divisions, public sentiment about the Sewol disaster persisted for three years after the initial incident to play a key role in Park’s ouster.

How can we understand public mourning as a platform for political action within this affective fabric? How did the Sewol disaster play such a central role in mobilizing large crowds of protestors in an extremely atomized society plagued by smartphone addiction and political apathy? In this paper, I offer as one piece of this complex puzzle the notion of Hell Joseon, a neologism that started as a satirical internet meme but quickly became a hotly-debated topic in the media during the aftermath of the Sewol disaster. As a term that invites reflection on death and national identity, I argue that Hell Joseon was an important catalyst that converted grief for Sewol victims into a shared sense of social precarity among the South Korean youth who formed the backbone of the candlelight protests.⁴ This conversion was crucial in the long and difficult fight against Park’s regime, for grief in itself can be sustained for only so long. Indeed, the ironic tone of Hell Joseon reflects a spirited, playful approach to public mourning that deserves more critical attention—as an example of outcry meeting entertainment.

Examining this phenomenon in contemporary South Korean

culture can be challenging, especially in relation to the Sewol disaster as the psychological and emotional trauma is still strongly felt. As a first step toward a broader study on the cultural performances of mourning Sewol, I focus on the role that Hell Joseon played in weaving this affective fabric by considering a second outrageous incident: the abrupt death of rock musician and celebrity Shin Hae-Chul after an apparently botched medical operation. The Sewol disaster and Shin's death resemble one another in significant ways; both incidents fed into a perpetual fear of victimization that intensified over the course of Park's presidency, propelling the Hell Joseon meme into public discourse. To illustrate the ways in which mourning, protest, and play converge in Hell Joseon, I examine Shin's death via an episode of the popular television show *Hidden Singer* that featured Shin's music while also serving as an impromptu memorial service. At the end of the essay, I will return to the Sewol demonstrations to identify similar strategies of representation that redirect mourning into political energy.

Living and Grieving in Hell

The sudden news of Shin Hae-Chul's death on October 27, 2014 came as a shock to many. This was partly because he had only recently been on TV offering consolation and advice to South Korean youth about their uncertain futures. Aside from his successful and prolific musical career spanning over twenty-five years and more than a dozen LPs (mostly with his band N.EX.T.), Shin was a one-of-a-kind celebrity, unafraid to make political comments on behalf of the young generation that listened to his music. Even as he continued to push the envelope in Korean rock and electronic music, he gained respect as a critical voice speaking against the neoliberal values of competition and success, especially after the conservative Hannara Party retook power in 2007.

A few days before he died, Shin was rushed to the emergency room in a coma after a stomach operation. The magnitude of public shock only escalated from there as allegations of medical malpractice began to surface. A police autopsy found that there were small ruptures in Shin's small intestine and pericardium (the membrane encompassing the heart),

and that small pieces of food had spilled out of the digestive tract and caused an infection. The National Institute of Scientific Investigation determined that Shin had died of blood poisoning caused by days of neglect after the organs were punctured. The rupture was likely caused when Shin received gastric bypass surgery, surprisingly without his consent, according to his family. The surgeon was found guilty of manslaughter and medical negligence in two different courts, although he is currently appealing both verdicts.⁵ Reporters also discovered that some of the doctor's other patients have died in similar circumstances, suggesting that Shin's death was not a simple accident but the result of dangerous and unethical medical practice.⁶

As the shocking story attracted widespread attention, internet users started to mention Hell Joseon, interpreting Shin's death as symptomatic of a social system incapable of protecting its constituents. A combination of the English word "hell" and Joseon, the 600-year-old kingdom that fell to Imperial Japan in the early twentieth century, this term became a catchphrase for criticizing South Korean society in the middle of Park Geun-Hye's presidency. As Yonhap News reported in a study conducted with a big data analysis company, the usage of "Hell Joseon" on social media jumped by a factor of more than twenty between 2014 and 2015.⁷ Granted, the term was often used as a knee-jerk response to just about any tragic or maddening incident in the news at the time. However, several factors made the term particularly relevant to Shin's case compared to other high-profile deaths, such as celebrity suicides.

