The Value of Embracing in Korean Common Pain and Struggle: *Han* in a Korean Woman's Perspective

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Why do we need to observe *han* again? Most Korean theologians, including Korean women theologians, have touched on the Korean concept of suffering, *han*, to develop their theology.[1] *Han* was introduced by Korean Minjung theology not only to the theological field but also to most academic fields as a part of Korean studies from a political, economic, social, and cultural perspective. I want to observe *han* from the perspective of an indigenous Korean woman who was prohibited political, economic, and social activities by patriarchy.

Today, the younger Korean generations have heard about *han* from their mothers or grandmothers, but they do not want to mention *han* or hear *han* again because they think that *han* does not matter for them anymore, or is not related to their life at all. In addition, because they think of *han* only in a negative way, they themselves feel shame as did Koreans who had *han.* We need to redefine the meaning of *han* as a positive aspect in Korean common pain and struggle. *Han* is not the feeling of shame, or only the feeling of revenge, but rather the unique Korean pathos rooted in Korean history.

Korean women have struggled under the patriarchal social system and have survived by embracing *han* (suffering). Indigenous Korean women suffer with *han*, yet at the same time they survive because of *han*. Minjung theologians define *han* negatively as the feeling of revenge, anger, and resentment. *Han* has a positive aspect as well. For example, Korean feminism has blossomed because of *han*—facing *han*, struggling with *han*, embracing *han,* and finally sublimating *han* in order for women to be at peace and to be in harmony with their families and their communities.

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The more indigenous Korean women embrace *han*,—the more they suffer—the stronger they are. Their *han* does not lead them to take revenge on others, causing them suffering. Rather, their *han* develops into *mi-eun joung* (affecting love). The strength of *mi-eun joung* is enough to cut off *han*, which is a vicious circle. The embracing love of indigenous Korean women is strong enough to overcome the negative feeling of *han*.

In Korean society, patriarchal systems go back to the Chosun dynasty (1392–1897) under Confucianism. In the beginning, the nature of Confucianism only affected the educated and upper class as an academic system. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Korea, however, Confucian ethics established a patriarchal family system and formulated a kinship system based on a male lineage in the same period. The head of a family in a patriarchal system enjoyed various rights in terms of representativeness: control, wealth, marriage, and funeral and ancestor worship. Ancestral worship provided opportunities to reinforce such hierarchical and horizontal relations and was central in religious rituals. A woman was given an insecure identity from birth in a society that allowed official membership only to men. This system still remains today.

1. Korean Minjung theologians such as Hyun Young-hak, Shu Nam-dong, Kim Yong-bock, and Ahn Byung-mu employ the concept of *han* in order to develop their theology from the political and economic perspective. See *Minjung Theology: People as the Subject of History*, The Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia, ed. (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981). Korean women theologians also employ *han* for their theology such as Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990); "Han-pu-ri: Doing Theology from Korean Women's Perspective" *Ecumenical Review*, 40 No. 1 (Jan. 1988): 27–36; and Oo Chung Lee, *In Search for our Foremothers' Spirituality* (Korea: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology), 1994.

Confucianism was my family's religion. In my family, males work in the field during the day, while females are expected to work not only in the field but also as housekeepers, which includes raising their children. Even during the evening, my mother could not get enough sleep because she had to make clothes for the entire family, including her family-in-law. When it came to mealtimes, women, including my mother, ate in a different place from men. I experienced my mother not having a comfortable place to eat and sleep. She could have a meal in the corner of the kitchen only after everybody else finished their meal because she was expected to serve the family during the meal. As a daughter-in-law, mother, and wife, my mother was expected to serve the whole family.

In addition, she was expected to prepare food offerings for *Chesa*,[2] the worship service for ancestors every month, and food for many guests and even neighbors because my family had *Chesa* thirteen times a year. Even though women were not allowed to participate in the ritual of *Chesa*, women had to prepare a lot of food and clothes for the male family members who participated in *Chesa. Chesa* is one of hierarchical rituals in the patriarchal system, because males stand in front of an altar depending on their hierarchical order.

The silence of my mother, as with most Korean women, reflected her position in her extended family. For example, my grandfather, who was the owner of property, had authority to make all the decisions in the family's affairs, including all financial decisions. It seems to me that he thought of my mother as a good worker, not as a member of the family.

Patriarchy, with the support of Confucianism, affects the social customs of marriage. Only a head of the family could make a decision about the marriage of family members. The case of my father and my mother is a good example. While my father was training in the military, my mother married him without knowing who he was or even having met him. Neither did my father know my mother. My grandfather made the decision through a matchmaker. When my father got leave from his military training to marry, someone told him a rumor—"she has a burn-wound on one side of her face"—because they knew that my parents had not seen each other yet. On the day before the marriage, my father went to my mother's house to see her face, to check whether she had a wound on her face. However, my father could not see her face well because my mother greeted him from a long distance, in accordance with Confucian custom. These kinds of rumors are very common among bridegrooms and brides before marriage because they cannot see each other until the wedding day.

