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## Conferring Eloquence: *Suicide and Martyrdom in Korean History*

*Beyond Death: The Politics of Suicide and Martyrdom in Korea.* Edited by Charles Kim, Jungwon Kim, Hwasook Nam, and Serk-Bae Suh. Seattle: Center for Korean Studies, University of Washington Press, 2019. 390 pages. ISBN: 9780295745640.

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### Introduction

July 9, 1987. It was a Thursday. Rev. Mun Ikhwan's shout, *Jeon Taeil yeolsayeo!* reverberated across Yonsei University campus. His invocation of Jeon Taeil, as a martyr for dignity, justice, and recognition for workers, brought about an immediate stillness among the many thousands who had gathered for Yi Hanyeol's funeral. Yi Hanyeol was a Yonsei student killed by fragments from a tear gas canister fired by riot police. I have no doubt that the mourners who crowded onto the campus felt what I immediately felt: shock, and visceral awareness that everyone present had been called. I sat up straight. Jeon Taeil, the garment worker who died by self-immolation for workers' rights in 1970, that name was followed by many others, and those names, piercing, came wave after wave. When Mun Ikhwan's list ended with Yi Hanyeol's name, we were all ready to face the riot police. In the march from Yonsei University campus in Sinchon to Seoul's City Hall, hundreds of thousands of people came out of their homes, shops, and offices to join the demonstrators. By the time the marchers reached City Hall we were a

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million strong.<sup>1</sup>

Ten days prior to Yi Hanyeol's funeral, in his June 29 Declaration, Roh Tae-woo, chairman of the ruling party, had made significant concessions to the democracy movement, including amendment of the constitution to allow for direct presidential elections, amnesty for many political prisoners, and restoration of a free press. The June 29 Declaration was a concession forced by unprecedented organization and mobilization by robust solidarity networks between student, labor, and religious movement groups.<sup>2</sup> Starting on June 10, organized and coordinated by the National Movement Headquarters for a Democratic Constitution (Minju heonbeop jaengchwi gungmin undong bonbu), tens of thousands of people had poured out into the streets of every major city in South Korea, daily, calling for the overthrow of the military dictatorship and a new constitution. In a short span of time, the concessions made by the ruling bloc and the realities of direct presidential elections shifted the momentum to party politics and electoral competition. During the "Great Labor Struggle" (July-August 1987) that followed the June uprising, the moderate fraction of the democracy movement and the urban middle class that had poured out into the streets in June 1987—those who had prioritized procedural democracy rather than substantive democracy—did not actively support striking workers' demands.<sup>3</sup> On September 4, 1987, at the height of government suppression of labor protests, Yi Seokgu, a taxi driver, took his own life by

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1. These are personal observations. In 1987, in-between my MA and PhD, I was doing an 18-month internship at the Incheon Urban Industrial Mission (Incheon dosi saneop seongyohoe) working on labor and human rights issues.
  2. Democratic transition in South Korea was not caused by divisions within the authoritarian regime. Rather, the transition to democracy was driven by mass mobilization against authoritarian rule. See Kim (2000, 3–5).
  3. There were 3,337 strikes in the July-August 1987 period, which was more than 12 times the total number of strikes in 1986. More than economic issues, workers demanded dismantling of state-corporatist unions and their replacement by democratic unions. Starting in August, anti-union organizations like the Korea Association of Employers (from 2020, Korea Enterprises Federation) demanded that the government intervene and restore "stability." See Kim (2000, 94).

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self-immolation shouting, “Do not crush union activity!”<sup>4</sup>

South Korea today is a democracy. But it is a democracy that has rendered exploitation, continued violence against workers, and recurrent work-related deaths at the workplace peripheral to electoral politics. In the transition to democracy, the moderate and progressive wings of the democracy movement took separate paths, and the substantive democracy demanded by the progressive wing of the democracy movement remains largely unfulfilled. Even when violence against workers and death at the workplace are made visible to the general public, the self-image of a prosperous and democratic South Korea remains largely undiminished, while worker militancy appears irrational, emotional, and anachronistic. Thus, Jong Bum Kwon has argued that a “democratic imaginary” in early 21st-century South Korea is “a play in perception.” During the Daewoo struggle during February–April 2001, for example, more than three years after Kim Dae-jung became President, an icon of the democracy movement and the first opposition politician to win the presidency, eight thousand police in full riot gear drove out four hundred workers, some with spouses and children, from the production complex in Bupyeong. As protests continued into April, police attacked workers with truncheons and beat them with their metal shields. But these scenes of violence against protesting workers, or other scenes of violent suppression of dissent, did little to disturb “the social/political imaginary of the present as a radical break from the dark past” (Kwon 2014, 72–73).

To explain the copresence of worker suppression with the image of South Korea as having left behind its dark past, Kwon points to a democratic imaginary made possible by cultural amnesia via management of social memories, new tactics of policing protest, and the concealment of violence. The riot police no longer fire teargas and so “nothing is happening” (Kwon

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4. The culmination of government suppression of workers came on September 4 with the riot police violently suppressing protests by tens of thousands of shipyard and auto workers in Ulsan (David Holley, ‘Violence Flares in South Korea Labor Disputes,’ *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-09-04-mn-3893-story.html>).

