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Han and/as *Ressentiment*: Lessons from Minjung Theology †

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† This article uses the McCune–Reischauer system in romanizing Korean words. However, it retains the romanization system used in the original texts when quoting and for names of scholars and public figures.

Abstract: Following calls in recent critical debates in English-language Korean studies to reevaluate the cultural concept of *han* (often translated as "resentment"), this article argues for its reconsideration from the vantage point of *minjung* theology, a theological perspective that emerged in South Korea in the 1970s, which has been dubbed the Korean version of "liberation theology". Like its Latin American counterpart, *minjung* theology understood itself in explicitly political terms, seeking to reinvigorate debates around the question of theodicy—the problem of suffering vis-à-vis the existence of a divine being or order. Studying some of the ways in which *minjung* theologians connected the concept of *han* to matters of suffering, this article argues, offers an opening towards a redirection from *han*'s dominant understanding within academic discourse and public culture as a special and unique racial essence of Korean people. Moreover, by putting *minjung* theology in conversation with contemporary political theory, in particular the works of Wendy Brown and Lauren Berlant, this article hopes to bring *minjung* theology to the attention of critical theory.

Keywords: *han*; *minjung* theology; *ressentiment*; emotional epistemology

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1. Introduction

In a segment on a food and travel program called *Parts Unknown*, the late, chef-turned-writer-turned-TV host Anthony Bourdain, is seated in the middle of a fish market, and asks his dinner companion, "How come all the Korean guys are so tormented? They're all carrying around some unseen weight". His companion, a Korean, playing the role of ethnographic informant, responds, "Every single Korean person is born with this thing called 'han,' which is a deep sorrow and anger. It's nothing to do with upbringing". Bourdain interjects inquisitively, "It's genetic". She confirms, "Yeah, it's genetic. It's in our blood".

It would not be a stretch to say that this view of *han* is widespread not only among non-Koreans, like Bourdain, but also among Koreans living on the peninsula but also in the diaspora. The basic explanation, as she says, is "because there's been so much wrong that's happened to us". This perspective, of *han* being something that exists in all Koreans, was common in popular culture and even academic discourse until recently when critical debates on the concept in English-language Korean studies, film studies and cultural psychiatry began to emerge (Kim 2004; Kim 2017; Roberts et al. 2006). In the main, these reconsiderations have been motivated by the acknowledgement of the concept's colonial origins (Freda 1999; Kim 2017; Watson 2007). The emphasis on the historicity of the concept attends to concerns raised by related critiques of the term which accuse it of a specific sort of essentialism unique to Korea's claims of unbroken homogeneity and ethnic singularity. In this view, *han* is both metaphysical and genetic, somehow "running in the blood of all Koreans". Thus, if one is "born Korean, one is born with han and cannot escape it". It has even been biomedicalized under the guise of *hwa-pyŏng* (화병) (Lee et al. 2014; Min et al. 1997; Pang 1999). For Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, however, the sorrow associated with *han* has come to problematically function as "pre-given," to use Homi Bhabha's words,

an ethnic or cultural trait that has become naturalized. It has grown into a view as a kind of "originary Korean subjectivity" (Kim 2017, p. 257), and, quite often, becomes the basis for ethnonationalism.

In pointing out the colonial and postcolonial aspects of *han*—from the exoticist aesthetic racialization that came out of the so-called Korea Boom in the Japanese colonial period to its widespread adoption during the pro-democracy *minjung* movements that began in the 1970s—Kim makes the strong case that *han* is a colonial construct, "which Koreans themselves embraced as a special and unique racial essence" in order to "authenticate their feelings as part and parcel of a racial imaginary that distinguished Koreans from Japanese in an essential, biologistic way". This idea then "translated itself into the discourse of ethnonationalism within a pervasively biologistic understanding of the Korean people as a nation" (Kim 2017, p. 264).