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A strong example of gender discrimination occurred at my birth. In Korea it is the custom to heat the delivery room for an expectant mother and a baby during labor and delivery and then after for rest and healing. When it became apparent that I was a girl, instead of the desired boy, my grandfather turned off the heat in the room. It was winter. As a child I was treated as though I was useless. This treatment continued and even got stronger as my will got stronger. I was a strong-willed person from early on, with opinions and a voice of my own. My mother, however, saw that I had a voice of my own. She encouraged the development of my will and my voice. She even encouraged me to get educated, which was against the Confucian culture of not allowing for the education of girls and women. I had to leave my family in order to go to high school where I studied independently, without any support from my family other than the encouraging words from my mother. When I was in high school my mother would go behind my grandfather's back and she would sell grain and vegetables in order to help me in school. I also worked while going to school.

I still remember when I entered a university in Seoul. My mother went against my grandfather, who did not support my receiving a higher education. Consequently, my mother along with my siblings moved out of my grandparents' big house for the sake of her children's education. It was the first time my mother went against my grandfather. For her, her children were more important than herself. For a long time, our family had to live in one small bedroom without support from my grandparents. My parents had to pay rent every month. My mother always told me women have to learn so they can voice their own opinions. However, my mother never voiced her opinions in front of my grandparents except for

2. *Chesa* is a worship service for ancestors in Confucianism. It is the major religious ritual of Confucianism and portrays the male as both dominant and supreme. *Chesa* has roots in Korean traditional culture mixed with Confucian culture. It is not colonized culture imposed by other country. In the era of Japanese colonization, even though Japan persecuted indigenous Korean people, *Chesa* was performed by indigenous Korean people. Early Christian missionaries, who were against *Chesa*, were persecuted by the Korean government because Confucianism was the strong Korean national religion. After many missionaries were persecuted, Catholic missionaries accepted *Chesa* as a Korean traditional culture, not a religious ritual worship service. Duk-Whang Kim, *A History of Religions in Korea* (Korea: Daeji Moonhwa-sa, 1988), 281–290. Ai Ra Kim says that "the crux of ancestor worship from an anthropological view is that it reunites the ancestors with the living family members and thereby strengthens the identity of the family's lineage." While this worship ritual excludes women's participation and service, women managed all the necessary preparations, such as cooking the food and setting up the ritual table. After worship, women would feed the family, relatives, and any guests who had attended. Without the fundamental assistance of women, ancestor worship would not be able to be performed. Ai Ra Kim, *Women Struggling for a New Life: The Role of Religion in the Cultural Passage from Korea to America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 17–18.

my education. In 2001, when I visited my mother in the hospital because she suffered a stroke and a heart attack, her last words to me were, "Go to America to study and become a great minister who can transform the world."

She was a good daughter in-law for my grandparents, a smart wife for my father, and a wise mother for me and my five siblings. I believe that she lived in the patriarchal society embracing stronger males within her weaker body; however, her love (*jeong*) was enough to be strong to embrace *han* and to overcome *han*. She had *jeong* for my father and my grandfather to overcome *han*; her *jeong* might have been *mi-eun jeong* instead of *han.*

How does *han* transit to *jeong*? *Han* and *jeong* are similar in that they are generated through human relationships. For example, when I meet you, if we like each other and have a good relationship, *jeong* is generated in our relationship. And then, I would expect you to do something as a friend, a classmate, a lover, or a family member. However, if you do not follow up my expectations, our relationship has a gap, which means disappointment; the relationship of *han* could develop from the gap. The more we have a strong *jeong* in our good relationship, the more we disappoint in each other. This disappointment leads to the feeling of hate, moreover of *han*.

Chang-Hee Son explains the special meaning of *han.*

> At times *han,* visible on the sufferer's face, bears down mercilessly [no *jeong*] on her/his consciousness. At other times *han* is invisible, undetectable from the person's face because he/she has suppressed the *han* so well that it may be pushed down into his/her subconsciousness. In essence, *han* is the bitter, raw, ferment of one's internalized remorsefulness. ... The word *han* is peculiar to the Korean people. *Han* is the very pathos of Koreans.[3]

Han is the feeling of suffering from the bottom of the heart. One who has *han* or who embraces *han* seems to have a bitter face with a suffering heart, and the *han* leads him/her to be strong in the desire for revenge or the desire for survival. As Son stated about *han*, there is a moment of *han*, which transits into subconsciousness from consciousness. At this point, the feeling of *han* would go to *mi-eun jeong* or to the feeling of revenge.