2014, 86–87). Today, while we might not see spectacular displays of state violence against workers as in 1987, or 2001, new forms of repression have been created. As pointed out by Yoonkyung Lee, in place of state intervention, commercial security firms manage and physically intimidate workers who resist neoliberal employment conditions, while employers initiate litigation that make huge damage compensation claims against unions and workers who stage protests (Lee 2019). In this context, the rise of non-standard (*bijeonggyujik*) employment along with the decline of labor unions have increased precarity and stratified and fragmented the workforce, creating a new underclass of irregular workers and low-income self-employed who lack organization-political representation (Lee 2015).

It is this situation that makes the publication of *Beyond Death: The Politics of Suicide and Martyrdom in Korea* especially meaningful, because of the historical and interpretative perspectives the contributors provide that prompts critical conversations between (South) Korea's past and present. In the Introduction, two of the editors of the anthology, Charles R. Kim and Jungwon Kim, situate "meaningful suicide" alongside the often noted fact that, since 2000, South Korea has sustained one of the highest suicide rates among OECD nations. There is an overlap between "meaningful" deaths, atomized suicides, and the "righteous dead" (Youngju Ryu) in that they are expressions of despair, sacrifice, or dissent. They point out that between suicide and martyrdom there are three commonalities. First, the meaning of death is produced: It is produced posthumously, and the (re)production of meaning is an ongoing process. Second, death evokes symbolic power through its connection to religious or ethico-moral discourses, including nation-centered narratives. Finally, suicide and martyrdom are gendered: for example, righteous death in acts of loyalty to the king was the purview of elite men, while recognition was given to widows who chose "chaste martyrdom" following the death of their husbands.

This anthology provides proof of what scholarly collaboration can achieve. The project began with a panel organized by Hwasook Nam, one of the editors, at the 2012 meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS). Separately, Charles Kim and Serk-Bae Suh organized a panel for the

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2014 AAS meeting. Subsequent workshops, inclusion of more contributors, feedback from many discussants, support from Korean Studies centers at the University of Washington and Columbia University, have brought forth a very valuable anthology consisting of high-quality contributions that together provide views of martyrdom—why and how a person's death was made meaningful, or meaningless—that deepen our understanding of the social and political history of Korea. The volume is organized into three parts: Part I has four chapters devoted to the Joseon period, Part II has two chapters on the colonial period, and Part III has five chapters on South Korea. However, I have chosen to structure this review essay as a sequence of topics, starting with the question of what constitutes martyrdom.

### **Martyrs and Dupes**

Serk-Bae Suh's essay, "A False Martyr's Wager: Yi Gwangsu and Colonial Collaboration," most explicitly draws on the work of philosophy to show why Yi Gwangsu's claim to martyr status rings hollow. The turn to philosophy is indispensable because Yi Gwangsu's claim of self-sacrifice rests on a logic that evokes devotion to nation, and because Korea's modern (national) literature's (patriarchal) lineage begins with Yi Gwangsu. I do not think Suh is exaggerating too much when he says, "Yi Gwangsu is both the wound to the Korean psyche, and the inflictor of that wound." Suh argues that the wound persists. The wound persists because, in the late colonial period the "father of modern Korean literature" publically and unambiguously called on his Korean readers to support the Japanese empire, and then in 1948, three years after Japan's defeat, insisted that his acts of collaboration were acts of self-sacrifice.

In his 1948 "Confession" (Na-ui gobaek), Yi Gwangsu explained that, despite his wife's tearful protest and solemn admonitions from his friends, in the 1930s he had decided to join the other collaborators "with the same intention that Sim Cheong had when selling her body to save her father from his suffering." Yi presented his late-colonial-period self as the exemplary

filial daughter, and his collaboration as an act of love for the Korean people. Suh is insightful when he shows how Yi Gwangsu's "Confession" presented collaboration as simultaneously the best and worst thing he could do for his nation. Willing collaboration and unstinting support for the Japanese empire would bring recognition and equal status for Koreans following Japan's victory. If Japan lost, the price would not be as great in comparison to what would have happened if Japan had won the war but Koreans had not supported the empire. In Yi's logic, collaboration was the best bet to make, but few Korean leaders were willing to go all-in. Thus Yi felt he had to make the wager.

How compelling is this logic? Suh asks, in what sense was his collaboration an act of self-sacrifice? Yi Gwangsu sacrificed neither his life, his wealth, nor his family. The wager that Yi Gwangsu made was with the lives of young men (and women) whom he urged to willingly shed their blood for the Japanese empire. The bulk of Yi's "Confession" served to remind his readers about his nationalist past—as a student in Japan, about his work with the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai, and his sense of duty as a writer and public intellectual in colonial Korea. Only by claiming a status akin to a patriarch of the Korean nation does his collaboration make sense as self-sacrifice. The logic of Yi's "Confession" runs counter to the nationalist common sense in contemporary South Korea. But rather than falling back on familiar nationalist indictments, theoretical engagement with Pascal's wager and Derrida's reading of Abraham and Isaac enables Suh to deconstruct Yi Gwangsu's "Confession." Yi's "Confession" cannot suppress the fact that he is very much aware that it was the lives of countless youth whom he sacrificed. But more importantly, and here perhaps only suggestively, Suh shows how the Yi's self-identification as the patriarch-who-sacrifices-himself breaks down, because of the way Yi associates the logic of Pascal's wager with the logic of sacrifice. Drawing on Derrida, Suh reminds us of how Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac transcends the logic of economics, and from there we can see the perversity of conceptualizing human sacrifice in terms of gambling (p. 136).

