Conceptualizing Sorrow and Hope: The Discourse of Han in South Korea

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Bodily memory of pain is
   Easily erased
   But
   The wound of the heart
   Grows ever worse
   It departs and returns and
   Stares at me deep in the night
   Not only stares but
   Weeps sadly
   Shakes from anger
   Or embraces despair
   The pain of the body is sensory but
   The wound of the heart
   In touch with the essence of life
   Is perhaps what is called han

Han by Pak Kyŏngni

Introduction

In the summer of 1983, a reporter from the Kyunghyang Shinmun, a major daily Korean newspaper, traveled to Wonju to interview Pak Kyŏngni, a prominent writer considered by some as “the mother of Korean literature.” The occasion for this interview was the publication

1 Pak Kyŏngni 박경리, Pŏrigo kal kŏnman namasŏ ch’am holgabunhada 버리고 갈 것만 남아서 참 홀가분하다 [I leave light-heartedly with nothing left to keep] (Seoul: Maroniebuksŭ 마로니에북스, 2008), 106, my translation.

of the fourth volume of what became Pak’s five-part, sixteen-volume historical epic called *T’oji 토지* (Land), a story spanning five generations of a rural landowning family in the politically turbulent late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and set in Japan, Korea, China, and Russia.³ In the course of their discussion, Pak expanded on a concept that she considered a major theme running throughout her work: “The meaning of han is not limited to sadness or mournfulness. That may be part of han, but han itself is deeper and more fundamental. Every living thing in the world possesses some degree of han and lives to resolve it. That is why han can also be a source of strength and a creative, life-steering energy.” The reporter went on to explain how each character among the hundreds in *T’oji* had to live with their own form of han.⁴

In the mid-1990s, *T’oji* was translated into English for the first time as part of a UNESCO effort to collect representative literary works worldwide. Under the title “Trapped by Han: Land,” a *Los Angeles Times* reviewer wrote: “Like the 19th century Russian writers who gave us glimpses into the Russian character, Pak explores the Korean soul. Central to *Land* is han, which has no English equivalent. Han, the Korean tenet of an eternal woe, unrequited love and unending hope, lives in all Pak’s characters.”⁵ Straddling essentialist and nationalist tones, han has been understood as a prominent and unique emotional feature of Korean identity not only in the literary field but also in other academic fields. Despite its widespread use, its meaning has been difficult to pin down and has thus led to various broad and contradictory claims regarding its nature, cause, and function.

**Han as an emotion concept**

*Han 한* derives from the Sino-Korean character 恨 and is, arguably, not a specifically Korean word, concept, or characteristic, especially in the context of other Asian languages and areas where Chinese script is used. It has, however, developed a contemporary “ethnonationalist” and essentialist

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significance in Korea. The emotion concept has been discussed and used individually and collectively with variable force and meaning depending on its historical context. The following is a concise compilation of key studies that have attempted to define han in the literary and academic spheres.

In the 1980s, poet and activist Ko Ŭn 고은 wrote: “we cannot deny that we were born from the womb of han and raised in the bosom of han.” Ko viewed han as a negative emotion accumulated over Korea’s history through the peninsula’s experience of foreign aggression, colonization, and poverty. Linguist Chŏng Taehyŏn 정대현 wrote that due to its long period of accumulation, han has not easily disappeared; it is independent of an object or a cause, and it is experienced passively, like a bodily ache. Chŏng also emphasized that han is the sorrow of helpless victims such as women oppressed by Chosŏn-period Confucian values and social structures. In contrast, literary scholar Ch’ŏn Idu 천이두 drew out the positive aspect of han, arguing that it “has both negativity and transcendence nested within it.” Ch’ŏn viewed han as a multifaceted emotional “complex” that contained both “bright” and “dark” sides as well as both affection, chŏng 정, and resentment, wŏn 원.

In the 1990s, inquiries into shamanism in Korean folk culture pointed to han as a crucial cause for being drawn to shamanism, according to

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8 Chi Kim, “Korean Han,” 255.


12 Chi Kim, “Korean Han,” 256.

cultural anthropologist Ch’oe Kilssŏng 최길성.\textsuperscript{14} Writer and former minister of culture I Ŭryŏng 이어령 gave a series of lectures compiled into a book linking the economic success of South Korea with the shamanic ecstasy derived from the resolution of han.\textsuperscript{15} In the late 1980s and 1990s, psychiatrist Min Sŏngkil 민성길 published and presented his psychiatric findings on han identifying it as a “uniquely Korean psychological state” linked to a physical malady called hwa-byung 화병 (fire-illness). He called for an “ethnic psychiatry” that would identify uniquely Korean socio-cultural factors to treat patients.\textsuperscript{16}

As this brief overview of existing literature attests, the understanding, perception, and application of han have been varied and often contradictory. Some of the main tensions nested within the emotion concept based on relevant literature include the following:

Han is an emotion afflicting the socially disadvantaged—especially women and the working classes—while claiming applicability to the whole of Korean society.

Han cannot be fully comprehended by non-Koreans and it cannot be translated accurately, although other people with a history of foreign aggression may feel han and not recognize it as such, making it both universal and unique.

Han is both sorrow and hope. It is both negative and positive.

Such broad and ambiguous claims regarding the emotion concept of han underline the contentiousness and complexity of its vocabulary and discourse. Despite—or perhaps because of—this ambiguity, han has been able to play a significant role in shaping Korea’s realm of experience. An emotion’s tangible, lived experience is closely bound to its discourse, since the vocabulary of emotion is inextricably tied to its social experience and expectation. Thus, as the language of han increased and diversified in its formulation, it has arguably affected the way individuals and groups feel and express themselves over time. Additionally, the more han has been written and theorized about, the greater and more legitimate its vocabulary has become.

The primary sources examined here are two essays from a collection titled Hanŭi iyagi 恨의 이야기 (The Story of Han), published in 1988. The first text,


\textsuperscript{15} I Ŭryŏng 이어령, Kûraedo paramgaebinŭn tonda 그래도 바람개비는 돈다 [Still the pinwheel turns] (Seoul: Tonghwasŏjŏk 동화서적, 1992), 238.

“Hanŭi kŭkpokŭl wihayŏ” 恨의 극복을 위하여 (Towards the overcoming of han), is an essay first published in 1980 by the poet Ko Ŭn. The second text, “Hane taehan minjungsahoeahakchŏk shiron” 恨에 대한 민중사회학적 시론 (Essay on han and minjung sociology), is an essay first published in 1987 by sociologists Han Wansang 한완상 and Kim Sŏngki 김성기. Ko, Han, and Kim have creatively formulated the meaning, value, and application of han in an attempt to redefine and establish Korean culture, identity, and history. Arguably, these interpretations, which build upon one another, show that han is neither stable nor timeless and that its meaning and value have been wide-ranging, even among contemporaries.

This article does not attempt to pinpoint exactly when, where, and by whose authority the notion of han came into existence, if that were possible at all. The word han existed in the Korean vocabulary as a Sino-Korean character, as previously mentioned, before the emergence of the presently examined discourse. It would also be a misleading claim to simply consider it a twentieth-century construct seized by Korean intellectuals in the postwar years to construct a national identity, as this would overlook the lived experiences of those who have actually felt this emotion.

What this article attempts to address are the different interpretations of han based on a close reading of two texts to uncover how its authors endeavored to imbue the emotion concept with a sense of urgency and agency. This article is based on written material and intends to comparatively approach the aforementioned texts to disclose some of the underlying presuppositions and conceptual tensions that deserve closer scrutiny. The analysis will be categorized temporally, according to past, present, and future dimensions of the writers’ interpretations of han.

Ideological demystification is not the ending to the story but rather the hope to better understand how the tensions within han opened up a discursive space that allowed different agents to conceptually engage with this emotion. Ultimately, the goal is to examine what the writers attempted to do with the emotion concept of han.