First, Shin himself had evoked similar ideas in his music. N.EX.T. released an album in 2004 titled *Gaehanminguk*, a play on *Daehanminguk* (the nation's name "Republic of Korea" in the Korean language) that replaces the first syllable (*dae-*), meaning "great," with a derogatory prefix (*gae-*) that literally translates to "dog." The album is a scathing attack on every aspect of South Korean society—from the government and military to the education system and the Christian power establishment. Several of the tracks were banned from TV and radio because of their explicit content. Looking back, Shin's wordplay and sardonic attack on the nation prefigured the more impactful coinage, Hell Joseon. Shin also publicly spoke out about the young generation's feelings of socio-economic

insecurity and criticized the government for failing to respond to these issues in interviews and debate programs, contributing to the growing consensus among disillusioned youths that would materialize into the Hell Joseon meme.⁸ Surely, Shin would have embraced the neologism if he had lived to see it proliferate.

That such a thoughtful, confident personality could be blindsided by medical malpractice was also a reminder to Shin's grief-stricken fans that they were no less vulnerable to dangers beyond their control. Since young South Koreans were beginning to see the nation itself as a threat to their lives and an obstacle to their aspirations, it was difficult to brush off Shin's death as a statistically insignificant accident. Many saw the "accident" as intentional, even predetermined. To those who already felt helplessly outmatched in a hostile society, the loss of Shin was yet another "win" for the ruling class of Hell Joseon. What better proof could there be that there is no place for critical voices in South Korea?⁹

As the term Hell Joseon circulated beyond social media and into all areas of public discourse, it also became the site for contesting attitudes towards nationalism and patriotism that have deep roots in South Korean society. Conservative news outlets pounced on the exceedingly negative term to scold the young generation for unfairly blaming the country for their own failures.¹⁰ Some politicians also quoted Hell Joseon to marshal public opinion for various agendas, the most well-known being conservative legislator Kim Mu-Sung's statement that the idea originates in a distorted and narrow (i.e., leftist) account of Korean history, which was his justification for mandating state-issued history textbooks in public education.¹¹

The charge of anti-nationalism has some merit; internet users often mention Hell Joseon to express their desire or plan to emigrate from it.¹² But more importantly, anti-nationalism can also mean that the modernist paradigm of nation-building has run its course as transnational capital exerts more influence on one's life than the state. The erosion of twentieth-century nationalism coupled with socio-economic instability for the younger generations is not a phenomenon limited to South Korea. Chua Beng Huat has written about the situation in Singapore, in which "[young people] have the existential sense of a loss of larger 'meaning'

as the major obstacles to nation-building appear to have been overcome. From now on, there is only the dull compulsion of struggling to make a living, albeit a materially rich one.”¹³ In that sense, Hell Joseon is the negative image of nation-building in which the residues of nationalist discourse are repurposed to highlight “modernized” Korea’s failure to live up to its promises of prosperity and security. Meanwhile, Lauren Berlant points out that the recent discourse on precarity as a global phenomenon functions as “a rallying cry for a thriving new world of interdependency and care that’s not just private,” as well as “an idiom for describing a loss of faith in a fantasy world to which generations have become accustomed.”¹⁴ Hell Joseon has the potential to facilitate a renewed sense of sociality based in precarity, as well as in disengagement from twentieth-century narratives of progress and prosperity.

Whichever position one takes, it is clear that Hell Joseon has become an important site for negotiating politics and culture in South Korea. In my view, the concept excels in this role precisely because its meaning and purpose are ambiguous. Depending on the individual and the context, Hell Joseon could be a rallying cry for social change, an expression of anger towards the “ruling class” that thrives while the rest of the population withers away, a symbol of despair for the future, an excuse for venting hatred, or simply a waste of time with no impact on actual social issues. Yet so far, there has been surprisingly little cultural analysis done on this phenomenon that focuses on its productive and political aspects.¹⁵ Indeed, Hell Joseon is often interpreted as cynical and abnormal, even by some on the left who sympathize with the precariats who rally around the term. In an editorial, Jason Lim calls it a “collective psychopathological phenomenon,” even though he acknowledges that “[y]oung people are disengaging from a culture that holds people as interchangeable commodities.”¹⁶ Cultural critic Moon-Kang Hyung Joon argues that this “fad” (his word) demonstrates that economically burdened youths are conscious of structural inequality, but “at the same time shows that there is still little faith in change through politics.”¹⁷ Some commentators are perhaps unable to move past its hyperbolic tone and pessimistic attitude, or its self-deprecating humor. But the larger issue seems to be the fatalism implied in portraying South Korea