In contrast to Yi Gwangsu, Jeon Taeil's status as a labor movement martyr is largely unquestioned.<sup>5</sup> Hwasook Nam's chapter, "Reading Chun Tae-il [Jeon Taeil]: Making Sense of a Worker Self-Immolation in 1970s South Korea," pays respectful tribute. But she also provides a careful and nuanced critique of the mystique that has built up around him. Through a close reading of Jeon Taeil's diary, and appreciation for Jo Yeongnae and his beautifully written 1983 biography of Chun (*Jeon Taeil pyeongjeon*), Nam's chapter shows crucial aspects of the silencing that took place in Jo's biography of Jeon Taeil.<sup>6</sup>

The problem, as Nam points out, is that *Jeon Taeil pyeongjeon* presents Jeon Taeil as a solitary figure. Nam reminds us that Jeon's father had been a member of Jeonpyeong (National Labor Federation that led strikes in the late 1940s). She points out that the labor movement in South Korea was not totally eliminated by the Korean War, and Jeon Taeil had colleagues (comrades) with whom he made appeals to local government offices. From this, Nam shows how Jeon Taeil can and should be *humanized*. Nam's reading of the diary shows that a part of Jeon's motivation for activism, and ultimately his decision to commit suicide, seemed to have stemmed from his self-understanding of his relationship to the young female workers, as an elder brother troubled by their grim circumstances and working conditions. Nam's careful reading of Jeon's diary allows for a critical appreciation of Jeon Taeil's place in labor movement history: Jeon's self-immolation was a masculine act, which nevertheless retains an ethical status.

While Jeon Taeil's place in the pantheon of the democracy and labor movement is secure, the case of Kim Chiha (Kim Jiha) is quite different. Youngju Ryu begins her essay, "From Martyrdom to Apostasy: Kim Chiha and the Politics of Death in South Korean Democratization," by having to remind contemporary readers of Kim Chiha's centrality to the democracy

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5. Those on the right who wish to deflate Jeon Taeil's status as labor movement martyr do so on grounds that wages for skilled, experienced garment workers like Jeon Taeil were going up.

6. Jo Yeongnae is an icon to human rights lawyers in South Korea. When he was interviewing Jeon Taeil's mother, Jo Yeongnae was himself on the run because of his involvement with Mincheong Hangnyeon (National Federation of Democratic Youth and Students, NFDYS).

movement in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> For example, the name of an event held at a Catholic Center in Weonju, one of many in 1979, was “An evening dedicated to Kim Chiha Literature” (Kim Jiha munhak-ui bam). Ko Un would say that Kim Chiha’s literature, and the pain inflicted on Kim by the dictatorship, were such that Kim Chiha is no longer a single body: his loneliness was now the nation’s, and his despair the people’s. Ryu writes, “Kim had become the proper name for all who suffer privation and persecution for the sake of justice and conscience—a martyr in other words, and as such, a potent call for revolution” (p. 288).

But what happens when a martyr outlives his martyrdom? Ryu reminds the reader of how, in the run-up to the presidential election of 2012, which pitted Park Geun-hye against Moon Jae-in, Kim Chiha threw his support behind Park and proceeded to revive the term *kkangtong ppalgaengi* (rattlebrained commies) to describe a slew of opposition politicians and progressive intellectuals. *Ppalgaengi* is, of course, a red-baiting label once hurled at Kim himself by the Yusin court. The problem Ryu addresses is the problem of how to remember, narrate, and sacralize the sacrifices that were exacted under South Korea’s authoritarian regimes when iconic figures from that era abandon and criticize progressive movements and leaders in the present.

As a sensitive and meticulous reader of contemporary South Korean history as well as literature, Ryu brings attention to two key texts: first, “Satire or suicide?” (Pungja nya jasal nya?), which appeared over two issues of *The Poet (Siin)* magazine in 1970; and second, Kim Chiha’s May 1991 column “My young friends, what are you learning from history?” (Jeolmeun beot-

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7. For his 1970 satirical poem “Five Bandits” (Ojeok), Kim Chiha was charged with violating anti-communist laws and “benefiting North Korea.” Upon arrest and trial in 1974 for rebellion, Kim was sentenced to death. In response to public outcry from within South Korea and abroad his sentence was commuted. Released in 1975, he was arrested again less than a month later. With the help of a sympathetic prison guard, Kim’s “Declaration of Conscience” was smuggled out of prison. Kim’s “Declaration” drew support for Kim and the democracy movement in South Korea from such luminaries as Willy Brandt, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. Kim was released from prison in December 1980.



deul yeoksa-eseo mueot-eul baeuna?). By comparing these two texts, Ryu's chapter presents the most convincing explanation I have encountered as to how Kim Chiha came to find himself at the heart of the politics of death, and how we can understand what happened to Kim Chiha after the end of the authoritarian era, without resorting to simple explanations such as apostasy or senility. In Ryu's hands, Kim Chiha becomes not a knot to untangle, but a node to think about the terrain of resistance in ways that are not delimited. The 1970 essay "Satire or Suicide?" was Kim's most substantive and theoretical piece of literary criticism. But, Ryu tells us, it was also a product of faulty memory.

*Haetal* (Hindi, *vimoksa* or *vimutti*), a Buddhist term for the state of enlightenment that enables sentient beings to break free from samsara, delivers a release from the cycle of rebirth into the worlds of suffering. *Jasal*, on the other hand, eliminates the physical self without the promise of metaphysical redemption: *jasal* is self-destruction that does not simultaneously open up some higher plane of existence. In his 1970 essay, Kim Chiha misquoted Kim Suyong's 1961 poem. Had his memory not been faulty, the title of his 1970 essay would have been, "Satire or Enlightenment (*haetal*)?" But, Ryu argues, the substitution of *jasal* (suicide) for *haetal* was less an accident than "a parapraxis in the Freudian sense" (p. 291).<sup>8</sup> What this mistake enabled was the foreclosure of the possibility of transcendence, and a new theory of poetry. By misremembering *haetal* as *jasal*, Kim Chiha had made a powerful argument for why poets and intellectuals could not exempt themselves metaphysically from the world of suffering, the world inhabited by the *minjung*.