The theoretical impulse upon which this article is based has to do with the critical relationship between emotions, concepts, and history as proposed by Ute Frevert, Margrit Pernau, and Imke Rajamani. Ute Frevert has laid out two basic premises in her introductory text to Geschichte der Gefühle: (1) Emotions make history. Gefühle machen Geschichte. They motivate and deter actions, form and destroy communities, and allow and disrupt communication. (2) Emotions are not only able to make history (geschichtsmächtig) but also have histories of their
own (geschichtsträchtig). They are not constant but rather changing in expression, object, and value.\textsuperscript{17}

Emotions and their vocabularies are embedded in particular spatial and temporal contexts that lend them meaning; they are not passive descriptors and instead actively form and project what they describe.\textsuperscript{18} The language of emotion “mirrors cultural conventions and social norms. But it also allows [historians] to read back what people actually felt, wanted to feel, or meant to feel. And they impart an insight into the transience of emotions, in their historicity and temporality (Zeitgebundenheit).”\textsuperscript{19}

汉 will be treated as both emotion and concept here—as a temporally and spatially grounded subject of both conceptual history and emotion history. Such a perspective, which aims to “expand conceptual history beyond language” through “concepts of emotion,” has been suggested by Margrit Pernau and Imke Rajamani.\textsuperscript{20} Pernau and Rajamani have argued that emotions play an important role in conceptual change and aim to “bring conceptual history and the history of emotions into a dialogue from which both will profit,”\textsuperscript{21} a view that is regarded as important and necessary in this article.

Based on Frevert’s emphasis on the place of emotion within history as well as Pernau’s and Rajamani’s stress on the potential of emotions as agents of conceptual change, 汉 is regarded in this article as an emotion concept that has a history just as much as it is a part of it, as a case study exemplifying how emotion and reason are entangled and not opposed,\textsuperscript{22} and as a concept that can create as well as embody change. By analyzing how 汉 has been interpreted and explicated in different ways by different intellectuals, this article hopes to contribute to its discourse by arguing that 汉 is a contested and multifaceted emotion concept in history. By situating it in a particular historical context and examining its contradictions, it also seeks to challenge common essentialist, ethnonational perceptions.


\textsuperscript{18} Ute Frevert, Vergängliche Gefühle (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2013), 11–12.

\textsuperscript{19} Frevert, Vergängliche Gefühle, 15.


\textsuperscript{21} Pernau and Rajamani, “Emotional translations,” 47.

\textsuperscript{22} Pernau and Rajamani, “Emotional translations,” 55.
Han and the minjung movement

Out of the many historical moments in which han has been discussed, one of the significant periods in which it conveyed momentum as a concept of change was during the minjung movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Han was crucially linked to this movement by various writers who saw the suffering of the people due to political, economic, and social oppression as a central element in the minjung realm of experience. This connection between han and minjung is a prominent feature that threads together the collection of essays in The Story of Han.

Minjung, roughly translated as “people,” “proletariat,” or “folk,” was a highly debated idea that came into public focus as a result of the adjustments in the state–society relationship after a successful military coup d’etat led by Pak Chŏnghŭi 박정희 in 1961. The ensuing regime, which prioritized rapid industrialization and repressive strategies of control, birthed groups of dissidents that looked to minjung as a rallying concept. Though its contours were contested by groups influenced by differing ideologies and the role that intellectuals envisioned for themselves in relation to it changed over time, the general consensus among its advocates was that minjung did not include all Korean nationals, that it excluded the wealthy and those with political power or privileges, and denounced foreign influence. It has been argued that the flexibility and inclusivity of the concept gave it a greater practical relevance in social movements, which continuously reinterpreted the concept according

23 Kim Jin 김진, “Han(恨)iran muŏsin’ga 한(恨)이란 무엇인가? [What is han?]” in Han(恨)ŭi hakchejŏk yŏn'gu 한(恨)의 학제적 연구 [Interdisciplinary studies of han], ed. Sin Ch’angsŏk 신창석 (Seoul: Ch’ŏrhakkwa hyŏnsilssa 철학과 현실사, 2004), 12.

24 Kim Yŏngp’il 김영필, “Hanŭi hyŏnsang hakchŏk punsŏk 한의 현상학적 분석 [Phenomenological analysis of han]” in Han(恨)ŭi hakchejŏk yŏn’gu 한(恨)의 학제적 연구 [Interdisciplinary studies of han], ed. Sin Ch’angsŏk 신창석 (Seoul: Ch’ŏrhakkwa hyŏnsilssa 철학과 현실사, 2004), 212.


28 O, “80nyŏndae han’gugŭi minjungsi,” 141.
Most *minjung* movement activists advocated for an “ideal democratic society” in opposition to authoritarian rule, although there certainly were socialists who used the term “proletariat.” The term *minjung* had been used in the context of Japanese colonial rule to refer to the Korean people in opposition to the Japanese people, as exemplified in the 1923 *Korean Revolutionary Manifesto* by Sin Ch’aeho, but its usage since the 1970s has revolved around a distinct sense of purpose—an urgent need to establish a *minjung*-centric society and an effort to reinterpret Korean history based on their resistance to oppressive rule.

The movement’s central premise was that the *minjung* were the principal and rightful agents of society and of history. Groups of intellectuals differed on whether they themselves were part of the *minjung* or separate from them, but nevertheless compelled to help them realize their own political agency. In the 1970s, they tended to see their role as educators, awakening the “sleeping” *minjung* to realize their historical agency; in the 1980s, the intellectuals increasingly thought of themselves as a part of the *minjung*.

*Han* was a central theme in the writings of *minjung* movement intellectuals. Poet Kim Chiha, whose unwavering critical stance was inspired by his Catholic faith and whose works were influential to many *minjung* theologians, was one of the leading figures of the *minjung* movement. Starting with “Five Bandits,” a poem that led to his arrest in May 1970, he suffered multiple subsequent beatings and arrests, later...

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30 O, “80nyŏndae han’gugŭi minjungsı,” 143.

31 O, “80nyŏndae han’gugŭi minjungsı,” 142.


coming close to being executed by Pak’s regime.39 In 1971, he wrote in “Satire or Suicide” that the ceaseless violence inflicted on the minjung and the resulting accumulated experience of sorrow produced han. This han was the foundation on which poetic resistance was based.40

Ko Ŭn 고은, also a poet and a former Buddhist monk, whose writings carried a certain “Buddhist sensibility” as Kim’s works had with Catholicism, wrote various socially conscious poems in the 1970s and 1980s, such as "Arrows" (1977), which called for democratic activists to leave behind everything for the sole purpose of “advancing with all our might” towards an envisioned political struggle.41 He saw the tragic pain of han accumulated in the minjung as a passive emotion that cannot lead to a will to reform—as Kim Chiha believed—especially in his essay “Towards the overcoming of han.”42

Minjung theology was an activist ideology and “theology of praxis” that drew its divine knowledge from the experience of the oppressed and marginalized and gained their energy from han.43 As its main proponent, Sŏ Namtong 서남동 proclaimed himself to be a “medium” or “prophet of han” in his 1983 publication titled A Study of Minjung Theology.44

Minjung sociology, according to Han Wansang 한완상, was “conceived and raised in a site of suffering” and emerged as a kind of social diagnosis and potential prescription to treat this pain.45 His critique of social inequality and national division between north and south as well as advocacy of democratic ideals were influential in the social movements into the 1980s.46 Kim Sŏngki 김성기, who coauthored papers with Han, was part of the next generation of scholars influenced by minjung

39 Hwang, A History of Korea, 236–237.
40 Chang, “1970nyŏndae ‘minjung’ kaenyŏmŭi chaedŭngjang,” 120.
41 Hwang, A History of Korea, 242.
46 Chŏng, “Han Wansanggwa pip’an sahoeagŭi hyŏngsŏng,” 368.
sociology. Han and Kim later wrote about han in “Essay on han and minjung sociology,” viewing it as a potential catalyst for social change.