Thus, *han*, while often typified in media and other cultural forms to express some sort of essentialized "Koreanness," as demonstrated in the Bourdain segment above, is actually "*invested* with cultural and nationalistic significance" beyond a generalized self-reflection (Kim 2017, p. 255. Emphasis added). The term "invested" is notable here as it moves the conceptualization of *han* from an "essentialist Korean sociocultural concept that is popularly understood as a uniquely Korean collective feeling of unresolved resentment, pain, grief and anger" to "an affect, a habit, a practice and imaginary based within the sounds and scripts of colonial and postcolonial historical experience" (Kim 2017, p. 271).

This is a shift that was initiated by earlier engagements with the concept in Korean studies and beyond. For instance, in his celebrated *Han Unbound*, sociologist and social theorist John Lie writes of han as "the cultural expression of *ressentiment*," making sure to highlight the Nietzschean connotations. *Han*, for him, is the expression that results from "the accumulation of human tragedies" (Lie 2000, p. 114) both internal and external. For Lie, the understanding of *han* is necessarily historical if it is to function as a useful analytic tool and must attend to dynamics both internal and external. As Kim's work attempts to denaturalize, that is, de-internalize, *han* and connect it to a regime of sociality, her argument foregrounds historical developments that may be characterized as those which acted upon Korea, including Japanese imperialism and the Cold War in the case of the Korean War. A consequence of this is the flattening of difference within Korea itself and amongst Koreans. That is to say, in Kim's formulation, Korea (and by implication Koreans) has become monolithic in its internalization of postcolonial *han*. What Lie's definition of *han* as *ressentiment* offers to Kim's definition is a way to take account of the ways in which *han* has been deployed *within* Korean society, especially among those who have been at its margins.

Therefore, this article aims to contribute to this critical discourse on han, analyzing it beyond originary subjectivity, trying to bring together aspects of Kim and Lie, attending to the historical nature of *han* (as emphasized by Kim) and understanding *han* as a cultural category not a biological one (as emphasized by Lie). It suggests that this project of renewal could draw fruitfully on recent political theory on *ressentiment* and, of all places, theology, in particular *minjung* theology, a movement often dubbed "Korean-style" liberation theology, which emerged in South Korea during the 1970s and is called a "theology of han" by its progenitors (Considine 2014, p. 56). Specifically, the way that the Korean theological movement conceptualized *han* as a way of connecting emotion to epistemology will be of key concern.

To make this argument, this article proceeds in the following manner. It begins with an analysis of *ressentiment*, drawing on the work of political theorist Wendy Brown. It then moves on to discuss how *ressentiment* could be understood as an "epistemology" by engaging the work of Lauren Berlant, in particular the way she theorizes "sentimentality" both of and against "state emotion". It then moves on to interpret *minjung* theology in more detail, digging into specific aspects of the understanding and deployment of *han*.

2. From Resentment to *Ressentiment*

Political theorist Wendy Brown traces the concept of *ressentiment* to Nietzsche. She and others, such as Michael Ure and Didier Fassin, have spearheaded a reconsideration of Nietzsche to foreground the importance of, what she calls, the "codification of injury and powerlessness" in contemporary political life. For Nietzsche, she argues, *ressentiment* is undoubtedly a "critique of power from the perspective of the injured . . . [that delimits] a specific site of blame for suffering" (Brown 1995, p. 27). As she puts it, "moral ideas are a . . . complaint against strength, [an] effort to shame and discredit domination by securing the ground of the true and the good from which to negatively judge it" (Brown 1995, p. 44). It not only "springs from" powerlessness but also "compensates" for it. It avenges an incapacity for action. Resentment becomes *ressentiment* as it becomes "a culture," specifically one "whose values and ambitions mirror the pettiness of motivating force". *Ressentiment*, by institutionalizing resentment, is able to construct an epistemology whereby specific "sovereign subjects and events" are held responsible for the social subordination of the injured. Thus, the epistemology of *ressentiment* "fixes the identities of the injured and the injuring," resulting in what Brown dubs an "economy of perpetrator and victim". In effect, what emerges from *ressentiment* is a zero-sum morality, where the end game, for the injured, is simply to exact revenge, meaning the perpetrator must feel the pain of the sufferer (Brown 1995, pp. 27–28).