But Kim Chiha's 1991 column addressing "My Young Friends" reflected a profoundly post-1987 understanding of the South Korean political situation. That spring, in May alone, seven people, including a high school student, had set themselves on fire. But Kim insisted that the South Korean nation was no longer at stake. The situation was not so "extreme and dire." The

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8. Kim Chiha later acknowledged his mistake as an unintended case of faulty memory (p. 291–292).

students who were protesting through suicide were “indulging themselves in a dangerous and self-destructive game” that leads to catastrophic ends—and he mentioned the cult mass suicide at Jonestown (p. 298). Within the democracy movement self-immolators had been commemorated as *yeolsa*, or the “righteous dead” (Ryu’s translation). The *yeolsa*’s death was seen as pure in motivation and autonomous in its decision. But in the 1991 column published in the conservative daily *Chosun Ilbo*, Kim raised the specter of agitation (*seondong*) and a behind-the-scenes mastermind (*baehu*), effectively denying the movement’s claims. Kim’s essay transformed the righteous dead (*yeolsa*) into dupes who were manipulated into meaningless non-action.

Comparing the 1970 and 1991 essays, Youngju Ryu sees an evolution rather than a conversion. At the heart of both essays is reverence for life (*saengmyeong*). Showing Kim Chiha as a theorist of ritual (*kut*), one who brought about a shift from theatre to ritual, where the audience is transformed into participants, Ryu traces the evolution of Kim’s philosophy as it became universal and cosmic in scale. Writing in 1985, Kim depicted the daily life of the people (*minjung*)—“the life of eating, the life of work”—as “the holiest of holy kut” (p. 304). What was dropped in this process of abstraction was the political. As Ryu put it, Kim Chiha had given up the sword, bypassing the political passions of the 1980s, “and arrived proleptically to a post-authoritarian state of being at the very height of authoritarianism” (p. 305). In a mirror-image of Hwasook Nam’s critical but affirming recognition of Jeon Taeil, Ryu provides a sympathetic and yet ultimately critical assessment: during his imprisonment, life (Greek, *zoe*) had become the pillar of Kim Chiha’s metaphysic, a refusal of death. For Kim Chiha, this was a kind of spiritual liberation, one that reached for a reconciliation. *Outside*, however, while Kim’s metaphysical outlook became increasingly cosmic and mythical, the massacre in Gwangju, the persistence of state violence, and the right-wing’s resistance to substantive democracy kept the call for struggle politically and morally urgent for activists in the movement.

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## Death and the Ethical Subject

In Young Chae Seo's chapter, "The Birth of an Ethical Subject: 1980s and South Korean Literature," the killings that took place in Gwangju haunt the living, and gives birth to an ethical subject. "Where were you at the time?" Seo's chapter shows how the weight of this question grew even greater after the truth of the Gwangju Uprising became widely known in the late 1980s through the media. An ethical predicament accompanied the question—not only where they were, but how they have lived since then. Seo writes, "To have remained silent about the event after finding out about it could also make one feel guilty. But about Kwangju [Gwangju], even the fact that one failed to actively seek out the knowledge of what happened, or that one remained utterly ignorant, damned one as unethical. Such was the unique ethical status that the Kwangju Uprising had in the 1980s" (p. 263).

According to Seo, the construction of the ethical subject has been the preoccupation of modern Korean literature. Starting with Yi Gwangsu (bracketing his writings in the late colonial period), and continuing down through Choe Inhun, the prominence of the ethical position comes into being via "guilt without guilt," and "responsibility without sin." For writers like Im Cheoru, then, Seo constructs a literary inheritance that prompts Korean writers' deep investment in characters who make themselves guilty for an offense they have not committed, and who attempt to take responsibility for what they have not done. What is at stake for these writers is the very question of what it means to be a human being beyond the realm of necessity. After Gwangju, the movement for democracy, and literature organically connected to that movement, enabled the "interrogation not of life as a given but of the reason for living" (p. 265).

Seo's chapter thus offers an interpretive frame that puts affect, ethical practice, modern Korean literature, and modern subjectivity in structural proximity. Borrowing from Hannah Arendt, Seo sees Im Cheoru's fiction and Pak Hyoson's theater as at once a *labor* for livelihood, *work* as artists, and *action* launched by ethico-political subjects. Keeping in mind the particular literary inheritance of Korean writers, Seo, as a literary critic, outlines how

guilt achieves the status of a universal: wracked with guilt, an individual inhabits her small universe; making a passage through her own wound, she sees countless others (scarred, shamed, wretched); when she joins this humanity, she become a “subject of the world” (p. 277). Guilt becomes meaningful only for those who take it upon themselves to stand in the place of someone who can take responsibility. Within the field of this action, writers like Im and Pak are no longer slaves of guilt but subjects of their own lives. It is hardly an accident then, that this desire becomes most marked in Korean literature produced during and after periods of historical trauma. With this compelling reading, Seo situates writers like Im Cheoru and Pak Hyoson in a genealogy that renders their literature the consideration they deserve.

