

Reflections on the sinking of the Sewol

Daniel Davies
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[I felt so sad about the sinking of the ferry in Korea that I needed to write about my feelings. The Korea Times published the article in Thoughts of the Times. "Reflections on the Sinking of the Sewol."]

Since I learned of the tragic sinking of the Sewol I have been afflicted with a sadness that I cannot shake off. The news reports flashed on the TV screen of the airport limousine upon my arrival in Korea on April 16.



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Three hundred beautiful high school students dead or missing, with no hope of any more survivors. The immense tragedy with which the teachers at Danwon High School in Ansan are dealing is something I can understand. I retired from teaching at Cheongshim International Academy on March 1.

The rescued, dead and missing students are not faceless to me. They are the faces of my students whom I love intensely and dearly. When I think of the students in the Sewol tragedy, I see my students' shining eyes and faces, optimistic minds, pure hearts and boundless hope for the future of Korea and the world.

I feel the heartbreak and despair of the parents, grandparents, relatives, teachers and staff as my own. I can understand the vice principal's taking his own life rather than living with the agony that, as the responsible chaperone, he lived while so many students in his care perished.

They are not nameless students to him; he welcomed them into his school and spent every day fostering their education and wellbeing. What he arranged as a life-enhancing, memorable experience for his students became a hellish nightmare. He apparently could not live with the agony of his loss.

The captain, first and second mates acted in ways difficult to comprehend. Surely they knew that a boatload of high school students entrusted their lives to their care.

Rather than dash into the passengers' quarters with the news to abandon ship, personally supervising everyone's safe departure on lifeboats, the captain delayed the abandon-ship command, then made their own escape leaving the students to fend for themselves with misguided instructions to stay put.

Time will tell during the court proceedings exactly what happened on the bridge and why the crew abandoned the passengers to almost certain death.

I heard one news report that discussed the tradition of students obeying their elders and teachers. From my experience as a teacher at CSIA, I know that this is true.

That is one of the beauties of Korean schools. Students respect their teachers and follow their directions. And teachers follow the directions of their superiors as well.

Yet that beautiful tradition has the weakness of encouraging students to ignore their own sense of what is right. Those who stayed put even while the Sewol continued to tilt, then finally capsize, died. Those who ignored the call to stay put lived.

A sad coincidence lay in the shipwreck of the Kumagawa Maru on June 11, 1902 in waters nearby where the Sewol capsized and sank.

Henry G. Appenzeller, founder of Paichai Hakdang, the first high school in Korea to teach progressive, liberal democratic values, drowned in that shipwreck along with 27 other passengers.

The loss of Henry G. Appenzeller, just 44 years old, had tragic consequences for Korea. As a leader of the independence movement whose U.S. citizenship earned him protection not afforded Koreans, Appenzeller led efforts to resist Japanese and Russian designs on Korea by encouraging King Kojong to promote progressive principles and trying to arrange a treaty of protection with the U.S.

His school, Paichai Hakdang, bred a number of progressive leaders who became patriots in the fight against the Japanese, Chinese and Russian imperial designs on Korea.

We are still waiting for the recovery of the bodies of more than 100 students from the sunken ship. With all hope of finding more survivors gone, our task is to pray that God will receive the lovely souls of the 300 Danwon High School students, as well as Henry G. Appenzeller and the other 27 souls aboard the Kumagawa Maru, into the glory of heaven.

Dr. Daniel Davies is an adjunct professor for University of Maryland and University of Bridgeport in history and philosophy. He wrote many articles on the independence movement and founding of Protestantism in Korea.