



Emotion culture as a resource of sensemaking: Transforming an arson case of a Korean national heritage to citizens' responsibility



Kirsten Younghee Song*

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, West Virginia University, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the importance of culture in developing public understanding of social problems. To do so, I analyzed narrative structures of news contents connected to an arson case involving a Korean national heritage, *Sungnyemun*, in 2008. Scholars have highlighted a character arrangement in a binary opposition (e.g., victim/villain and good/bad) as a common narrative structure when dealing with conflicts. My findings suggest the conventional binary structure does not translate into the case at hand. Instead, the arson case narrative developed through what I conceptualize as *binary character convergence*. Combining the victim and villain character, news media created a *shameful victim* character and assigned it to citizens as a whole. As a result, the arson case was transformed into citizens' collective responsibility. This study shows that cultural particularities of Korean society mediated this process, specifically regarding a conflict resolution practice and shame/apology rituals which are deeply oriented to the value of group harmony. By taking an approach sensitive to cultural contexts, this study contributes to the study of social problem construction, particularly in the examination of a link between a narrative, emotions, and an event.

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1. Introduction

This study examines the importance of culture in developing public understanding of social problems. To do so, I analyzed news contents of a 2008 arson case in South Korea (henceforth Korea) that demolished an iconic national heritage, *Sungnyemun*. A 70-year-old man committed the hideous act of vandalism to show his extreme discontent with the land compensation dispute involving some property belonging to him (*Chosun* 1, February 12).¹ The incident immediately drew massive media attention nationwide, and news stories quickly developed. News media, however, unfolded their stories by spreading responsibility for the incident to the citizens collectively. Moreover, the accusing tone toward the citizens instead of the arsonist was almost identical across different newspapers. Only a few days later, the government publicized a restoration plan with a cost estimate of 16 million dollars (*Newsis* 1, February 15). Despite the significant financial burden to taxpayers, no dispute about the plan appeared on news coverage. The news development of the *Sungnyemun* arson case posed questions that warranted further exploration. Most of all, how could citizens as a collective be responsible for an

* Correspondence to: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, West Virginia University, 400 Knapp Hall, Morgantown, WV 26505, United States.
E-mail addresses: kirsten.song@mail.wvu.edu, kirstensong@gmail.com

¹ The sources for all news articles quoted in this paper are available in Appendix 1, both in English translations and the original Korean texts.



Picture 1. Sungnyemun.

Source: National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage.

incident that was as unpredictable as arson committed by an individual? Yet, news agencies chorused the claim of collective responsibility regardless of their varied political viewpoints. The next question then is: how did news agencies make sense of the ostensibly illogical claim? To answer to these questions, I took into account the cultural context, more specifically the strong collectivist value, of Korean society. In doing so, the current study explains a mechanism through which culture mediates public understanding of social problems. In particular, I focused on how cultural particularities worked to link a narrative, an event, and emotions in that process.

1.1. The case of Sungnyemun

To better understand the gravity of the case at hand, a brief description of the significance of *Sungnyemun* in Korean society is imperative.² *Sungnyemun*, literally meaning “gate of respecting propriety,” is a two-storied pavilion built in 1398 (see [Picture 1](#)).

It is an important heritage as a representation of the country’s long history which further symbolizes the resilience of the Korean people. For the sake of security for the newly established Joseon (the last Korean Kingdom, 1392–1910), the capital city, Seoul, was surrounded with walls having four gates. *Sungnyemun* constituted the southern gate of the wall. Facing the south, the areas where the most productive regions were located, *Sungnyemun* served as the major entrance for goods coming into the capital. Almost naturally, markets began growing around the adjacent areas which later officially turned into a modern market in 1912. The *Sungnyemun* business district has remained as a major retail center for Seoul up to today. Attracting large crowds of merchants, buyers, passersby, and visitors, the *Sungnyemun* area became a public space in old Seoul. Thus, it is no coincidence that the *Sungnyemun* site also served governmental purposes in old Seoul such as announcing the time, publicizing major government policies, receiving foreign emissaries, and holding important ceremonial events. It remained in good condition despite national hardships including countless foreign invasions, the Japanese occupation (1910–1945), and the Korean War (1950–1953). Acknowledging the rare and significant cultural value of *Sungnyemun*, in 1962 the Korean government designated it as National Treasure Number One.³ As such, *Sungnyemun* was a long-lived backdrop the capital city. Its symbolic meaning is deeply ingrained in everyday culture. It often appears in children’s songs, oral histories, fairy tales, and traditional rhymes (*Hankyoreh* 1, February 13, 2008). Having stood in one of

² Historical information about *Sungnyemun* in this section is from the official webpage of the Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA), which is the primary governmental agency responsible for preserving and maintaining cultural objects in original conditions, and promoting the value of cultural properties to both citizens and foreign travelers (<http://english.cha.go.kr>).

³ In Korea, the government designates highly valued heritage sites/objects as National Treasures and assigns them a serial number. More information is available at www.cha.go.kr.

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