I Hyojae regarded han as an emotion borne most acutely by women on behalf of the minjung and argued that han represented the afflictions of the weak more generally. By drawing attention to the historical and societal oppression of women, she called for a “new image of women” that does not consider han as a given female instinct or social fate.

Interest in han thus spread through various fields of study as minjung movement frontrunners employed it as a lens for social scrutiny and as a magnifier for the suffering caused by structural violence. Minjung and han were strategically connected by various writers who lent these concepts increasing political significance. Foremost among these were Ko, Han, and Kim, whose essays on han were published together in a collection in the late 1980s.

The Story of Han

In 1988, a selection of fourteen essays on the subject of han was assembled and published under the title Hanŭi iyagi 한의 이야기, or The Story of Han. A three-part collection concerning the nature, structure, and resolution of han, these essays were meant to serve as a foundation for further research according to its editor, Sŏ Kwangsŏn 서광선. Contributions from the fields of psychology, literature, sociology, politics, theology, and women’s studies had been published in various books and journals between the late 1970s and the mid 1980s, a period marked by dictatorships, censorship, mass demonstrations, and the rise of the minjung movement in South Korea.

Of particular interest here are two of its essays, which are addressed to the writers’ peers, urging them to advance their understanding of minjung experience and of han. The authors of these texts are concerned with democratization, unification, and nation building in a broader sense, attempting to situate Korea in the world through the crafting of an emotional identity.

47 Chŏng, “Han Wansanggwa pip’an sahoehagŭi hyŏngsŏng,” 390.
The first essay, “Towards the overcoming of han,” was written by poet and activist Ko Ŭn. He wrote during a time of national crises, becoming “awakened” to the political reality following the act of self-immolation of garment-worker Chŏn T’aeil 전태일 in 1970. Ko became a leading figure in the struggle for democracy, human rights, national unity, and the minjung movement as attested by various leadership roles in the Association of Writers for Practical Freedom (1974), the National Association for the Recovery of Democracy (1974), the Korean Association of Human Rights (1978), and the Association of National Unity (1979). He served several prison terms and experienced detention and torture under the watch of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency.

Following the assassination of President Pak Chŏnghŭi 박정희 in October 1979 and the successful coup led by Chŏn Tuhwan 전두환 in December of that year, laborers and students demonstrated en masse against Chŏn’s takeover during the so-called “Seoul Spring” in early 1980. Groups of dissidents had been rallying around opposition leader (and future president) Kim Taejung 김대중, meeting regularly to discuss their views of the state, plan countermeasures, and exchange information. On May 15, 1980, one hundred thousand protesters—mostly students—demonstrated in front of Seoul Station. That same day, the “Declaration of 134 Intellectuals” was issued in public opposition to Chŏn’s regime, which included Ko Ŭn’s and Seoul University professor Han Wansang’s names. On May 17, martial law was forcibly extended to the whole country, campuses were shut down, and Kim, Ko, Han, and many others were arrested and tortured under sedition and conspiracy

52 Hwang, A History of Korea, 236–237.
56 Hwang, A History of Korea, 263.
The demonstrations culminated on May 18 with the Kwangju Uprising, a student protest that turned into a bloody civil movement lasting ten days, during which a brutal government crackdown killed over two hundred and injured hundreds more.\(^5^9\)

That was also the year in which Ko’s essay, “Towards the overcoming of \textit{han},” was first published. Given the political backdrop of tireless demonstrations by students, intellectuals, laborers, and other activists, a \textit{minjung} movement gaining traction and running the gamut of academic discourses, and with the challenging tasks of democratization and unification ahead, Ko’s broad, radical, and uncompromising style and content seem to encapsulate South Korea’s \textit{zeitgeist} of the 1970s and 1980s, as will be examined in further detail in this article.

The second text, “Essay on \textit{han} and \textit{minjung} sociology,” coauthored by Han Wansang and Kim Sŏngki 김성기, was first published in early 1987. Social critic and activist Han Wansang was twice relieved of his professorship at Seoul National University in the 1970s for his involvement in the democratic movement, especially after reading an anti-government declaration in 1975.\(^6^0\) Along with many other opposition leaders, Han was imprisoned in 1980 under conspiracy charges.\(^6^1\) He was invited to Emory University as a visiting professor after his release “to ensure his personal safety,” effectively living in exile only to return a couple of years later as democratic movements were starting to build momentum.\(^6^2\)

In the 1960s, Han had studied and taught in the southern United States. There, he was exposed to the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam War protests, events that deepened his commitment to social reform back home.\(^6^3\) Han later wove together “Western theory” and the concept of \textit{minjung},\(^6^4\) striving to make the tools of sociology more applicable to

\(^5^8\) Hwang, \textit{A History of Korea}, 263.

\(^5^9\) Hwang, \textit{A History of Korea}, 264.


\(^6^1\) Kim, “Han Wansang puch’ongninŭn nugu?”


\(^6^3\) Chŏng, “Han Wansanggwa pip’an sahoeahgŭi hyŏngsŏng,” 367.

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Korea’s current situation. Along with minjung theology and minjung literature, the field of minjung sociology that he spearheaded greatly influenced scholarly debates in the 1970s and 1980s, especially his works The Minjung and the Intellectual and Minjung Sociology. Cultural critic and professor Kim Sŏngki was part of a subsequent generation of minjung sociologists, publishing studies on minjung and subjecthood in the late 1980s as well as collaborating with Han on “An essay on han and minjung sociology,” published in February 1987.

The year 1987 was a year of political breakthrough in South Korea, as Chŏn Tuhwan 전두환 succumbed to domestic and foreign pressure and assented to a direct presidential election. The memory of the 1980 Kwangju Uprising—kept alive through underground networks even as the Chŏn regime maintained official silence surrounding the “Incident”—the slowdown of the economy, and the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines in 1986 fueled the resistance against the authoritarian system. When Chŏn declared that a parliamentary election would follow the end of the term in June 1987 to ensure the succession of his preferred candidate, over a million demonstrators—students, laborers, and activists, joined this time by “salary workers, managers, housewives” and other middle class people—flooded the streets throughout the country.

Earlier in January, it had come to light that Pak Chongch’ŏl 박종철, a linguistics student at Seoul National University suspected of anti-government activities, had died from torture in police custody despite the authorities’ botched attempts to conceal the truth. This event, which shocked and galvanized the nation, moved Han Wansang to write the following in the Joongang Daily: “as his contemporary, as a professor, as a parent dismayed by the speechlessness of Pak’s han-filled father, we eagerly await the day of freedom, the day of justice that will burst forth the

65 Chŏng, “Han Wansanggwa pip’an sahoehagŭi hyŏngsŏng,” 367–368.
66 Kim, “Han Wansanggŭi ‘Minjunggwa Chisigin.’”
67 Chŏng, “Han Wansanggwa pip’an sahoehagŭi hyŏngsŏng,” 390.
68 Hwang, A History of Korea, 262.
69 Hwang, A History of Korea, 265–266.
70 Hwang, A History of Korea, 267.
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language of sorrow that has accrued into han [...].” The “Essay on han and minjung sociology,” published shortly after this incident, reflects a growing sense of anticipation. Collective resentment and anger are intimately intertwined with resolution and hope for a new future, as will be analyzed in the sections below.

**The bitter past**

In his essay on han, Ko Ŭn argues for the existence of a unique and cohesive Korean national history that has produced han but has also been disrupted by it. Han is said to be a product of a particularly adverse history, one constantly undercut by “Sinocentric thinking and the feeling of historical marginalization.” Han is strongly linked to past experiences: “Han is not a wound but a scar. Han is not pain itself but the long memory of pain [...].” Han is not only a painful product of history but also the present “memory” of all the layers of suffering from the past. The repeated use of “accumulated” and “accumulation” throughout the text underscore han’s association with a prolonged buildup of past recollections.