as a living hell—encapsulated in the oft-used retort to depressing news, “Of course in Hell Joseon”—as it reinforces a weak and passive attitude towards social injustice.

Granted, the candlelight protests in late 2016 and early 2017 tend to disprove this view: during this time, the phrase Hell Joseon appeared frequently on physical posters and banners, in addition to being posted on Twitter, Facebook, message boards, and comment sections. A banner during a protest in Busan sported the slogan: “Ousting the Park regime will change my life. Overturn this world of Hell Joseon and dirt spoons!” while an advertisement for a mass demonstration in Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul read: “Resign, Park Geun-Hye! Let’s change Hell Joseon! Candlelight on Lunar New Year’s Day!”¹⁸ In these examples, Hell Joseon is not an imaginary landscape; it is another name for Park’s regime, which *was* overthrown through political action.

But even if one concedes that Hell Joseon mediates seemingly passive and negative affects such as fear, anxiety, depression, and helplessness, that does not necessarily render it apolitical. When the image is evoked in the context of mourning Shin’s death and the Sewol Ferry disaster, it can allow mourners to also acknowledge their own vulnerability, which, in turn, can stimulate forms of political action that may otherwise be beyond their scope. Discussing the debates around performances of public mourning during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, Douglas Crimp writes that mourning and militant rage do not have to be mutually exclusive; that each plays a needed role in resistance politics. He writes:

Activist antagonism to mourning hinges, in part, on how AIDS is interpreted, or rather, where the emphasis is laid, on whether the crisis is seen to be a natural, accidental catastrophe—a disease syndrome that has simply struck at this time and in this place—or as the result of gross political negligence or mendacity—an epidemic that was allowed to happen.¹⁹

Here, Crimp is concerned with keeping the state in the frame as mourners cope with grief and trauma so that it is held accountable for failing to protect its citizens without discrimination or political

calculation. Following this line of thought, we may ask: what is happening when internet users write “Hell Joseon” in the comment sections of news articles about Shin’s death and the Sewol disaster? Are they treating these incidents as inevitable tragedies? Does Hell Joseon ask us to forget the victims and move on, since there is nothing we can do? Or does the meme weave these discrete incidents and victims into a single portrait of a society gone to hell, and in the process secure critical space for other cases that do not receive media attention? Can Hell Joseon frame these disasters as man-made and hold the state accountable for allowing them to happen?

In the rest of the paper, I make a case for the latter interpretation. As I have discussed, Hell Joseon serves as a mediating discourse on social precarity for Korea’s young generation. Public responses to Shin’s death and the Sewol disaster illustrate that this growing recognition of precarity is closely related to various forms of public mourning for the victims of catastrophic events. Indeed, mourning has become one of the most politicized things people can do together in contemporary South Korea. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian posit a “politics of mourning that might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary.”²⁰ The episode of *Hidden Singer* that I now turn to delineates such a politics of mourning, not by making a direct political statement, but rather through its affective multivalence, bringing irony, playfulness, and entertainment into the orbit of grief and memorialization in ways that draw upon the deployment of Hell Joseon in digital culture.

Hide and Seek

Merging elements of the competitive talent show, talk show, and live music program genres with a guessing game that invites audience participation, *Hidden Singer* is an unlikely setting for public mourning. The program’s format remained largely the same for the Shin Hae-Chul episode, broadcasted on October 24, 2015 on JTBC. No part of the actual game that is run over four stages during every episode was truncated

or modified. This was unequivocally an entertainment product. Nevertheless, the program succeeded as an emotionally charged memorial event that coincided with the one-year anniversary of Shin's death, paying tribute to his work and acknowledging the grief that many of his friends and fans still feel.

