

*Han* is a slippery and subtle term that, depending on context, denotes everything from “resentment” and “lamentation” to “unfulfilled desire” and “resignation.” *Han* can be vaguely defined as the deep-rooted sadness, bitterness, and longing sparked by prolonged injustices and oppression. Various scholars have identified the sociopolitical sources of Korean *han* to include: a long history of foreign invasions by the Chinese, the Japanese, and the West; patriarchal Confucian traditions that have silenced and enslaved women for hundreds of years; the inhumane treatment and exploitation of the subaltern class under the feudal caste system as well as during the full-throttle modernization process; and the gross violations of civil rights by successive authoritarian military regimes (1961-1992) in the postcolonial period.

It is widely believed that *han* is uniquely Korean, a concept that almost, if not completely, escapes translatability in other cultural lexicons. Im Kwon-taek—a household name in South Korea and a director whose oeuvre brims with *han*-centric films that aestheticize Korean history, tradition, and culture in melodramatic modes—concisely sums up this position: “*Han* is not a concept that Koreans can agree on. I can’t even count the number of books that have been written about *han*.... However, *han* is a specific emotion that has profound links to the history of the Korean people, and as such, might be a difficult concept for non-Koreans to grasp fully.” The overlooked transnational valency of the concept becomes salient once we examine the etymological roots of this monosyllabic Sino-Korean character. According to a Chinese-English dictionary, “*han* is *hen* (‘hate’) in Chinese, *kon* (‘to bear a grudge’) in Japanese, *horosul* (‘sorrowfulness’) in Mongolian, *korsocuka* (‘hatred,’ ‘grief’), and *hân* (‘frustration’) in Vietnamese.” The Korean concept *han* also bears a striking resemblance to Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of *ressentiment*, which refers to a particular type of anger and resentment that results from sustained periods of subordination and oppression. The French term *ressentiment* is central to Nietzsche’s conceptualization of morality. In his landmark philosophical treatise on the historical evolution of Judeo-Christian moral values, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche defines *ressentiment* as a process by which the powerless and oppressed cope with pain through emotion and imaginary revenge. Nietzsche identified the ancient Jews as people of *ressentiment par excellence*.

The existence of similar concepts throughout East and Southeast Asia as well as in Western philosophy challenges the local claim that *han* is uniquely Korean and thus untranslatable to non-Koreans. (Hye Seung Chung)

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