While Ko underscores that han is a product of history, he also points the blame at han for facilitating the isolation and suffering of the Korean people—in other words, for being a cause of rupture with world history, cutting the Korean people’s ties with all other world peoples. He writes that “han is exactly this history, that of a non-diverse path of ordeals and suffering” associated with “the internal toadyism of a regressive culture” that has only allowed Korea to maintain a relationship to China and no other world regions.

Ko acknowledges that “every nation or tribe that survives to this day has undergone a long and turbulent historical unfolding.” He seems to take for granted that there are distinct, ethno-national communities that develop corresponding distinct, basic emotions, even though—as he notes himself—international affairs are moved by “political and social

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relations of conflict” and thus must form in contexts of continuous contact. If every community that survives has a history of conflict, it remains unexplained why han should occur only in Korea and why it should be “untranslatable.” Despite his prior statement regarding Korea’s Sinocentric foreign relations, Ko categorically argues that Korea’s emotional experience is “completely different” to that of its East Asian neighbors China and Japan and that “there is no han to be found there.”

Though the current form of han may not exist elsewhere, remnants of the “original form of han” from primitive nomadic communities is said to continue to exist in other languages, as seen in Chinese as “hen” 恨, in Sanskrit as “upanāha,” in Mongolian as “korosul,” and in Manchurian as “korsocuka.” In Manchuria, however, which has “had close ties to the Korean peninsula since prehistoric times,” Ko writes that a feeling of “wild anger or loathing […] lapsed into a form of sadness” following the dismantling of the Manchu Dynasty. Similarly, the evolution of “korosul” in Mongolian into an emotion denoting “sorrow” is linked to the demise of the Mongols and the Jurchen. These supposedly analogous transformations of “korsocuka” and “korosul” to that of han in the Korean context do no service to the claim of han’s untranslatability, and neither do the translations of the word itself in other geographical contexts. The lack of a similar deteriorative process in han’s development in China is partially attributed to “the economic and cultural gap caused by the Great Wall and the Sinicization of nomadic tribes,” although this vague explanation regarding the assumed stability of han in China leads to more questions than answers in regard to Korea’s emotional uniqueness.

Ko traces han back to a time in history when han was not “untranslatable” but a common feature in Asian prehistoric societies. Referring to the “nomadic” cultures of Sumerian and Ancient Indo-Aryan civilizations, he writes that

[…] [their] relocation implies two conditions: occupation caused by invasion, and resignation caused by defeat. Nomadic groups were required to develop a way out of each moment of crisis as well as the fear and insecurity caused by the process of relocation.

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78 Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 27.
80 Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 34.
81 Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 43.
82 Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 43.
Here, a feature of nomadic life on the continent—a wild, combative spirit and the terrible hostility toward the Other—develops. This is likely the original form of han.84

Before han decayed into its current shape in the Korean context, its “original form” was that of a “wild, combative spirit.” Ko idealizes and grossly generalizes “nomadic life on the continent” and its character despite having no substantial historical evidence to support his claims. He romanticizes collective life of the ancient past and its “vigor.”85 What is bemoaned is a supposedly primordial, dynamic, and belligerent desire in the face of danger that has been lost in han’s current form—and by extension, in the current Korean people. Ko attempts to argue that a dynamic spirit that belonged to the people long ago must be recovered.

In an essay also published in The Story of Han, literary critic and journalist Im Hŏnyŏng 임헌영 responds critically to Ko’s theory of han. Im agrees with Ko on the point that the emotion of han has “existed for a very long time” and that the usage of han in Korea differs from that of China and Japan, where it means “loathing and resentfulness.”86 Im situates Ko’s take on han as part of an attempt by various nationalist writers to assign han a social and historical function. He notes, however, that Ko’s concept of han is much too “vague” and its “scope of applicability is too broad.”87 The statements in the excerpt above imply that “kings, generals, aristocrats as well as frail women and slaves could all have han, and its emotional scope ties together everything from lofty patriotism to petty individual resentment under the name of han.”88 Im further wonders how well-known lyrics written by the ruling class from the feudal past could have been regarded as part of the literature of han if the emotion occurs only in the minjung. In national literature, Im points out, most works that express extreme sorrow are linked to han,89 in contrast to Ko’s claims that han has never existed in pre-modern literature.

Like Ko, Han Wansang and Kim Sŏngki agree with his interpretation of han as an emotion caused by and accumulated through prolonged

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84 Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 36.
87 Im, “Hanŭi munhakkwa minjungûisik,” 106.
88 Im, “Hanŭi munhakkwa minjungûisik,” 107.
89 Im, “Hanŭi munhakkwa minjungûisik,” 109.
oppression, referencing him as an authority on han. Han and Kim also describe han as a “product,” an “accumulation,” even a “cultural heritage” of despair stemming from systemic, historical injustice.\(^9^0\)

Unlike Ko, who reaches back into a reimagined prehistory, Han’s and Kim’s account of han is more focused on the structural conditions of the relatively recent past. According to Han and Kim, two particular factors are responsible for the occurrence of han: economic exploitation and political exclusion. Economic exploitation and consequent poverty are named as the first “structural cause” of han. Poverty is shown to be “chronic” as han is traced from the Chosŏn period to the colonial period and finally to the present.\(^9^1\) In regard to the second cause of han, they write:

An even more important structural factor of han is the limitless abuse of power of a section of the political bureaucratic authorities. This was then aggravated by the conspicuous consumption and lifestyles of the emerging upper classes formed of the political bureaucracy and business elites. By the 1970s, the minjung, who had grown vast, began to perceive their own political, economic, and cultural exclusion and accumulated han in a new way.\(^9^2\)

Political exclusion, they argue, is the second cause of han, one that is closely tied to economic exploitation. Han and Kim take critical note of the “conspicuous consumption and lifestyles of emerging upper classes” and “business elites” that represent the politically privileged. They also mention “political bureaucratic authorities” in a rather neutral way without explicitly elaborating on the present political regime, perhaps out of caution. Though the issue of class is mentioned in reference to both causal factors, Han Wansang saw the concept of minjung as different from class. His view was that “class could be included in the minjung concept, but minjung could not be subjected to the classist concept.”\(^9^3\) He does, however, group those with political and economic power into a ruling class, “critiquing the ideology of the ruling class” through a sociological perspective.\(^9^4\)
The first factor of han, poverty, is characterized as “absolute lack,” while the second factor, political exclusion, as “relative need.” The characterization of “absolute” versus “relative” is interesting given the political situation of the time, since the political need might be seen to be just as “absolute.” Perhaps seen from the perspective of the minjung, material, tangible needs were certainly the more pressing issue. The political and economic problems, however, go hand in hand—as Han and Kim have noted themselves in the previous passage—and cannot easily be disentangled in addressing structural oppression and han.

Beyond internal historical, political, and socioeconomic factors, Ko, Han, and Kim broaden han’s causal range to foreign influences. Ko writes that Japanese authorities in the colonial period are said to have deliberately removed epic myths, heroic folktales, and enterprising seasonal customs, leaving only han-filled, “plaintive folk culture” behind. Han is perceived to be assisting the colonizer, as a causal factor in what Ko regards as the current collective lack of will. Explained in this way, he echoes to some degree “The Character Features of the Korean People” identified by the Japanese Governor-General’s Office and Korean intellectuals of the colonial period, which included the features “lacking in vitality,” “lacking in courage,” and “lacking in self-reliance.” Based on his critiques of han as a backward national trait, Ko may have been influenced by essentialist and fatalist views of han himself and internalized colonial-era self-blame, which interpreted Korea’s weakness and colonization as a natural consequence of intrinsic, non-progressive characteristics in Koreans.