In considering the question of literary inheritance and transmission of an affective-ethical structure down generations, one of the many strengths of this volume is the examination of the category of *yeol* itself, starting in the Joseon period. The opening chapter by Jungwon Kim, “*Yeol* (烈): Chaste Martyrdom and Literati Writing in Late Joseon Korea (1392–1910),” explores the ideal of *yeol* that conferred meaning and significance to women’s chaste suicide. Her study looks at how that ideal was expressed in male literati writings on women’s chaste suicide in late Joseon. More than just historical backdrop, this first chapter begins to lay out the central theme of the volume: what constitutes *honorable death*, and what conditions prompted those suicides as well as meaning-making? It was only after the establishment of the Joseon state that, gradually, women’s chastity became normative, an ideal. Especially after the Imjin War (1592–1598) and Manchu invasions (1627, 1637), I think it would not be an overstatement to say that the Joseon state, with enthusiastic support from ruling elites, sought to reconstitute Joseon society by way of chastity ideology.<sup>9</sup>

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9. Kim notes the publication of *Dongguk sinsok samgang haengsil do* (Illustrations of the New Edition to the Conduct of the Three Bonds). This 18-volume work included 441 cases of chaste women who perished or chose death to avoid sexual defilement by Japanese soldiers. In contrast, only 59 names of loyal male subjects are recorded (p. 28). In thus paying tribute to honorable deaths, the post-Imjin War Joseon state was intensifying control over women’s bodies, as a way to restore the authority of the dynastic state.

From the two figures of *yeol* that Kim Jungwon discusses—chaste women (*yeollyeo*) and chaste martyrs (*yeolsa*)—it is clear that the intent was to draw a boundary, a distinction between extraordinary people who act with (die for) purity of purpose, and others who are not so upright. Kim makes it more explicit: in a fundamental way, *yeol* has to do with exclusivity. *Yeollyeo* demonstrates the virtue of (sexual) fidelity (*uiri*) / sexual dignity: that is, a wife serving her husband exclusively, parallel to a male official's exclusive loyalty to the king/state above all else. The problem, of course, was disagreement over what constitutes loyalty: that is, those who justified King Yeongjo's killing of Crown Prince Sado, and those who were sympathetic to Crown Prince Sado. In this context of political contestation, chaste women put to shame legions of men well-versed in Confucian classics who were wicked and ethically compromised. From the periphery of power, scholars like Yi Kwangsa used stories of women's chaste suicide to critique male literati's flickering moral responsibility. These stories were not merely testaments to wifely fidelity but to the political virtue of loyalty.

By the late 18th-early 19th century, the emphasis came to be placed on sincerity. A true chaste suicide cannot be something involuntary, nor an impulsive response to the conditions of the moment. It had to be a voluntary, measured action carried out in all sincerity. It is an act of *dying quietly*, driven by a stubborn, upright, fiery will but with the act itself carried out in calm and quiet. *Yeol* must be kept as a narrowly defined ideal about acts of unshakeable devotion. What we glimpse in this wonderfully researched chapter is how sincerity—an unwavering moral commitment, rather than an impulsive response—became not simply a criterion validating women's chaste suicide but a sociopolitical norm constructed by literati in late Joseon.

In comparison to Jungwon Kim's chapter, Ho Kim's chapter, "Politics and the Discourse of Virtuous Sacrifice in Late Joseon Korea: Jeong Yak-yong's Discussion of Righteous Killing," looks at famous scholars/texts. But the argument is less meticulously argued. This becomes evident early on when he refers to Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism as if it were a consistent social script: Upon birth, all human beings are endowed with luminous virtue (*myeongdeok* 明德). Thus, human beings are capable of sacrificing

themselves for the sake of benevolence and righteousness. This readiness for self-sacrifice is represented by the idea of *yeol* (烈), or virtuous sacrifice (*uiyeol* 義烈). At the same time, killing another can also be justified (*uisal* 義殺).

Song Siyeol's *Samhaksa jeon* (Biographies of the Three Patriots), in acclaiming the virtue of "the three patriots" who called for resisting the Manchus, effectively placed those who remained alive under a moral cloud. Life and death, shame and honor now emerged as stark oppositional dichotomies, with discursive space between the two poles eliminated. As principled death became the subject of adulation, in the late 18th century virtuous deaths and eulogy of virtuous deaths grew in number. The increase in these kinds of deaths debased the value of virtuous sacrifice. It was in this milieu that Jeong Yakyong (1762–1836) condemned the proliferation and ignorant actions done in the name of moral principle. For Jeong, everyday expressions of virtue, while enduring suffering, was better evidence of virtuous sacrifice. What is not discussed here is the broader textual world of late Joseon, where thinkers like Jeong Yakyong were reading Matteo Ricci's engagement with Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism (Cawley 2014). Surely, Jeong Yakyong's familiarity with Catholicism and Catholic martyrdom influenced his ideas about martyrdom?

George Kallander's chapter on Tonghak martyrdom, "Resurrecting Choe Cheu: Tonghak Martyrdom in Late Joseon Dynasty Korea," shows how "martyr-like narratives" were created for the leaders of the early Tonghak (Choe Cheu and Choe Sihyeong), but not ordinary followers. In both North and South Korea, Tonghak is well known as a popular rural religion. Cheondogyo and Sicheongyo are two of the better known religions that claim Choe as founder. Choe Cheu, the founder of the Tonghak religious movement, utilized the concept of a personified heaven to describe God, and the second leader tapped into the image of an executed "criminal" to further legitimize their religious teachings. Choe's moral and religious superiority are demonstrated by his self-sacrifice and martyrdom. These stories helped the community fathom the loss of their patriarchs, and later, their country through Japanese imperialism, by placing upon their leaders' deaths moral

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and didactic meanings that followers could interpret in multiple ways.