To understand how *Hidden Singer* managed to accomplish this feat, it is necessary to first explain the game show's innovative format and rules. The creators first put out an open call for anyone who can convincingly imitate well-known singers. Those who are selected then compete against the original singer before a panel of 100 judges made up of celebrity guests and a studio audience. In each round, the contestants hide in booths and take turns singing segments from a hit song. In the first three rounds, the panelists vote on the voice least likely to be the original singer and the contestant with the most votes is eliminated. (If the original singer gets the most votes, the game continues under slightly different rules.) In the final round, the panelists try to guess the original singer based on what they have learned about each contestant's vocal traits and habits. The goal of the imitators is to mimic the original singer as closely as possible and survive until the end to win a cash prize. The goal of the featured singer of the episode is, simply put, to be the real thing—to recover the aura of the original, as Walter Benjamin might put it.

Although the show is pre-recorded, *Hidden Singer* is edited in a way that allows viewers at home to play along, as if they were watching a live performance. Starting from round two, the music continues while the studio panel votes on their electronic devices, also giving viewers at home time to decide. Afterwards, the booths open one by one to reveal the contestants, who walk out as they continue singing segments of the song. This is the most exciting moment of the program—when the face behind each near-identical voice is dramatically revealed. Correctly identifying the original singer is not as easy as one might imagine. Not only do the imitators receive professional vocal training and practice extensively before the show, but also it is sometimes the case that the original singers' voices and styles have changed over their careers such that they no longer match the voice that people remember. An imitator

has won the contest six times out of around fifty episodes, with several other close calls.

Shin was the second deceased singer to be featured, following folk musician Kim Kwang-Suk during the previous season. As such, the digital technology for extracting the vocal track from old recordings and the procedural adjustments necessary for an absent original singer were already in place. When the singers were revealed each round, Shin's booth remained empty while a recording of his voice filled in the allotted bars. At the same time, the show used digitally controlled spotlights and post-production visual effects to mark Shin's position on the studio stage, as if his recorded voice were emanating from that spot rather than from the speakers. In other words, Shin's "entrance" was carefully staged to create the illusion of presence. This spatio-temporal vocabulary was reinforced in later rounds. After the reveal in round 3, the contestants sang a few bars in pairs (see the figure below.) The imitator in booth 4 turned towards the empty space marked by the spotlight, as if he were actually singing a duet with another person. In some of the close-up shots, another post-production effect was added onto the CG spotlights—a cluster of soft, glittering light—that appeared to evoke Shin's spiritual presence in the studio.

However, the illusion of Shin's presence created by stagecraft and digital effects also made the reality of his absence all the more palpable. True to the program's title, Shin remained "hidden" even after multiple reveal sequences, forcing the audience to gaze at an empty, spotlit space while listening to an archive of his past voice. To be hidden in this context means that presence and absence are locked in



The Shin Hae-Chul episode of *Hidden Singer*

tension without being resolved: *here* and *not here* at the same time. The mourners/participants of the game had to concentrate and draw upon their memories of Shin's physical appearance and voice to take part in this unusual ritual. Commemoration became an active search.

To elucidate the ways in which *Hidden Singer's* game show format translated grief into forms of emotional and mental activity, we may compare Shin's representation to arguably the most famous use of technology to resurrect a dead singer in live performance: the holographic Tupac Shakur that "performed" at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in 2012. Even commentators who acknowledged the tribute paid to Tupac were disturbed by the implications of digitally resurrecting a deceased artist in an illusion of "liveness" and presence, "animatronic kitsch, spinning tragedy into a stupid amusement park ride," as one critic berated it.²¹ Others were interested exclusively in the technology, which turned out to be a nineteenth-century theatre trick called Pepper's Ghost and not actually a hologram, and how much it cost. In any case, Tupac's likeness, faithfully rendered in cutting-edge CG, ended up getting in the way of memorializing his early death and musical legacy.