Interestingly, while arguing that foreign influence is partly to blame for producing han, Ko nevertheless presents the historical continuity of han, an “indigenous sentiment,” in defiance of a “Western logic” that “separates traditional and modern consciousness in modern cultural history.” Ko goes so far as to say that “han is hereditary,” echoing a biological view of han also developed by Kim Chiha, who wrote that han is “inherited and transmitted, boiling in the blood of the people.” As notions of race and ethnicity became conflated with nation, han

95 Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 69.
100 Chi Kim, “Korean Han,” 255.
became an “ethnonational, biologic badge of Korean uniqueness” in
the process.\textsuperscript{101}

While Ko focuses on the remnants of the colonial era, Han and
Kim reference “Cold War logic” in the footnotes, claiming that the
marginalization of the \textit{minjung} and thus the continuation of their \textit{han} is
attributed to the polarized ideology of the Cold War and national division
dictated by foreign powers.\textsuperscript{102} The political domain of \textit{han} is thus extended
beyond a matter of ruling class versus \textit{minjung} in Korea, attributing \textit{han}’s cause partly to international conflict, although this explanation
remains at the level of a theoretical assumption rather than a concrete
political example.

\textbf{The uncertain present}

Ko sees the current notion of \textit{han} as a popular ideology beyond the bounds
of the emotional. In his view,

\begin{quote}
\textit{Han} was discussed as an ideological standard in the pursuit of a
national literature, affecting historical science, religious studies,
\textit{minjung} culture, and even socioeconomic […] when the social
possibilities deferred in the 1970s were opened and the need arose
to critique \textit{han}, it had already become a trend.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

Not only did the less-educated Korean \textit{minjung} fall prey to \textit{han} but
also intellectuals, who became “slaves to the conceptual trend.”\textsuperscript{104} Ko’s
contemporary Mun Sunt’ae 문순태 also critiqued the notion of \textit{han}’s alleged
“conceptual lineage,” which was taken as a given in literary circles of
their time. In an essay titled “Haniran muŏshin’ga” 한이란 무엇인가 (What
is \textit{han}?), Mun lists various contemporary writers and critics including
Kim Yŏlkyu 김열규, Kwŏn Yŏngmin 권영민, and Chŏng Hyŏnki 정현기,
questioning why and how they interpret well-known works to carry \textit{han}
at its base.\textsuperscript{105} This uncritical reception of \textit{han} as a conceptual banner of
national intellectuals and \textit{minjung} alike is what Ko aims to recognize, critique,

\begin{flushright}
101 Chi Kim, “Korean \textit{Han},” 266.
\end{flushright}
and correct. By “social possibilities deferred in the 1970s,” he alludes to the oppressive Pak regime and the building momentum of social change in the 1970s, leading up to the present moment in which the path to social change has been “opened.”

Further, this “individualistic, regressive” han is said to be interfering in minjung psychology, becoming a widespread convention in the emotional expressions of daily life. The danger of getting caught up in the emotion and subsequently “becoming blinded to life’s renovation and activeness produces the paradoxical need to identify what han is.”¹⁰⁶ As though it were an infectious disease that stealthily invades the senses, han is described as though it possessed a life of its own, catching the oblivious minjung unawares and thwarting collective action. Ko assigns a great deal of agency to han and its ability to overpower “our optimistic willpower” and to lead to “extinction” while stripping the agency from the people, depicted as merely passive recipients. Especially in the early sections, the text downplays the human actors, and in this way avoids assigning either blame or agency to any specific group of people. Humans are simply swept along in the unfolding of history and the workings of han. Ko even writes that

[...] han is not in time but is an atemporal experience. Thus, han is the creation of the politically-excluded Korean people’s apolitical and ahistorical experience. Han is not an emotion of loss but rather of extinction and is not temperamental but subdued in nature. When this han outweighs our other facets and our optimistic willpower, it leads to the fog of alienation, resignation, and decadence.¹⁰⁷

Han is associated with “atemporal,” “apolitical,” and “ahistorical” experience. The non-progressivity of this emotional characteristic in Koreans is extended to temporal, political, and historical dimensions. According to this description, han seems to lie beyond the realm of progress altogether, and it indicates Ko’s subscription to the notion of universal and linear historical progress. This severe diagnosis sits uncomfortably with the other claims that han is deeply historical and political—a “national emotion formed out of Korean peoples’ history” and “a political outcome.”¹⁰⁸ Han is the “creation” of the experience of political exclusion, but it is also a causal factor for suspension from time, history, and politics and a potential

¹⁰⁸ Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 44.
menace for Koreans that could lead to “alienation, resignation, and decadence.” Han and Kim also seek to correct the trend of abstraction and idealization of han through the analysis of common minjung rituals that deal with han. It must be noted, however, that their emphasis on han as a tangible, lived emotion rather than as a theory has its limitations as their essay is based on external sociological observations. Han and Kim investigate two present modes of han’s expression: kut 굿, or shamanic ritual, and t’alchum 탈춤, or mask dance, two “important forms of expression of minjung arts” that “articulate the long-held hopes, emotions, and conflicts of the minjung collective.”

First, shamanism and shamanic ritual became imbued with symbolic political value during the minjung movement. At a student rally on June 26, 1987 at Seoul National University, students and professors witnessed Professor I Aeju 이애주 expressing her grief over the torture and death of student Pak Chongch’ŏl 박종철 through a symbolic dance of rebirth and liberation. On July 9, at Yonsei University, Professor I once again performed a hanp’uri 한풀이 dance at the funeral of another student martyr, I Hanyŏl 이한열, to console the han of the deceased. These performances, which Professor I described as “belonging to the minjung, a leap into the wave of liberation and unification,” became a widely publicized symbol for the democratization, unification, and minjung movements.

The hanp’uri dance performed by I Aeju is a form of kut 굿, “a religious ceremony in which the shaman interacts with spirits through song and dance,” and it epitomized a burgeoning trend of symbolic folk rituals in protest movements that began in the 1960s. The “Ritual to Invoke Native Land Consciousness,” for example, became a legendary performance in which over a thousand students participated during a massive protest at Seoul National University in May 1964, and which concluded with a symbolic funeral of the military government.

109 Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 96.
112 Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 74.
As leaders and participants of movements steeped in such forms of expression, Han and Kim explain the social, religious, and political significance of kut for the minjung in the following way:

A major experience of minjung religion is found in shamanic form. Kut could be seen as the formal expression of the minjung’s collective religious experience. Kut is the minjung’s effort to change from excluded and objectified masses to subjects. It is the survival mechanism of the minjung, their “subjective and collective spirit.”

In a 1983 book titled *Theology, Ideology, and Culture*, Sŏ Kwangsŏn 서광선, editor of *The Story of Han*, had written that the shaman had the social role of undoing the han of a minjung that had nowhere else to turn. He describes shamanism as “‘folk,’ ‘popular,’ ‘people’s,’ and now ‘minjung,’” not only because it is shared by the majority of the Korean people, but also because it has been officially ignored, if not openly persecuted, first by the literati of the Yi dynasty, and then by the new and modernized governments, both Japanese and then Korean.” Sŏ justifies shamanism as “a proper Korean religion because it predated Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism or Christianity” and “is pervasive in Korean minds, and […] alive in the Korean way of life.” The shaman carries the burden of addressing the minjung’s “han, their troubles, their tears, and their frustrations.” Han and Kim share the view towards shamanic kut as a significant and historically marginalized religious form, which has nevertheless “sustained them [minjung] through the crises and perils of this world and the other-world.”

Historian Kim Sŏngsik 김성식 also referenced shamanic ritual in a 1984 column in the *Donga Ilbo*, using it as an analogy to explain the role of politics in people’s lives. Kim wrote that rituals such as okukut 오구굿 existed to relieve the burdens of han carried by the dead, while politics assumed the role of relieving the emotional burdens of han in the living. In his analogy, politics was supposed to be a figurative kut for the living—the technique of relieving people of their burdens and

115  Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 74–75.