This is precisely the crux of Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment* as "slave morality" (Brown 1995, p. 70). As the sufferer—or "the injured" in her parlance—constructs a moral system whereby the values and norms of the injurer are not undermined but rather held onto more deeply by the injured, he ends up "investing in [his] own impotence" (Brown 1995, p. 70). Nietzsche's primary example of *ressentiment* is Christianity. Christianity is a slave morality because it is predicated on the accomplishment of moral superiority through the rejection of power as such. Power itself becomes evil tout court. By rejecting it as evil, rather than specific moral content or action, the powerless are able to be good automatically. In describing Nietzsche's reading of Christianity, Michael Ure uses the terms "repressed envy" (Ure 2015, p. 604) and describes it as "hoodwinking oneself" (Ure 2015, p. 605) and also "sour grapes". Christian morality is like the fox in Aesop's fable. Sweetness, that is, power, itself was undesirable in the first place.

But it is not simply the moral reversal of power that characterizes *ressentiment* but also the repression of hatred. Christian morality based on love and charity is therefore a "disguise". Max Scheler describes Nietzsche's position as viewing Christianity's "alleged positive values" as "rationalizations born of repressed hatred and fear, attempts to make virtue out of necessity, to transform weakness into positive merit" (Scheler 1994, p. 21). Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is that it promotes silence and "how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble" (Fassin 2013, p. 252). As Ure points out, the stakes of ressentiment's pervasiveness (via Christianity and its impact on Western culture since Augustine) could not be any higher. It is the "pathological disorder," which has led to the "codification" of hatred and vindictiveness in Western culture (Ure 2015, p. 601). In sum, one's impotence becomes an "accomplishment of virtue". The effect of such a "value delusion," as Ure calls it, was, for Nietzsche, a culture-wide "blockage" that comes with the "desire for revenge" but a "failure to express" it in direct action.

In the 20th century, the contours of this argument are most evident in the ideas of one of Nietzsche's intellectual inheritors, such as Freud. There are structural similarities between Nietzschean *ressentiment* and Freudian repression. According to the logic of the latter, if one does not express one's unconscious desire at some point, the psyche will either sublimate the feelings or they will break free in an out-of-control manner (Gemes 2009; Lichtenstein 2020; Rieff 1987). Brown likewise concludes that *ressentiment* produces three things in concert: an affect (rage, righteousness), a culprit responsible for the hurt and also a way of getting revenge. "Combined, they all ameliorate (anesthetize) and externalize what is otherwise unendurable," as Brown writes, through the codification of injury and pain as the basis for belonging.

3. Emotional Epistemology

When *ressentiment* forms the basis for belonging, it becomes what Lauren Berlant calls an "emotional epistemology" (Bertant 2005a, p. 48). Berlant's work analyzes citizenship and its concomitant social institution, the state (Gauchet and Taylor 1999, p. 199), in particular the US state, which she argues is predicated on the production of "state emotion" rather than a deliberation-oriented "national public sphere" as in the liberal democratic theory of Rawls and even Habermas. Instead, she contends, the "scene for the orchestration of public feelings—of the public's feelings, of feelings in public, of politics" is that of "emotional contestation" (Bertant 2005a, p. 47).

This entails thinking differently about political attachment and means of belonging. For Berlant, "feeling modes of personal subjectivity" express "embodied rhetorical [registers] associated with specific practices, times and space of appropriateness". Feelings, in other words, are "not less than thought". To argue that they are would be to ultimately engage in value judgments about whether "certain emotions conventionally associated with bodily reactivity have more or less value because of their seemingly expressive immediacy". Hence, by connecting the denigration of feelings to normative theories of democracy, Berlant is ultimately critiquing the predominant history of "US political modernity" that sees "the core activity distinguishing the human being" as rationality (Bertant 2005a, p. 51).

By viewing modern political life in the US as moving from "the rational circuit of opinionated argument to the visceral performance of moral clarity, which then may be supported by argument and evidence" is one that sees "hypotheses and ordered proof" as secondary. For her, regimes of power have always contained "emotional [styles] linked to moral claims about truth and justice". It is this that she names "emotional epistemology" (Bertant 2005a, p. 48).