Hidden Singer, on the other hand, emphasized Shin's absence through a combination of his disembodied voice, other people who replicated his voice, and special effects that marked a space as both empty and occupied.²² Shin's indirect and fragmented representation here recalls the theatrical notion of *ghosting*, discussed by theorists such as Herbert Blau, Marvin Carlson, and Alice Rayner. Ghosting is not necessarily about actors portraying the dead, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, or making the dead seem alive again, like Tupac's hologram. Rayner argues:

The ghost is known only by its affective presence, when one asks from a state of wonder, What am I seeing, how does this happen, where is this coming from, this 'thing' happening before my eyes? If words are successful in naming the ghost, there is no ghost.²³

Building on Rayner's idea, it is the attempt to discover the ghost, despite the impossibility of physically locking it down, which makes the ghostly

encounter meaningful. Rather than grant us the cathartic satisfaction of Shin appearing before our eyes or sending him off for good, ghostliness keeps affective responses to Shin's death in flux. It keeps us hanging. Notably, the game show host referred to Shin in the present tense throughout the episode, teasing the audience, "Which booth do you think he is in right now?" and addressing the original singer through the curtain as if he were actually there.²⁴

This ambiguity and irony allowed for a wider range of affect to arise during the show. The studio audience laughed and clapped during the reveal sequences, but these excited responses were directly followed by closed eyes and weeping when Shin continued to sing *in absentia*. However, grief never inhibited the game in progress; the audience searched for Shin again in the next round. In sum, entertainment and mourning complemented one another to offer the public a different way to cope with the infuriating and fear-inducing conditions of Shin's death. Not only did the program give viewers an outlet to grieve collectively, it activated that grief in the form of a collective search for answers.

At the end of the program, Shin's widow, Yoon Won-Hee, who had been quietly sitting in the audience, thanked the contestants and surmised what Shin would have said if he were here: "Did you all have fun because of me?"²⁵ Perhaps this was her attempt to lighten the mood or rekindle one last memory of Shin's mischievous personality. In my view, however, this utterance captures why this entertainment product worked so well as a platform for mourning in contemporary South Korea. *Hidden Singer* refashioned public mourning into an absorbing game that the people in and beyond the studio could play together. This sense of play rejects the isolationism that South Korean society enforces on precarious youths, forced to survive or die on their own and mourn the deaths of others only in private. It is akin to the sardonic "game" of calling South Korea "Hell Joseon," which also bundles individual suffering together into social precarity. Furthermore, the active search for Shin's trace, and the communal jubilation in locating and identifying "him," offered a way for Koreans to break the oppressive silence in the aftermath of national catastrophe.

Recovering What Was Lost

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the audience's engagement with *Hidden Singer* had direct political consequences. Neither the host nor the panelists mentioned the unjust terms of Shin's death during the show, even though some of the guest celebrities condemned the medical incident as a crime and demanded a more extensive police investigation in other interviews. Indeed, this glaring omission at first seems to contradict my argument that a politics of mourning is operating here. The uplifting tone and validation by Shin's widow at the end also diverge from the depression and anger evoked by Hell Joseon, falsely implying that Shin and his family have found peace of mind.

However, it is important to note that mourning while being silent about the *human* causes of disaster was a familiar sight on television and other media during this time. After the Sewol Ferry disaster, the government ruthlessly suppressed any attempt to hold the Korea Coast Guard and government accountable—for example, with the *Diving Bell* controversy at the 2014 Busan International Film Festival.²⁶ During the impeachment trial, it was revealed that the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism kept a secret blacklist after the Sewol disaster to exclude artists and cultural figures hostile to the government from appearing on mainstream media and receiving government funding.²⁷ The state tolerated mourning for the Sewol victims only when the mourner's intentions were deemed "pure," in other words, devoid of any political demand for truth, accountability, and justice. As such, I am convinced that the silence on medical malpractice and violence in a program dedicated to Shin's tragic death spoke volumes about the pervasive atmosphere of government censorship in post-Sewol South Korea. This silence registers the fear and anxiety that someone will swoop in and stop the ritual the moment it turns into a demonstration against injustice. At the same time, the silence is an ongoing reminder that grievances and critical perspectives nevertheless ripple beneath the austere surface of the memorial, waiting for the right moment to break out.