Franklin Rausch's chapter on Catholic martyrdom, "Choosing to Die: Catholic Voluntary Martyrdom in Late Joseon Korea," is wonderfully researched. The title of his chapter, "Choosing to Die," gets to the core of his argument about Catholic martyrdom in late Joseon Korea. Between 8,000 to 10,000 Catholics were killed during several waves of persecutions in late 18th- and 19th-century Joseon Korea. The Joseon state saw Catholics as carriers of a possible epidemic that threatened its morals, indeed a threat to the very foundation of human relations. Rausch is well aware of the institutional interests vested in this history. In 1984, Pope John Paul II canonized 103 from among those killed. Thus, Korea currently has the fourth largest number of saints in the Catholic world. In 2014, Pope Francis beatified 123 others.<sup>10</sup> Currently, there are efforts to beatify Catholics who were killed by communists during the Korean War.

Rausch's historical account is not hagiography. He argues that a significant number of those 8,000 to 10,000 Catholics who were put to death in late-18th-19th-century Korea actually chose to die, and his chapter outlines reasons why, under what conditions, they might have made that choice. In late-18th-19th-century Korea, the Joseon state, and most Koreans, were unable or unwilling to understand or tolerate Catholic beliefs: Catholic understanding of sin, the idea of an absolute, transcendent and yet loving God, the notion that the son of God died for everyone's sins, etc. But more so than belief, most of the attacks against Catholicism had to do with social and political issues—perhaps most importantly, the Catholics' refusal to offer mortuary rites for parents (*jesa*).

Some of the earliest converts to Catholicism were yangban scholars, many of them related by blood or marriage. From the beginning, these members of the early Catholic Church in Korea knew they had to keep their faith, and their church, secret. Two events forced this early church into total

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10. To be beatified means that the Catholic Church gives acknowledgment that the person has gained entry to heaven, and has the capacity to intercede on behalf of those who pray in his or her name.

secrecy. First, the discovery of secret prayer meetings of several *yangban* scholars, including Tasan Jeong Yakyong and his brothers, in the house of the *jungin* Kim Beomu, led to the arrest of all the participants. The *yangban* escaped harsh punishment, Kim Beomu died, after being exiled, from the wounds inflicted through torture, becoming the first Catholic martyr in Korea. Nevertheless, scholars like Tasan continued to be involved with the Church, in violation of the law.

The second event, known as the Jinsan Incident, occurred when Yun Jichung's mother died in 1791. Obeying guidelines from the Church authority in Beijing, Yun and his cousin Gwon Sangyeon, whom Yun had converted, refused to hold the Confucian ancestor memorial rite (*jesa*). In fact, they burned the memorial tablets (*wipae*) generating a huge scandal. Both Yun and his cousin were arrested, and after torture, beheaded. Many of the original members of the Church were tortured, exiled, or executed. Tasan, like many others, renounced the religion after witnessing relations and friends brutally executed. With King Jeongjo gone, and feeling threatened by the growing Catholic religion, the court, armed with the political support of the Queen Dowager, began an extensive persecution of Catholics all over the country with the aim of eradicating Catholicism. Hundreds were arrested, and initially they were given a *choice* to renounce the religion, or die (Cawley 2014, 304).

For theological reasons, Korean Catholics thought of martyrdom as an honorable death, an expression of the highest form of devotion to God. Rausch points out that in the context of late-18th-19th-century Joseon, martyrdom became not only devotion to God but to the Catholic community—especially when that community included the martyr's family. In the history of Catholicism, martyrdom meant dying for God in imitation of Jesus of Nazareth. Just as Jesus died out of obedience to the Father's will, so Christians should shoulder their cross and follow him. Martyr literally means "witness" in Greek, and a Catholic martyr was understood, through his or her death, to be providing a public confession of trust in Jesus and his promise of heavenly rewards for those who stayed faithful to him. Public witness would convince others of the truth of the faith, leading to their



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conversion.

Rausch points to a number of similarities between Confucianism and Catholicism where choosing death could be the highest ethical choice. For both Confucians and Catholics, then, preservation of virtue could be more important than life. Catholics like Jeong Yakchong drew upon traditional ideas of loyalty to the king to encourage an even greater loyalty to God. For Confucians, devotion was understood as principally aimed at one's superiors (parents and king), and Catholics could appear selfish for their desire for personal salvation and heavenly reward. When faced with persecution, a number of Korean Catholics (not all) actively embraced martyrdom, in such a way that would have provided the most powerful witness. Choosing martyrdom as a Catholic meant being tortured prior to execution. Catholic hagiographies typically concentrate on how the martyr behaved under torture (how she remained steadfast in her faith even under tremendous pain and suffering), and how she faced execution.

But Rausch reminds us that many Catholics repudiated their faith when faced with persecution. Faced with the shame of apostasy, some later sought martyrdom to atone for the shame and sin of having repudiated their faith. (To run away from martyrdom showed a lack of faith in God's promise of eternal life.) On the other hand, those who chose death were driven by concern and devotion to their fellow Catholics, particularly family members. Catholicism and family often went hand-in-hand in late Joseon Korea. That is to say, while happy enough to keep living during normal times, when their fellow Catholics were being killed for confessing the faith, other Catholics were forced to decide. Rausch points out that Catholics faced a continuum of choice, from actively surrendering themselves, to passively waiting for arrest and meeting it joyfully when it came, to doing all they could short of denying their faith to save their lives.