One example of such a scene is the Presidential inauguration, which is often thought of as symbolic of political stability and continuity. Media scholars Dayan and Katz have described it as "ceremonial" in the sense of ritual; it is a reaffirmation of society's central values, turning spectators into witnesses. On the flip side, there are events such as 9/11, which are viewed as national, even global, tragedies. Thus, irrespective of media and happiness of occasion, these events come to be felt as "genuine 'public' trauma". Berlant thus argues that emotions are central to "the national-popular domain without being especially political" (Bertant 2005a, p. 50). "National publicness" becomes the way to construct a "normative effect" through communications. It is that which constitutes "the collective experience of the national present" as subjective experience. Berlant calls this "preframing". The subject is "solicited to feel the impact that provides evidence that she belongs to the public constituted as a mass of spectators who see what she sees and feel what she feels, within a range of appropriate variation" (Bertant 2005a, p. 49).

Hence, for Berlant, the citizen is a "subject with moral feeling" that has "the capacity for feeling and responding to the suffering or less fortunate others who could be described not as individuals but as members of a subordinated population". This comes from something akin to American civil religion (though she does not put it that way), which instills a distinctly "Christian religious sense of compassion as fundamental social ligament". It should be noted, however, that this religion is less belief and more belonging to invert the words of sociologist Grace Davie (Davie 1994). The "relational affect" of American Protestantism is rooted in the idea that one can "bring one[self] enough into the experience of others such that one comes to understand their destiny as tied in with one's own" (Bertant 2005a, p. 52). This communal and collective aspect of citizenship, Berlant argues, is an "epistemology" in the sense that it provides the tools for the citizen-subject to "experience identification with a capacity for experience located inside the subordinated other". Calling this "sentimental solicitation," Berlant argues that it relies on the distribution of "scenes of intense emotion," which then serve as "a lubricant for a particular experience of social belonging," which can range from a "patriotic National Symbolic" to "a collection of free autonomous individuals living in a mass-mediated simultaneity" (Bertant 2005a, p. 52).

Thus, moral outrage can bind spectators together. Negative emotions always demand some sort of ethical and political response. "National sentimentality" runs off affective identification and empathy (Bertant 2005b, p. 53). Sentimentality, in general, Berlant argues, is a means whereby "mass subaltern pain is advanced in the dominant public sphere as the true core of national collectivity" (Bertant 2005b, p. 53). For Berlant, the identification with pain becomes a "universal true feeling," which affects both the "classically privileged national subjects" as well as the "subalterns". In turn, the identification with pain by either side functions to reinscribe the nation at the core of the collective. As Berlant argues, for the privileged, the pain of others is that of "intimate others". Hence, a sense of injustice emerges. Citizenship, in this logic, is a form of "traumatized subjectivity" as opposed to "rational subjectivity" (Bertant 2005b, p. 57). Understanding citizenship in this manner points to thinking "beyond ideology, beyond mediation" (Bertant 2005b, p. 58).

Berlant's work therefore provides the basis for understanding how forms of togetherness, such as citizenship, are able to connect pain, feeling and justice through the production of sentimentality that emphasizes identification with the experience of suffering. This is achieved, she argues, through the sanctification of scenes of intense emotion. This is not always for the best. In fact, while Berlant points out the centrality of affect in politicization and forms of belonging, she does critique the form and function of this in contemporary life. Her work on "cruel optimism" is case in point as it suggests that happiness (or its potential) has had a deadening effect on dealing with the ravages of neoliberal capitalism, a point I will return to later.

4. *Han*

Here, I can finally turn to *han*, which I can understand as an emotional epistemology rooted in a form of *ressentiment*. As mentioned above, among the various intellectual and political movements that have deployed the discourse of *han* throughout Korean history, *minjung* theology (*Minjung Sinhak*) stands as one of the most influential and significant. Often dubbed "Korean-style" Latin American liberation theology, *minjung* theology emerged in South Korea during the 1970s under the military dictatorship of Park Chung-Hee, and responded to the "suffering of the masses during the country's industrialization drive" under that regime (Kim 2018, p. 2). Interestingly enough, another name for *minjung* theology is "theology of han," coined by one of its progenitors, Suh Nam Dong (Considine 2014, p. 56).