The Korean government perpetrated various forms of violence against people who stepped beyond the boundary of individual, passive mourning—even parents who lost their teenage children. Extreme right-

wing groups, funded and guided by government agencies, harassed the families both online and in the streets, calling them money-grubbers and puppets of the opposition party, or even of North Korea in some cases.²⁸ This was one strategy in a larger campaign of manipulating public opinion, meant to discredit the victims' families so that society disengages from the Sewol issue and moves on. To employ Judith Butler's term, the government attempted to curtail the *grievability* of the Sewol victims. In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, Butler writes:

Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, "there is a life that will never have been lived," sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost. The apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life.²⁹

Butler develops her theory on grievability and its relationship to precarity by considering the ways in which war, especially American wars in the Middle East, enforces a distinction between a life that can be mourned (an American casualty, usually a soldier) and one that cannot or should not (an Iraqi or Afghan casualty, usually a civilian framed as a potential threat). In that regard, Park's administration essentially waged war against the victims and bereaved of Sewol, systematically Othering them so that their lives and losses would become ungrievable. (Frequent comparisons to the deaths of "patriotic" seamen in the 2010 sinking of the ROKS Cheonan, an opportunity that conservatives had seized to stoke fears about national security, fit snugly into Butler's distinction between grievable and ungrievable lives.) Furthermore, the government policed the public's grief when it could not be blocked off, spreading fear that mourning too much and too loud could turn *you* into a target just like them.

One way to counter these strategies is to develop new forms of mourning: frameworks and contexts that exceed the government's understanding of grievability. Hell Joseon offers one such approach, while *Hidden Singer*'s handling of Shin's fatal accident suggests a related one. To connect my reading of the program to the larger issue of resisting

the government's restraint of grievability for the Sewol victims, I would like to bring up a certain choice of words during the Sewol protests. Because the sunken ferry was not raised until March 2017, and because many of the victims were trapped inside the ship when it capsized, some of the bodies have still not been recovered. But instead of including these missing passengers in the death count (currently five out of a total of 304 victims), the families have insisted that they be categorized as the "unrecovered" (*misuseupja*). This terminology protests the botched rescue operation while the Sewol Ferry was still sinking, when there was still breathable air inside the upturned ship, and it was believed that some of the passengers might have been alive hours after the initial accident. In the end, no one was rescued, and the hope that there could be more survivors faded away in the following days and weeks without the unrecovered passengers ever being officially confirmed dead.

Why do these families insist on this label when it has been more than three years since the accident? Surely, there is no chance that their loved ones have survived at this point. However, the ongoing search for possible survivors is significant because it doubles as the demand for truth, that the accident and its causes be thoroughly re-investigated. It also prevents the Sewol disaster from sliding into the past by calling attention to the fact that these are still open cases. On another level, the symbolic search for unrecovered victims counters the government's strategy of marking certain lives ungrievable since one cannot be fully mourned if it is uncertain whether one is alive or dead, just as *Hidden Singer* turned mourning into an active group effort to find Shin again and again through the interplay of presence and absence.

Butler believes that the ability to apprehend grievability in others and by extent the precariousness of one's own life forms the basis of ethical action, for "[p]recariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other."³⁰ If so, then engaging in a search to recover the lost, even if it is in the context of a TV game show, can strengthen these social bonds and mutual dependencies. Moreover, the ambivalences contained in Hell Joseon set the stage for these cultural performances of recovery, playfully nudging us to see at once both life and death, hope and despair, the real world and an

imagined one. Despite its origins as a cynical and self-deprecating idea, Hell Joseon is the key to understanding the new culture of mourning that, on the one hand, underscores social precarity as the basis for standing with the victims and bereaved, and on the other, effectively deploys irony and playfulness to transfer grief into sustained political action.