120  Sŏ, *Theology, Ideology, and Culture*, 36.
sorrows. Such references to *kut* and shamanism exemplify how elements from the *minjung* culture and movement had become widespread in the vocabulary of political resistance.

In contrast, Ko’s view is that shamanism is a cultural feature that must be overcome. Ko dismisses shamanic rituals as distractions to social change, since

*han* must be resolved not through folk or spiritual dimensions using *hanp’uri* 한풀이 (ritual for releasing *han*) or *haewŏn* 해원 (notion of undoing a grudge) but rather on a political level. In other words, the only way to eliminate *han* would be through a political and human equality that would allow the oppressor and oppressed to dance together.”

He later lists various forms of *hanp’uri* in rural folk culture including dances, satire, and games, only to argue that

[…] if the release of *han* means to liberate society of it, then such amusements are only amusements. These types of activities only lead back to *han*. Amuse yourself all you want, but you will have to return to your old place of *han*. This is the structural mechanism of such activities.

Ko addresses the rising interest in folk culture and its reformulation as a contemporary tool for nationalism and resistance as advocated by a growing cultural movement, especially in universities and public festivals. Ko rejects “folk” expression as merely temporary “amusements” that do not permanently alleviate *han*. He claims that only something on a more explicitly “political level” could help achieve utopian “equality,” but declares this vaguely without further elaboration on how to attain such change. Given such public, politicized performances as that of I Aeju, however, his negative assessment of folk culture does not take full account of the expressive potential of *han* and ritualized forms of resistance.

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122 Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 43.


Second, mask dances also became a popular mode of expression for the *minjung* movement in the 1980s. The mask dance developed from harvest ceremonies to popular village performances satirizing the rich and powerful. The *minjung* movement adopted the genre, “drums, gongs, cymbals,” noisiness, vulgarity and all, as a way for the *minjung* to transcend their *han* through laughter.

“Folk culture” became popular in universities in the 1970s starting with the establishment of mask dance groups on every campus. Through folk song, dance, and theater, this counter-cultural trend merged with student movements under the Pak Chŏnghŭi 박정희 regime. Even in the 1960s, students had organized campaigns for *hyangt’ogaech’ŏk* 향토개척 (national unification and native land development), turning their attention to farming life instead of state-building projects. Students would perform mask dances and folk music after lectures on agriculture.

Kim Chiha wrote in 1970 that the satire and songs of the *minjung* must be developed into an explosive possibility for change; as he predicted, various forms of “folk” expression such as theater, mask dance, and music became symbolic displays of anti-government and anti-foreign sentiment. The Pak regime dismissed shamans, their rituals, and other such “folk” elements as outdated customs in the uncompromising drive toward modernization. Despite and against such an approach, a budding revival of *minjung* culture appropriated elements of “folk culture”—though greatly romanticized, formalized, and essentialized—creating new practices of resistance.

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125 Clark, “Growth and limitations of minjung Christianity,” 95.
126 Clark, “Growth and limitations of minjung Christianity,” 96.
131 Chang, “1970nyŏndae ‘minjung’ kaenyŏmŭi chaedŭngjang,” 120.
Han and Kim interpret the mask dance positively as a minjung form of resistance on a collective and political level, affirming that all gathered at the mask dance stage are “subjects and participants” in a “collective event.” In doing so, they advocate a “revolutionary aesthetic” in folk arts, expressing a rather idealized notion of the minjung and their culture as many members of folk-theater groups did at the time.

Though they paint a straightforward image of counter-cultural resistance in masked performances, it was also the case that landowners sometimes financed such communal festivities in the pre-capitalist period “to ease farmers’ discontent and thus rule them more effectively.” Further, mask dances at universities were partially student reconstructions of popular performing arts, which objectified popular culture. There was a case in which students taught the reconstructed mask-dance ritual back to villagers. Further, the 1960s Pak regime passed the Cultural Assets Conservation Act, under which select regional “folk cultures” were officially recognized, formalized, and preserved, losing their connection to the lives of the minjung. Thus, popular performing arts genres were complex and contested but did, nevertheless, “further revolutionary imagination.”

Thus, Ko renders shamanism as a distraction, while Han and Kim appreciate it for its vitality. Ko regards folk forms of expression as simply amusements and possibly temporary solutions for han that are ultimately useless, whereas Han and Kim hold up kut and mask dance as highly transformative, unifying, and politically radical means of expression. Han and Kim, along with minjung theologians, hold that shamanism sustained the minjung through crises and that mask dances afforded them a break from reality as well as a new social perspective through humor. The ritualistic and masked performances by I Aeju and university students also exemplify how han served as a creative impulse for real action and how these religious and cultural modes of thought, feeling, and expression provided new creative, syncretic ways of expressing dissent even if they were based on misinterpretations or appropriations of an essentialist notion of “tradition.” These certainly served as the basis for dynamic and contested reinterpretations and reformulations of what could be said in an era of limited political expression.

135 Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoeahakchŏk siron,” 87.
The imagined future

The broader divergent views of *han* in scholarship—particularly in the literary sphere—are schematized by Im Hŏnyŏng 임헌영 in the following way:

*Han*—retaliatory emotion—catharsis—social consciousness—revolution

*Han*—resignation—catharsis—acceptance of reality—nihilism

According to Im, “the debates in the literature on *han* have been over which of these is truly the literature of *han*.141 The first line of thought has led to a literature of *han* linked to social critique, which is the trend exemplified by Kim Chiha. It also links *han* to social consciousness and revolution, which is closer to Han’s and Kim’s conception of what this emotion can achieve, although it is not “retaliatory.” The latter progression is closer to Ko’s interpretation of *han*, which links the emotion to nihilism and resignation.

Ko repeatedly critiques suggestions that current *han* is conducive to revolution:

It is claimed that this *han* can birth a new historical will through its accumulated strength, but the logic that the accumulation of *han* can develop into revolutionary willpower is incorrect. The moments of combative *minjung* action occurred only when there was a complete break from *han* [...]. It would be impossible for the *minjung* of *han* to eradicate social incongruities through *han*. *Han* cannot evolve into other values. In order for *han* to become revolutionary, it would have to be reformed into a stronger emotion that borders on resentment, hatred, and vengeance.143

Ko calls for a radical transformation of *minjung* emotion into a stronger, more forceful form—and, by extension, a radical transformation of the people themselves. If *han* is “hereditary” and so engrained within the “*minjung* of *han*,” then it follows that not only the emotion must be eradicated or transformed but the nature of the people themselves must be completely renewed and undergo a “complete break from *han*.” Ko argues that previous revolutionary moments in history, “moments of combative *minjung* action” occurred not due to *han* but due to a fundamental departure from it.

141 Im, “Hanŭi munhakkwa minjungŭisik,” 107.

142 Im, “Hanŭi munhakkwa minjungŭisik,” 107.

Han and Kim, however, approach *han* as “an agent of structural and historical change”\(^{144}\) with an important social function:

In this text, *han* is seen as a major driver of *minjung* actions and attitudes and as a force that will create a new history. Therefore, *han* is not simply the despair accumulated over a long time or the affective experience of the past but rather an experience of the future—a force that can open up a new history. What is historical should not be limited to the past. *Han* seems to be individual, but it is a collective experience. It might seem to be a thwarted desire or hope, but it is at the same time an energy that creates new structures. It is the experience of the past while also being the energy that opens life to the future.\(^{145}\)

*Han*, a “major” dynamic emotional force, shapes “*minjung* actions and attitudes” in potentially new ways. Han and Kim argue that it is not historically insignificant, not “limited to the past,” not “individual” and not “thwarted desire or hope,” but just the opposite. In the passage above as well as in their conclusion, it is continually emphasized that *han*, being “both sadness and strength,” can “create a new history” and “a new society,” and “open up future horizons for the *minjung*.”\(^{146}\) Thus, collective *han* can become the link between past and future and take on the “gateway role from despair to hope,”\(^{147}\) although one might ask how uniform and inclusive an emotion linked primarily to *minjung* could be. Again, they write,

The reason why *han* is emphasized is because it is [...] both a cumulative inherited form of *minjung* life experience and the basis upon which the *minjung* collective’s latent ability could develop a future directionality.\(^{148}\)

The *minjung* collective, it is argued, already possess a “latent ability” to look towards the future—an underlying will to devise change based on experience.