As Andrew Eungi Kim explains, *han* is minjung theology's central concept *along with* minjung (Kim 2018, p. 5). The term "minjung" is often translated to "the people" (Lee 2009, p. 1). Min is usually in reference to people. The word "*kookmin*" or "*simin*" is an example. *Jung* refers to the "masses" (Lee 2009, p. 52). Thus, minjung theology is understood as "people's theology".

Han is usually translated as resentment. Other definitions include sadness, sorrow, bitterness, grief and regret. Thus, in this context, the "minjung" are those who are "oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated socially and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters" (Kim 2018, p. 5). In other words, the minjung are the ones who have a basis for *han*. This sociological understanding of *han* is precisely what connects *minjung* theology to recent calls for critically reevaluating *han* mentioned earlier but also to other theological movements, including liberation theology and contextual theology. Like these, *minjung* theology emerges out of "an awareness of the suffering of the masses" and a reinvigoration of the Church's role in alleviating or, at least, addressing that pain. Indeed, as Kim puts it, *minjung* theology "represents an ideology and act of protest *against* Han, as it served to legitimize political struggle and social action as 'Biblical acts'" (Kim 2018, p. 5). In other words, *minjung* theology identified *ressentiment* and sought to address its sources.

This is quite a departure in relation to traditional Christian theology, which is preoccupied with "the problem of sin". *Minjung* theology, to the contrary, is concerned with resolving the *han* of the people (Kim 2018, p. 5). According to Volker Kuster, minjung theology's chief innovation in this regard came in the pioneering of a "narrative theology"

(Küster 2010, p. 16). The assertion here is that this technique of "narrative theology," which sought to link Biblical stories with stories of historical human suffering, is the thread that connects *minjung* with *han*. It is this analytic innovation of "narrative theology," along with its associated technique of "theological biography," that deserves special attention as it forms the basis of an epistemology, not of state emotion as in Berlant's case, but *against* state emotion.

While the term *minjung* has been used by scholars occasionally to describe pro-democracy movements in the immediate post-Korean War period, it is more closely associated with democracy struggles during the military dictatorship of Park Chung-Hee, which was especially repressive (Baik 2011). Yet, as the historian Namhee Lee notes, the rhetoric of Park in his rise to power via military coup in 1961 also contained the language of "solving the suffering of the common people with autonomous economic development" (Lee 2009, p. 30). Park's regime articulated a desire for wresting control and agency over Korean history from "external" sources. After all, the policies under Park had to do with industrializing the country quickly in order to move Korean people out of "the predicament of an incomplete or failed history" (Lee 2009, p. 5). In other words, one could argue that Park's brutal developmentalist dictatorship was rooted in an epistemology of sorts whereby the "aura of tragedy and hopelessness" of a failed history could be overcome through "progress and universalization". But this development came at a cost, in particular, to workers, many of whom were uprooted from rural areas and thus lost a sense of community when they moved to urban settings. As Lee states:

Development . . . brought feelings of immense achievement and of alienation among Koreans at large, giving rise to severe feelings of disconnectedness between past and present, between city and countryside, and between the emerging working and middle class (Lee 2009, p. 5).

Critical intellectuals in the 1960s, based largely in universities, began to theorize this alienation through a purposefully revisionist history. *Minjung* emerged as a historical category much like Gramsci's notion of "the subaltern". Thus, *minjung*, or the common people, were identified through "previous communal practices," which were interpreted by these intellectuals as "potential antidotes to the brutal pace and deleterious side effects of development" (Lee 2009, p. 6). Quite naturally, Korean history became a foundational source. In looking to the past, *minjung* intellectuals saw Korean history in similar ways to the Park regime—as somewhat of a failure—and offered "opposing and alternative meanings to those given by the state," effectively "[redefining] the role of events and persons and the nature of the political community". *Minjung* then became the name to describe the agents of history that were always in existence but needed to be called upon and revived (Lee 2009, p. 7).