Notes

¹ Choe Sang-Hun, "South Korea Raises Ferry That Sank in 2014 Disaster," *New York Times*, March 22, 2017, accessed December 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/22/world/asia/south-korea-ferry-sewol.html>.

² For a discussion of various symbolic objects used during the Sewol protests, including the yellow ribbon, see Jacyn Sakura Knitter, "The Evolution of South Korean Student Protests," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 29, no. 3 (2017): 383-91.

³ Athina Karatzogianni and Adi Kuntsman eds., *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

⁴ My usage of the term "youth" and "young generation" in this paper is based on the *cheongnyeon* age bracket, which generally refers to individuals in their 20s and 30s. The exact age range differs depending on various labor and welfare laws. Also, the upper limit has crept up from 34 to 39 and beyond in the past decade as it takes longer for South Koreans to attain financial independence. Korean youths are comparable, though not identical, to the millennial generation in Western nations, especially in terms of their vulnerability to neoliberal policies, such as reduced social welfare and job stability.

⁵ For online articles in English that summarize the case, see "Family Demands Autopsy of Singer Shin Hae-Chul," *Korea Herald*, October 31, 2014; "Rock Singer Shin Hae-Chul Died from Medical Malpractice: Police," *Korea Times*, March 3, 2015; and "Doctor Gets Suspended Sentence Over Singer's Death," *Chosun Ilbo*, November 28, 2016.

⁶ Judith Aparri, "Shin Hae-Chul's Doctor Who Was Blamed For His Death Is Recently Linked to Death of an Australian," *JKDaily*, January 25, 2016, accessed December 14, 2017, <http://www.jkdaily.com/articles/1250/20160125/shin-hae-chul-doctor-death.htm>.

⁷ Hyun Hye-Ran, "Cheongnyeoni sangsilgami mandeureonaen yuhaengeo 'heljoseon'" ["Hell Joseon," a Buzzword Created by Feelings of Loss Among the Young Generation], *Yonhap News*, September 18, 2015, accessed December 4, 2017, <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2015/09/16/0200000000AKR20150916129800033.HTML?input=1195m>.

⁸ Lee Jin-Wook, “Go sinhaecheol 2jugi, ‘mawang’i yegyeonhan ‘heljoseon’ 2016” [Two-Year Anniversary of Shin Hae-Chul’s Death: *Mawang* Predicts ‘Hell Joseon’ in 2016], *Nocut News*, October 26, 2016, accessed December 4, 2017, <http://www.nocutnews.co.kr/news/4675056>.

⁹ Without giving credit to conspiracy theories that Shin was murdered, it should be noted that Shin was in fact a target of the government in the past decade. It was recently revealed that the National Intelligence Service under former President Lee Myung-Bak (who preceded Park Geun-Hye) had pressured television stations and advertisers to block blacklisted celebrities, including Shin, from appearing in mainstream media. See Kwon Gil-Yeo, “Imyeongbak jeongbu, sinhaecheol donjul maga gumgyeo jugiryeo haetda” [Lee Myung-Bak’s Administration Tried to Starve Shin Hae-Chul by Cutting Off Income], *Insight*, September 30, 2017, accessed December 24, 2017, <http://www.insight.co.kr/news/121478>.

¹⁰ For example, see Roh Kyung-Mok and Park Sang-Yong, “Nara tataneun ‘heljoseon’...bumo tataneun ‘heuksujeo’” [Blaming Your Country with ‘Hell Joseon,’ Blaming Your Parents with ‘Dirt Spoon’], *Hanguk Kyungje*, October 4, 2015, and Park Yoo-Yeon, “Amuildo an hamyeo ‘heljoseon’ bulman daetgeul...’ingyeo’ingan 160manmyeongeuro geupjeung” [Doing Nothing But Posting Resentful Comments about ‘Hell Joseon’...‘Superfluous’ Population Grows to 1.6 Million’], *Chosun Ilbo*, October 13, 2015.