\(^{144}\) Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 65.

\(^{145}\) Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 67.

\(^{146}\) Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 96.

\(^{147}\) Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 96.

\(^{148}\) Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 70.
In stark contrast, Ko argues that “the revolutionary claims of han are not […] required to earn the support of the minjung,”149 that it is irrelevant:

There is a claim that this sort of accumulated han may contribute to the minjung’s revolutionary potential. If this han were able to link itself to justice and lead to historical change, han would be a creative mechanism to display to the world. However, it is impossible for han to fuel the will to achieve historically significant acts. Han only leads to more han.150

The achievement of “justice and historical change” was a major concern of intellectuals in Ko’s time, and there was an earlier tendency, particularly in Kim Chiha’s satirical works, which viewed han as an emotional trigger for revolution.

For Ko, the path to a “healthy minjung culture” involves the discarding of outdated customs, particularly shamanism and han.151 These must be overhauled and “han itself must undergo a creative transformation”:152

Rather, it is due to han that the Korean people are handicapped from developing ideological gravity or a passionate realization of values. Han is the residue of the truth of our experience, not the truth itself. Han is not progressing towards the future but a way forward that coincides with the past.”153

As previously stated, han is seen as the cause of Korea’s historical deviation from other world regions and its stunted development. Han cannot be taken as the “truth” of minjung experience but rather its by-product, a deterrent to the realization of historical progress and the attainment of “ideological gravity.” A history of han moves forward in time but can only “coincide with the past” rather than leading to a new kind of future through a revolutionary and political transformation.

Given these differing interpretations of han’s potential, what is the way to a new future? For Ko, the solution to han and the way to a better future seems to take a religious or spiritual form. Biblical and Buddhist references are made in his argument for radical emotional change:

149 Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 32.
151 Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 46.
152 Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 46.
The Old Testament is composed of the suffering of the minjung […] It is full of resentment, curses, hatred, and punishments that denounce evil […] this resentment is not unlike Korea’s primitive notion of han, although Korea’s han is not based on prophetic will but on shamanic sources. The New Testament then replaces this resentment with love, unfolding the history of a new era.\textsuperscript{154}

The practice of drawing parallels between the afflicted Korean minjung and the children of Israel date back to Korea’s period under Japanese rule. In the 1920s and 1930s, Korean Christians drew comfort from the story of deliverance in the Bible.\textsuperscript{155} In this case, Ko inserts the concept of minjung into the Biblical narrative, weaving together the histories of the Jews and the Koreans and seeing the older, reactive notion of han in the prophetic workings of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, however, “Jesus, a carpenter and man of the minjung who was surrounded by han-ridden people, lived a life and died a death […] through which others were liberated.”\textsuperscript{156} He seems to imply that a radical eradication of han—an emotional liberation—should occur based on transformative divine intervention, through a spiritual overcoming. Ko also writes that change is shown in

 […] the mercy of Buddha toward a society of love that allows human beings not to remain subordinate and that allows them to continuously become Buddha. Han needs to become sublimated into the power that leads to a world of love […] its significance will be transformed by the larger calling to unification and democratization.\textsuperscript{157}

Han must be “sublimated,” overcome by higher spiritual and political means. Ko’s “world of love” is one based on the bond of unification and democratization. Ko’s reference to Buddha here is interesting, since he critiques the “nihilism” and “resignation” associated with Buddhism earlier in his essay. In line with such a view, it could be argued that the forms of spirituality propagated by both Buddhism and Christianity emphasize sacrifice and giving up material life, which might be used to keep the minjung poor and oppressed rather than make them active political agents. Thus, the spiritual aspect of his proposed solution to han is ambiguous and problematic.

\textsuperscript{154} Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 58.
\textsuperscript{155} Clark, “Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity,” 93.
\textsuperscript{156} Clark, “Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity,” 93.
\textsuperscript{157} Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 58.
Further, the political and spiritual seem to converge in Ko’s vision of a future without han. National unification and democratization constitute the “true” vision of the future, and han is its obstacle.

Thus, if han is indeed the remnant of a long history that must be overcome urgently, it is necessary to find a way to regenerate it as the will and emotion of the true identity of the nation. Han is not our destiny but an external force from the past blocking a new future. We must confront this external force.\textsuperscript{158}

Only by tackling han, this “force from the past,” can a new future be achieved. Han is removed from the “true identity of the nation” and is externalized and antagonized as an urgent task, although it is questionable how “external” it can be. The destiny of the nation is progress, to change the course of a history “blocked” by han. The issue is that Ko only states the necessity “to find a way” to the achievement of the new future and does not offer a concrete solution on how to attain the resolution of han. It is possible that by the statement, “its significance will be transformed by the larger calling of unification and democratization,” Ko means that han will fade away or be replaced by a different emotion as a side effect of larger political endeavors, such as the unification of North and South Korea. However, he also sees the need to “confront this external force” urgently. The question remains: how, what, and who can bring about the radical affective transformation that is required for historical regeneration and for minjung revolution, unification, and democratization? Can change come from within without interference from outside forces? Is the solution spiritual?

In their observations of minjung religion and arts, Han and Kim seem to provide answers to these questions. They argue that there is an embedded potential for social change and means of action in kut and the mask dance. First, the ritual of kut is a social mechanism that facilitates the release of han, which manifests itself as collective ecstasy.

In the ritual of hanp’uri, the release of han could lead the possessed shaman to reproach the spirit’s former tormentors. However, the shaman does not allow for the hanp’uri to lead to revenge. What is important is to note that the space of kut allows the shaman to play the role of a comforter that relieves the victim’s suffering rather than that of an avenger. Thus, social resentment and psychological buildup can be released. The space of such release is kut.

\textsuperscript{158} Ko, “Hanŭi kŭkpogŭl wihayŏ,” 59.
If han is buildup, ritual ecstasy is its release. The buildup of han and its shamanic release can be seen as two opposite extremes, but actually these are two sides to the same coin. If the buildup of han is a phenomenon that occurred most frequently in the discrimination and abuse of the lower classes of Chosŏn society and in the repressed ambitions and desires of the modern minjung and its release is shamanic ecstasy, then the social utility and function of han and ecstasy can be easily confirmed.\textsuperscript{159}

Ecstasy in Korean shamanism is a state of spirit possession in which emotions and the body are released through a supernatural power. In the site of kut, the shaman controls the flow of emotions in the people who are present through song, dance, and play.\textsuperscript{160} Korean Studies scholar Kim Yŏlgyu 김열규 argued in the early 1970s that in shamanic rituals, the observers—members of the community—were also made to participate in the spiritual performance, experiencing shared ecstasy.\textsuperscript{161}

The function of the shamanic performance in kut is the undoing of pent up emotions, to “relieve the victim’s suffering” caused by “social resentment and psychological buildup” in a way that avoids retaliation. It is an internal as well as a collective manner of releasing han that opens a space that is both metaphorical and literal for spiritual restoration. Ecstasy fills the collective and drives away the mundane world.\textsuperscript{162} Han and Kim seem to argue that the solution to han already exists in folk culture, and that is contained in the complementary mechanisms of buildup and release found in kut. This dual process is not simply spiritual; rather, its significance is amplified to address the broader societal and historical resolution of collective victims’ suffering:

\textit{Kut} is the expression of a culture’s dream for a world of fusion and the restoration of a mythical world through song and dance. It is not about fixed religious precepts but about a Dionysian dance.\textsuperscript{163}

\textsuperscript{159} Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 79.