This occurred precisely through the construction of an "epistemology" (Küster 2010, p. 55), established through a link between theology and biography. Relying on the idea that biographical reflections can be theological in that one's own suffering can be linked to that of Christ's, the link between the individual, God and community was forged. The "crises" that Jesus went through thus become a "story of reference" for those who go through their own crises. In this formulation, "personal suffering" becomes "the horizon of the experience of faith" (Küster 2010, p. 57). As Ahn Byung-mu, one of the pioneers of *minjung* theology once put it, "through interpreting Christ's suffering on the cross as sharing their lot, the minjung who are alienated in their suffering reconstruct their identity and become the subjects of history" (Küster 2010, p. 66). In other words, Korean history, when read through this epistemology, reveals itself as containing many instances of ordinary people (*minjung*) overcoming their suffering by taking power. For Suh, this meant not only identifying sources of *han* but also its potential overcoming; within the experience of *han* lies "revolutionary potential". In placing suffering at the core, *minjung* theology opened up the possibility for redemption and resurrection.

Within the logic of *minjung* theology, *han* offers a historical subjectivity not simply rooted in a "feeling of defeat, resignation, and nothingness," in the classic sense of *ressenti-*

ment, but it also a "feeling of a tenacity of will for life," as Suh puts it (Küster 2010, p. 84). This potential for *han* to become a means of finding historical subjectivity—in both anguish and will for life—was opened for Suh by the work of poet and playwright Kim Chi Ha (Kuster, 82). Kim's work, especially his poetry written during 1960s and 1970s, puts forth what Kevin P. Considine refers to as a "han anthropology" (Considine 2014, p. 49), made up of a revisionist reading of modern Korean history, placing "the people" rather than "the nation" at its core.

1. Colonization and invasion by regional powers such as China, Japan and Mongolia that threatened the very existence of the Korean nation and people.
2. The tyrannical rulers who inflicted great suffering on the Korean people.
3. Neo-Confucianism's strict subordination and oppression of women, so that "the existence of women was han itself".
4. The overwhelming number of Korean peasants who were officially registered as hereditary slaves and thus treated as government property throughout Korean history (Considine 2014, p. 55).

What is important to note, then, is that minjung is not a designation that is fixed onto Koreans as such but specifically to those who experience "oppression" and "subordination," and would thus feel *han*, *within* Korean society, including women as well as those at the bottom of Korean social hierarchy.

5. Hanp'uri

This historical revisionism of *minjung* theology was built on yet another theological innovation. As mentioned earlier, Suh, especially, radically rethinks the traditional place of sin. Traditionally, or at least since in the Christian theological tradition going back to Augustine, sin was the ontological condition that required humanity's salvation by Christ (See (Niebuhr 1964)). In its most Protestant distillation, sin could only be forgiven through the blood of Christ. In *minjung* theology, however, salvation (or resurrection or redemption) is needed not for the sinners but for the "sinned *against*" (Considine 2014, p. 50 Emphasis added). As Suh puts it, "sin is [the] language of those in power, han is [the] language of the minjung" (Küster 2010, p. 85). For Suh, "God sides with those who are usually despised as sinners. He is present in the suffering of the 'little people'" (Küster 2010, p. 85). By equating the language of sin with power, *minjung* theology incorporates the Nietzschean critique of Christian morality as it pertains to sin while also redefining it by conceptualizing a way out. In this context, sin is understood as a strategy of the powerful. It creates a situation whereby the experience of injustice is not "merely" psychological. Thus, the salvation that is necessitated is not from sin, as generated from within, but rather from a social sin. The problem of *han* is a matter of theodicy rather than theology.

Consequently, *minjung* theology's task was to identify *han* via interpretive innovation but also to provide a means of "relieving" it, which involves *minjung* theology's incorporation of what is called *hanp'uri*. As the anthropologist and curator Laurel Kendall points out, *minjung* theology's popularization of the notion of *han* as "the pain of the politically and socially oppressed Korean masses" also contained the idea of releasing the *han* through *kut*, a ritual performed by shamans, which has a variety of purposes—from the general welfare of a particular village to the aiding of the journey of the spirit of a deceased person.