¹¹ Park Sun-Bong, “Gimmuseong, waegokdoego pyeonhyeopan yeoksaisik gareuchini... ‘heljoseon’ ‘manghaldahanminguk’ daneo yuhaenghae” [Kim Mu-Sung Says ‘Hell Joseon’ and ‘Damn Republic of Korea’ Are Trending Because Distorted and Narrow History is Taught], *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, October 26, 2015, accessed October 8, 2017, http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201510260935241&code=910100.

¹² Anna Fifield, “Young South Koreans Call Their Country ‘Hell’ and Look for Ways Out,” *Washington Post*, January 30, 2016, accessed December 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/young-south-koreans-call-their-country-hell-and-look-for-ways-out/2016/01/30/34737c06-b967-11e5-85cd-5ad59bc19432_story.html?utm_term=.eb545686f2a4.

¹³ Chua Beng Huat, “Return to/of the Political Popular in Cultural Studies in Asia,” *Situations: Cultural Studies in the Asian Context* 9, no. 1 (2016): 11.

¹⁴ Jasbir Puar, ed., “Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejic, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanovic,” *TDR* 56, no. 4 (2012): 166.

¹⁵ A notable exception is Dong-Wook Song and Keehyeung Lee, “A Cultural Analysis of the Varying Modes of Survival and the Particular Structures of Feeling among Young Adults in Contemporary South Korea in an Era of Fierce Competition and Widespread Social Uncertainty,” *Korean Journal of Communication & Information*, 84

(2017): 28-98. This illuminating study on the usage of Hell Joseon by Korean youths and its affective dimensions provides insight into the term's potential role in political criticism.

¹⁶ Jason Lim, "Psychology of Hell Joseon," *Korea Times*, October 2, 2015, accessed December 11, 2017, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2017/04/352_187869.html.

¹⁷ Moon-Kang Hyung-Joon, *Gamgagui jeguk* [The Empire of the Senses] (Seoul: Bukgeukseong, 2017): 317.

¹⁸ The images that I refer to can be viewed at http://www.newscj.com/news/photo/201612/394292_358100_1852.jpg and <https://www.facebook.com/raiseup1114/photos/a.953404921396900.1073741827.953396081397784/1382482755155779/?type=3&theater> respectively.

¹⁹ Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (1989): 6.

²⁰ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian eds., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

²¹ Jack Hamilton, "Hologram Tupac Was Inevitable," *Atlantic*, April 17, 2012, accessed May 4, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/04/hologram-tupac-was-inevitable/255990/>.

²² In November 2017, KB Securities sponsored a special "hologram concert" to commemorate the three-year anniversary of Shin's death. However, judging from video footage of the concert available online, the imaging technology was not as advanced as that used to create Tupac's likeness at Coachella. A CG Shin sang from inside a box-like structure on stage, separated from the live band members. As such, it looked more like watching a 3-D film rather than a conjuring of Shin's presence in a physical space.

²³ Alice Rayner, *Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxiii.

²⁴ *Hidden Singer*, "Shin Hae-Chul Episode," Season 4, Episode 4, Dir. Cho Seung-Wook, JTBC, October 24, 2015.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ For a summary of the documentary *Diving Bell* (later retitled *The Truth Shall Not Sink with the Sewol*) and government attempts to remove it from being screened at the festival, see Steven Borowiec, "Documentary about Sewol Ferry Sinking Roils South Korea Film Festival," *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 2014, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-south-korea-ferry-truth-shall-not-sink-20141011-story.html>.

²⁷ Yu Hui-Gon and Bak Gwang-Yeon, "The Blacklist Started with Sewol," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, January 12, 2017, accessed December 6, 2017, http://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201701121803087&code=710100.

²⁸ Donald Kirk, "South Korea Ferry Disaster: Victims' Families Express Outrage at Government's Failure to Conduct Full Inquiry and Recover Bodies," *The Independent*,

April 14, 2015, accessed December 4, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/south-korea-ferry-disaster-victims-families-express-outrage-at-governments-failure-to-conduct-full-10176757.html>.

²⁹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009): locations 578-81. Kindle edition.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 557-58.