In examining the circumstances that led Catholics to become voluntary martyrs, Rausch makes it clear that these martyrs were not isolated individuals. The choices they made were in the context of a community bound together by a belief in a God whose son had died for all human kind. Witness for one's faith, witness for one's community. This lent a sense of

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dignity and purpose to such suffering. Although obviously sympathetic, Rausch's history of Catholic martyrdom is not the kind of church history meant to inspire devotion among practicing Catholics. It is not Catholic hagiography that idealizes those who chose death. The chapter was limited in its aims: it did not explain the thinking behind the persecution of Catholics—why much of officialdom saw the persecution of Catholics and Catholicism as a defense of Joseon society. In addition, in Rausch's history of Catholic martyrdom, women's voices come through. But, probably due to limitations of space, Rausch does not attempt to delve deeper into the larger social context—marital/sexual practices and gender expression in late Joseon patriarchal society—in which quite a few young Catholic women, it seems, longed to live as perpetual virgins.

### **Recognition, Misrecognition, Non-Recognition**

Yerim Kim's "The Political Dynamics of Sacrifice and the Sacrificial Narrative in Modern Korea" examines the layered history of student soldiers who volunteered for, and then later were drafted into, the Imperial Japanese Army. Yerim Kim's concern is with the state: specifically, the relationship between death and the state. It is in that relationship that sacrificial narratives and its uses become most pertinent for modern times. Responding to the work of Achille Mbembe (2003), and then Mark Driscoll's development of that idea for colonial Korea/Japanese empire (Driscoll 2010), Yerim Kim delves deeply into the political dynamics of state-sanctioned sacrifice. While not explicitly cited, her argument stands in tension with the work of Takashi Fujitani (2011) who, drawing on Foucault's analysis of modern state power—i.e., to make the population live—pointed to biopolitics that interpellate self-disciplining subjects and an emerging mode of governance in the late colonial period.

In contrast, Yerim Kim's focus is primarily on soldiers, their deaths, and how their deaths are appropriated by the state. The soldiers, who are ordered to fight and to lay down their lives for their country, lie at the core

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of the dynamics of necropolitics. Paradoxically, it was when Koreans were left without their nation-state that they experienced the overwhelmingly large-scale system of modern necropolitics. Korean intellectuals (such as Yi Gwangsu) urged the younger generation to think of their military service to the Japanese colonial empire as meaningful, and as an opportunity to express their loyalty to the Japanese empire. Of the Korean student soldiers who volunteered (1938–1943) or were drafted (1938–1945) into the Imperial Japanese Army,<sup>11</sup> Yerim Kim points out that they made up the majority of Koreans who had official military experience in post-liberation Korea. They came primarily from the class of economic wealth and possessed educational capital because they were beneficiaries of higher education.

Thanks to their high degree of literacy, they left their own accounts of their experiences about the war and about the difficulties of army life. However, in the postliberation period, it was via anticommunism that different images of student soldiers emerged. Martyrdom narratives emerged soon after liberation. But when groups of the returned student-soldiers challenged the anti-communism of right-wing groups who were coming to power in southern Korea under the United States Army Military Government, martyrdom stories about student-soldiers were silenced. If we think seriously about subsequent state violence—for example, the massacre in 1980 Gwangju—Kim’s focus on necropolitics in modern Korean history brings renewed attention to state-sanctioned sacrifice that extends across the colonial/postcolonial divide, and the silencing that accompanies the discursive formation of South Korea as an anti-communist state.

In the chapter by Jung-Hwan Cheon, “Untimely Death and Martyrdom after May 1980,” the interpretive framework is starkly different, and in a number of respects repeats the post-authoritarian sensibility of Kim Chihwa in 1991. Cheon’s first gesture is to say that he is unable, as a literary scholar, to make a sustained effort at theorizing death and martyrdom. Writing in the first person, he begins by expressing doubt about the possibility of

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11. The Army Special Volunteers Act was promulgated in 1938. Starting in 1943, the Student Draft Program was announced, and universal conscription enacted in 1944.

distancing himself, so that he may “merely [write] about the ‘weight of the world.’” So he says he will draw on explanations put forth by social scientists, while not satisfied with them. He begins with a number of observations: it is hard to draw a line between martyrs (*yeolsa*) and those who committed suicide (he points out that self-immolation sometimes occurs without advance planning); the Gwangju Uprising of May 1980 was a traumatic event for both the ruler and the ruled; and the culture of the movement demands of its activists an unwavering faith in ideology.

For Cheon, the lives of (martyrs like) Jeon Taeil and others had little in common, and they should be understood in their *individuality*. With that, Cheon focuses on Bak Seunghui, a nineteen-year-old sophomore who died by self-immolation on April 29, 1991, at Chonnam (Jeonnam) National University (in Gwangju). Cheon cannot reconcile what is written in the suicide note addressed to “twenty thousand fellow students,” and the nineteen-year old author of the note. Cheon wonders,

What gap or a medium existed between the warm-hearted delicate girl and the self-righteous warrior who bravely gave up her life, bent on planting the seeds of anti-Americanism in every single one of her twenty-thousand fellow students...Who is the owner of this voice...What is this dark and potent power of collectivity and history that intervened in and filled her individuality? (p. 252)

Just prior to raising these questions, Cheon had already provided an answer. Activists in the movement are required to have “a contradictory mind-nature (*simseong*)”: that is, a split consciousness formed by cool-headed scientism and a spirit of self-sacrifice.