By linking *kut* for the dead and placations of hungry ancestors to specific instances of historical and recent oppression, Minjung ideology enabled the recasting of shaman rituals as a widely recognized idiom of protest theater (Kendall 2009, p. 23).

When performing a *kut*, the shaman can often become "possessed" in a state of ecstasy, relaying what the community must do in order for the *han* of ghosts or others can be solved. This is achieved, as feminist *minjung* theologian Chung Hyun Kyung describes, by either eliminating the source of oppression for the ghosts or by placating or negotiating with the ghosts. In ensuring the *hanp'uri* for the ghosts, the community also has the "opportunity for collective repentance, group therapy and collective healing" (Chung 1988, p. 35).

According to Chung, *hanp'uri* consists of a tripartite process. One must first speak and hear about *han*. Then, one must name the case. Lastly, the unjust situation must be changed through action (Chung 1988, p. 35). In this, Chung argues, women bear an "epistemological privilege" in identifying, relaying and relieving *han*. "Korean women have been the embodiment of the worst Han in our history," she writes.

They usually did not have the public channels to express their Han. This developed a sense of impassibility among Korean women. Many of them died without releasing the sense of impassibility in their lives (Chung 1988, p. 35).

By identifying the historical place of women in Korean shamanism, Chung argues that *hanp'uri* was one of the few spaces where poor Korean women played their spiritual role without being dominated by male-centered religious authorities" (Chung 1988, p. 35). In a classic standpoint-epistemological fashion, Chung argues that Korean women, with "their historical experience" of the double oppression via gender and class/caste (what Gayatri Spivak undoubtedly would describe as "doubly in shadow") not only have the potential to be both the "victims and agents" of liberation but had been so historically (Chung 1988, p. 36).

What I am suggesting ultimately is that *minjung* theology offers political potential into *ressentiment* by understanding *han* as more sociopolitical resentment and less ontological ressentiment. As Ure notes, by thinking of ressentiment as sociopolitical rather than ontological, it prevents us from understanding *ressentiment* as somehow built into human beings (Ure 2015). Instead, it pushes us to think of it as developing as a result of injustice that is part and parcel of a particular history.

In the context of *minjung* theology, this amounts to a "recuperation" of *han* as an "affective power for liberation" (Freda 1999, p. 17) through historical revisionism, theological innovation and ecumenicism. It is, in no small part, an extension of Kim's call for "critical han" (Kim 2017, p. 274). The danger, otherwise, would be the hardening of "emotional suffering" into a "community of ressentiment," which would utilize feeling as "a nationalist palliative" (Parkinson 2015, p. 88). Berlant identifies this as the distinction between the shaping of collective affect and the shaping of political emotion (Berlant and Greenwald 2012, p. 87). The latter is always, in her parlance, sentimental, and "abjures" the existence of "structural blockages," seeing emotions such as somehow "coming from within"—as mere "internal wounds" (Berlant and Greenwald 2012, p. 87). This, she rightly notes, covers over the inherent "violence of sentimentality," however. While the "cultural politics of pain" often does "[unify] a fractured society," it comes at the cost of turning into a "defensive response by people who identify with privilege yet fear they will be exposed as immoral by their tacit sanction of particular structural violence that benefits them" (Berlant 1999, p. 83). *Minjung* theology's critical reading of *han* sought to avoid this dynamic.

6. Contemporary Prospects

Thus far, this article has argued that going back to the work of *minjung* theology, specifically focusing in on its conceptualization of *han*, allows for its analysis beyond cultural essentialism and biological determinism. In particular, this article has suggested that the way that minjung theologians have theorized *han* as part of an emotional epistemology centered on its relief (*hanp'uri*) creates pathways for thinking about *han* as *ressentiment* while retaining its liberatory potential.

Yet, when one inquires the prospects for revisiting minjung theology's conceptualization of *han* in the contemporary moment, there is hardly a clear picture as to how it is taken up by most Koreans. Certainly, the linguistic tendencies of popular culture in South Korea at the moment reveal an engagement with the notion of *han* but with some complicated dynamics as it pertains to the violence of sentimentality that Berlant refers to. For instance, terms such as *kŭmsujŏ* (gold spoon), *hell Joseon* (hell Korea) and, more recently and crudely, *sipalpiyong* (fuck-it expense) are now commonplace in everyday conversation.