\textsuperscript{162} “Sinmyŏng.”

\textsuperscript{163} Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 76–77.
The “Dionysian dance” alludes to an irrational, spontaneous, playful, emotional outpouring beyond the boundaries of the given norms. Through *kut*, the *minjung* can perform through their bodies and voices—and thus live out in tangible form—their desires for a different kind of “mythical world” of harmony.

Han and Kim see a potentially “mutual relationship” between the process of *han*’s “formation, accumulation, expression, and eruption” with the “developmental stages of social movements.”\(^\text{164}\) They define as a necessary future task the detailed study of how the *minjung*’s *han* and historical revolutions are connected, as this kind of knowledge will reveal how to link the passion of ecstasy with the fervor of *minjung* participants in the current revolutionary movement.\(^\text{165}\)

Second, the mask dance transcends the present and unites the collective through satire:

The most holy and most secular, most divine and most human are thus mixed together in an event such as the mask dance [...] It has an asynchronous factor in that it does not wholly deny the normative frame of the past and present while simultaneously dreaming of a new future [...] the mask dance is not a simple performance of an enlightened state but a crafting together of this world and the world of enlightenment. This world and the next are not severed. The forbidden elements in the traditional dance narratives such as eroticism or mockery dissolve existing conventions and discard social logic.\(^\text{166}\)

According to this passage, the narrative of the mask dance breaks with social conventions in its “eroticism” and “mockery.” Simultaneously, it removes boundaries between the holy and secular, the divine and human, “this world and the next,” and between past, present, and future “crafting together” an integrated world. Therefore, “mask dances are not only about humor or mockery but rather [...] express situations of current social conflict through a satirical spirit and can be interpreted as the deep rooted *minjung* will to fashion new structural change.”\(^\text{167}\) This echoes the notion propagated by cultural critic Ch’ae Hŭiwan that ritualized theater challenges divisions—“the division of work and play, of production and consumption, of haves and have-nots”—in the lives of Koreans.\(^\text{168}\)

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164 Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoeakhŏk siron,” 99.
165 Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoeakhŏk siron,” 99.
166 Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoeakhŏk siron,” 92–93.
167 Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoeakhŏk siron,” 96.
The characters, themes, and narratives in mask dances are consequently deeply rooted in a collective awareness of the world and of society:

The stage of mask dances is a site in which critical observations of reality and feelings of resentment explode in artistic form. The suppressed and accumulated han erupts. Through this outburst of han, the minjung can affirm their own feelings and become conscientized. With the release of han on a higher stage, they experience the victory over the absurdities of reality. This experience of triumph becomes the hope and promise of a complete restoration and overcoming. It is also the minjung’s political yearning to participate in a future utopia. Given the point that the latent desires emerge in ritualistic collective play, the mask dance represents the dream of the minjung collective. A living dream that is performed directly through the body.\(^\text{169}\)

Han “erupts” in mask dances in dramatized confrontations based on “critical observations of reality.” This leads to political awakening and self-realization, as the minjung “affirm their own feelings and become conscientized.” By public, collective means on a “higher stage,” the release of han occurs as participants and observers realize the “absurdities of reality” and overcome han through humorous narrative resolution. The spontaneous and unintentional eruption of emotion also expresses unaddressed “latent desires” and “dreams” that can finally emerge in unrestrained artistic form. It is through this deeply embodied experience—“performed directly through the body”—that Han and Kim find the utopic yearnings of the minjung beyond the present reality.

In direct contrast to Ko’s view, they emphasize the significance of the social mechanism of han, which fulfills “a key role in the mechanism of social change” and is “the emotional core of the […] social reform movement”.\(^\text{170}\)

And finally, this is how the minjung’s han, along with individual self-realization, prompts collective social change. Founded on ecstasy and a spirit of resistance, the han of minjung does not flow regressively and can rather function as a dynamic factor for historical development. In this way, han and social change can meet in a meaningful way.\(^\text{171}\)

\(^\text{169}\) Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 94.
\(^\text{170}\) Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 96.
\(^\text{171}\) Han and Kim, “Hane taehan minjung sahoehakchŏk siron,” 97.
This is their conception of the minjung’s collective mechanism of structural change: han leads to self-realization and a critical awareness of reality through religious and artistic performance, a dramatization rooted in social and political conflict; the “spirit of resistance” shown in the satire of mask dance leads to the emergence of a critical attitude and a transcendence of the boundaries of the present; the ecstasy resulting from kut leads to a “collective consciousness” that unites human and divine, the dead and the living; through the processes of affective resolution in mask dances and kut, han can be seen to act as a trigger for the “expansion” of awareness and experience. Thus, it is argued to be a progressive and dynamic factor that “prompts collective social change,” builds a sense of solidarity, and leads to “historical development.” Ultimately, han must converge with social change.

Han and Kim thus argue that minjung forms of expression constitute an intrinsic mechanism of change and an orientation towards the future. Even though their essay remains at a theoretical level, they attempt to exemplify how resistance and social critique has occurred and can occur through collective, performative means triggered by han. Though an explicit path for “the overcoming of han” was not established by Ko, he opens a space through this essay to critique popular, revered notions of han and to call on his readers—his peers—to confront obstacles to national and historical transformation. Ko’s broad sketch of the transformation of han as well as its sociocultural environment over time also suggest a potential for change in the emotion concept itself. Underlying Ko’s theory of han is the notion that, despite essentialist claims, things have not always been the way that they are and that they need not stay that way.

Conclusion

“Towards the overcoming of han” and “Essay on han and minjung sociology” are similar in their examination of han as a deeply rooted and primarily collective emotion belonging to the minjung; the accumulated result of political and historical exclusion; having a spiritual and religious dimension; and an emotion that plays with temporal, political, social, and historical boundaries. Ko argues that han is a thoroughly negative facet of Korean people, while Han and Kim see it as an emotion that is negative but carries much positive potential as well. For Ko, it is a factor that is to some extent “external” and must be completely transformed and overcome. It is a tool for self-critique directed towards “Korean” qualities that hinder Korea’s progress. Ko’s perspective on current han is more individualistic compared to the united, collective sense of han as argued by Han and Kim.
The most striking and significant difference lies in their ideas about han’s relation to past, present, and future. Ko’s understanding of han is past-oriented and stresses impossibility, while Han and Kim see han as a future-oriented emotion of possibility. Ko laments the loss of a past “original” form of han, which manifested itself as a dynamic and heroic spirit of retaliation. Han and Kim, however, attribute political potential and social utility to han as an “experience of the future.” For Han and Kim, han is a deeply internal and embedded coping mechanism that can lead to political and social transformation. They regard han as a valuable and indispensable aspect of minjung culture as opposed to Ko’s interpretation of han as an emotion that must be discarded. Han and Kim argue that han is deeply performative and embodied, even though, as they admit themselves, their interpretations may be a stretch as they themselves are outside observers of “folk culture.” Whereas Ko argues cynically that were han revolutionary, it would have been a creative mechanism to show to the world, Han and Kim seem to suggest that han might actually be a mechanism of such value.

Rather than focusing on isolated, essentialist theories on han that are common in the han discourse, tensions within individual conceptions of han were teased out in the present textual analysis. Based on the comparative findings, it can be said that han varies not only from person to person or community to community but within these entities themselves. Moreover, han itself has been considered as an emotional and conceptual agent, as its language shaped and was in turn shaped by experience and expectation at a particular moment in Korean history. This article has attempted to show that the concept of han is not a self-contained unit of emotion with one true, authentic meaning, nor a relativist construct simply depending on individual interpretation. Han has shaped and been reshaped by its discourse. Because han was given a language, it was able to speak; because han created a space for multidisciplinary debates, and because of han’s inherent conceptual tensions, the greater and more legitimate its vocabulary became. As an emotion concept, it can and has played a significant role in individual and collective ways of thinking, feeling, and perceiving Korean society, history, and the world.