In the case of Bak Seunghui, Cheon identifies a specific culprit for Seunghui’s transformation (Cheon refers to her by her given name). In high school, Seunghui “received training in the movement as one of the first-generation students of the members of the National Teachers’ Union (Jeongyojo) and stood up as a lone voice against the firing of her teachers in 1989 as a high school senior” (p. 252). After entering Jeonnam National

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University, Cheon suggests that she fell under the spell of the National Liberation (NL) stream of the student movement. Among NL activists, scientism was deemphasized, and instead what was demanded was “a much stronger ethics of self-sacrifice and modesty” (p. 249). So, there is a gap, and without stating explicitly, we are to understand that it was (anti-American, pro-North Korean) ideology that created the gap between the original/pre-ideological warm-hearted delicate girl and the anti-American militant.

Cheon ends his chapter with the observation that, after the 1990s, the kind of (political) conviction that Bak Seunghui—whether NL or “minjungism”—had become “almost impossible.” He adds, “South Korean universities have stopped being a sacred place for youth or a space where imagination for liberation blooms. Instead they are becoming ‘vulgar,’ transforming into something akin to branch offices of a corporation” (p. 254). Thus, on the one hand, Cheon presents the figure of a “warm-hearted delicate girl” being duped by ideology—creating within her a contradictory mind-nature (*simseong*). On the other hand, young people today are made vulgar by the corporatization of the university. Thus, Cheon hits the keys of a post-authoritarian sensibility, sounding the notes of a distancing that he stated were not possible for him.

The last chapter to be summarized and discussed is Sun-Chul Kim’s “The Construction of Martyrdom and Self-Immolation in South Korea.” A sociologist by training, Sun-Chul Kim reminds us that self-immolation and other forms of protest suicide were rare during the 1970s and early 1980s when political repression was most severe. Burning oneself in protest was a relatively alien form until the mid-1980s. In the mid-1980s, while the democracy movement was gaining strength, the military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan also implemented some liberalization measures (e.g., giving partial autonomy to universities) in the run-up to South Korea’s hosting of the 1988 Olympics. Kim argues that this created a dynamic where

The pro-democracy movement brought greater attention to injustice in South Korean society as well as a stronger imperative to overcome it. The rising expectations for political change strengthened the conviction

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within the activist communities that one's action could actually lead to social change. (p. 206)

It was in this context of change, and mounting certitude, that self-immolation was "rediscovered as a powerful weapon that could galvanize an army of (potential) activists" (p. 207).

While the number of self-immolations declined starting in the mid-1990s, Sun-Chul Kim points out that self-immolation by activists, in diverse sectors, persists into the present. As students, workers, farmers, street vendors, and anti-Japan nationalist activists resorted to self-immolation as the ultimate form of protest, even "ordinary citizens" chose self-immolation "as a means of suicide to escape from desperation and despair." Self-immolation had become an integral part of the culture of protest, a protest "repertoire" wherein the martyr becomes "a torchbearer whose ideas and actions needed to be carried on by the survivors" (p. 223). In 2009 and 2010, when the labor movement was under attack by the Lee Myung-bak government, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) invoked Jeon Taeil's name to rally its membership. Indeed, the social and political significance of Jeon Taeil's martyrdom has been so firmly established that during the 2012 presidential campaign the candidate of the conservative party, Park Geun-hye (daughter of Park Chung-hee), was compelled to pay homage to Jeon Taeil, despite protest from labor activists. Kim ends his chapter with this:

Herein lies a dilemma. It is only human to honor those who sacrificed their lives for a bigger cause, and it is only understandable that the martyr is invoked to win the hearts and minds of the people in the context of political struggles. Yet, the approval conferred to the meaning of this deadly act might be taken as an approval of the act itself by some, inadvertently contributing to the continuation of self-immolation. (p. 224)

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## Conclusion

The title of this volume, *Beyond Death*, gestures to Gwangju and the recording/recollection of the killings that took place there in 1980 (Yi et al. 2014). Writing in a time of pandemic, when more than three million people have died from COVID-19, we see the world more clearly. We saw the lives of the most vulnerable crumble: not just refugees fleeing war, not just the millions who live in slums, but millions who live in rich capitalist countries. As life becomes more like surviving rather than living for many more people, does it become easier to understand suicide as an act of dissent? In *The Last Man*, a post-apocalyptic science-fiction novel published in 1826, Mary Shelley wrote about language stripped of its power after a plague has ravaged the world: loved ones die, and so does eloquence. “Farewell to the arts—to eloquence.”<sup>12</sup>

Farewell to philosophy, to poetry, to the sound of song. Imagination runs cold. It is all over now. Man is solitary. (Shelley 2006, 297–298)

In 2015, when Kim Chaegi (Jaegi), a 45-year-old worker and union representative at Kumho Tire Factory, immolated himself to protest the company’s decision to turn regular unionized jobs into subcontract work (p. 167), should we confer eloquence to that act? If we do not, then would he have not died a solitary death? This volume shows powerfully how victims can be insufficiently real to the general public: in the absence of a military dictatorship, invisibility is conferred to alleviate the inconvenience of caring. This volume, with a number of exceptional high-quality chapters, eloquently shows what it means to really *see* others, to appreciate their lives, beyond death.

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12. Mary Shelley’s novel is quoted in Jill Lepore (2020). Drawing on Shelley, Lepore would have us see how “every story of epidemic is a story of illiteracy, language made powerless, man made brute.”

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