A portmanteau that represents the reclaiming of a frivolous expense for psychological survival, *sipalpiyong* (fuck-it expense) has been widely called the word of the year in 2019 by various media outlets in South Korea. What would constitute a fuck-it expense for young Koreans today? According to a recent article, these include cab rides (instead of public transportation) to expensive sushi. As the article puts it:

Koreans have begun blowing their money not out of ignorance but out of common sense. A small pleasure now is better than a promised future contentment that will never come (Kim 2019).

This description of the fuck-it expense signals an important detail, which is that this expense is less a splurge and more a means of survival. This and other recent linguistic developments come in the wake of a collective despair felt by a generation of South Koreans who feel a sense of injustice when looking at their life chances in the country. The statistics support these negative feelings. South Korea recently ranked 8th in the OECD for income inequality (OECD 2020). Youth unemployment is the worst since the immediate aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis in the late-1990s. In contrast to the sweeping enthusiasm of the deposing of former President Park Geun-hye for the liberal Moon Jae-in in what is called the Candlelight Revolution, the current mood is still, in short, resentful. Not much has changed, especially when it comes to the structural vise grip of the chaebol, the multi-industry conglomerates that dominate the Korean economy and society. Given this backdrop, short-term consumption has emerged as a "rational choice maximizing the utility of money based on a realistic assessment of the future". In other words, individual, conspicuous consumption amounts to a "symbolic endeavor" that rebels against the expectations and norms of Korean society and culture. If saving cannot guarantee a pay off in the future, then why bother with the sacrifice? Dare I say, this is the basic cost–benefit analysis that makes up the emotional epistemology of today in South Korea.

Many questions remain: How are we to understand this epistemology *against* state emotion that, in effect, amounts to a nihilism? Does it call yet again for a rapprochement with Nietzsche? How do we understand the *hanp'uri* of conspicuous consumption?

As a means of conclusion but also as a way to think about these questions moving forward, it might be useful to return to Berlant, in particular the notion of "cruel optimism". "Cruel optimism" was meant to signify a dynamic where something we desire can actually be an obstacle to our flourishing. Primarily described by her as an affective structure, it is what allows a sense of possibility to develop where there really should not be any. Put differently, it is what enables the fantasy of "the good life" promised by liberal capitalism. The prospect for upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, among others, are today "dissolving," as Berlant notes, along with the "assurance" of something like meritocracy, "the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair" (Bertant 2011, p. 3). What is cruel is that this optimism becomes a "sustaining relation," one that keeps us invested in the social order. Could Berlant's concept work for contemporary South Korea but turned on its ear, that is, as cruel *nihilism*?

The implications for revisiting *minjung* theology's conceptualization of *han*, and studying it closely, become clear when reading recent reports about the proliferation of "flexing" in South Korea[1] alongside empirical data regarding the future. According to a recent survey, one in two people in their 20s and 30s have positive perceptions of "flexing" because of "the importance of self-satisfaction". Other reasons provided were "because time to enjoy expensive luxury is limited" and because "[flexing] is good for relieving stress," and "because [flexing] is about enjoying life". The survey even reported that 54.5% of respondents expressed that they would like "spend more on flex consumption in the fu-

[1] "To flex" is a slang term that originates in American hip hop culture that has now penetrated popular discourse to "to show that you are very proud or happy about something you have done or something you own, usually in a way that annoys people" (Cambridge Dictionary 2020). However, in South Korea, "flex" is used with specific reference to consumption.

ture”. These reports stand alongside data that show that the South Korean public is rather pessimistic, especially with regard to perceived inequality, with one survey finding that “about half (49%) disagreed with the statement ‘the state is run for the benefit of all the people’” (Cha 2020). By revisiting *minjung* theology’s contribution to the understanding of *han* as an emotional epistemology of subjugated social groups centered on relieving the conditions of *ressentiment*, we can begin perhaps, after Berlant, to see the experience of contemporary subjugation and suffering beyond hackneyed tropes of despair.

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