In my understanding, *han* has the level of development of an emotion. First, *han* is generated from a relationship. If people do not know each other, *han* cannot be generated. At this level there is a prerequisite emotion of expectation and a feeling of being disappointed by somebody. The second level is the feeling of being abandoned or dehumanized which develops into the feeling of hate. At this level, the feeling of hate brings suffering. Finally, *han* becomes a desire for revenge to kill somebody or to commit suicide. This is the regular development of *han*. I believe, however,

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that the feeling of *han* could be mixed with *jeong*, especially *mi-eun jeong*, which means love changed from hate. Commonly, for indigenous Korean women, the object of *han* is family, a friend, a lover, or a very close person because the feeling of *han* begins with disappointment in an expectation. For indigenous Korean women, however, *han* transits into *mi-eun jeong*, not into the feeling of revenge. They push the feeling of suffering down into their sub-consciousness as Son states. It is the way for indigenous Korean women to survive in the patriarchy. The suffering in their sub-consciousness would generate *mi-eun jeong* with patience in the long term. The strength of *mi-eun jeong* is enough to cut off *han*, which is a vicious circle.

Wonee Anne Joh states that a definition of *jeong* is that "heart, the center of all vital functions, is the seat of self, of energy, of loving, of compassion, of conscience, of tenderness and of courage."[4] *Jeong* is a tricky emotion in a relationship, even between an oppressor and oppressed. When *jeong* is present in a relationship, a person might appear as an "enemy" because of structural relationships, but in a one-to-one relationship, the relationship between the self and that same enemy could be fraught with compassion.[5] Joh addresses *jeong* in the following quote:

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> Koreans [speak of] two different kinds of *jeong*: *mi-eun jeong* and *go-eun jeong*. The latter emerges within mutual and satisfactory relationships; the former, out of and in spite of relationship full of discontent. These relationships often have mixtures of both *han* and *jeong*. … Koreans have a saying: it's better to have *mi-eun jeong* than no *jeong*." Absence of *jeong* implies absence of relationship, and absence of relationship means complete indifference not only to the other but also to the self.[6]

In Korean tradition, *jeong* can refer to the "feeling of affection" through the relationship between oneself and others. However, as Joh mentions, *jeong* might occur in both the positive feeling of

3. Chang-Hee Son, *Haan (한,恨) of Minjung Theology and Han (한, 韓) of Han Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press of America, Inc., 2000), 15.

4. Wonhee Anne Joh, *Heart of the Cross* (Louisville. London: WJK, 2006), 96.

5. Ibid., 97.

6. Ibid., 122–123.

affection *(go-eun-jeong)* and the negative feeling *(mi-eun-jeong)*. However, for indigenous Korean women, *mi-eun-jeong* also would be positive love. There is a saying, "I could live in *mi-eun-jeong* with my husband, even if he does not love me." Indigenous Korean women live in their belief that "*mi-eun-jeong* is *jeong*," too. That is, indigenous Korean women believe that the negative feeling of affection is love, too.

Indigenous Korean women can survive with *mi-eun-jeong* even in the dehumanized treatment from male family members in patriarchy, rather than with *han*. "*Mi-eun-jeong*" makes Korean women overcome and cut off *han*. There is a saying among indigenous Korean women: "I live with my husband because of *mi-eun-jeong*. I hate him enough to kill him. However, *mi-eun-jeong* with him made me survive." Indigenous Korean women's *han* develops *mi-eun-jeong*, not the feeling of revenge. The strength of *mi-eun jeong* is enough to cut off a vicious circle of *han*. Therefore, indigenous Korean women have the value of embracing *han* and *jeong,* which brings peace and harmony for her family and her community.

I want to introduce a story of a Korean daughter and a folk song for a Korean daughter in-law regarding *han* and *jeong* in order to analyze how indigenous Korean women's *han* transits *joeng*.

Princess Bari's story is the story of a Korean daughter. In this story, we can see a woman's sacrifice and the discrimination she endured. Princess Bari was devoted to her father even though he exiled her at her birth. A summary of the story of Princess Bari is as follows:

> Princess Bari was put in a jade box as soon as she was born and thrown into the sea because her father, the king, wanted eagerly to have a son instead of a daughter. She was the seventh girl for the king. But Princess Bari was rescued by an old couple and was brought up under their protection and guidance. After a long time, the king became sick due to the pangs of conscience from having abandoned his daughter. Her mother heard that the only thing that could cure her father's illness is the medicine water—living water—from the other world, which means the heavenly world.
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> However, nobody wanted to go to get the medicine, living water, for the king, even the other daughters who lived in the palace. It was too difficult a place to reach. Finally, the king asked this of the daughter, Bari, who had been abandoned. When Princess Bari heard that her father was dying, she departed to the world beyond to get the living water for her father. She was only fourteen years old at that time. She faced many struggles, distresses and various hardships during her journey to the heavenly world. When she arrived at the heavenly world, the well-keeper asked for some money in return for the living water. But she did not have any money. Therefore, she had to work for three years gathering fire wood, three years cooking, and another three years drawing water from the well. In spite of all these years of hard labor, the keeper still did not allow her to take the water back to her father. Finally, she had to marry him and gave birth to seven sons. She was given permission to take the living water home to her father. When she came back her father and her mother were dead. The living water she brought from the heavenly world was able to revive them and restore them to health. As a result, she became a shaman priestess of rejected and oppressed women in Korea.[7]

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In Princess Bari's case, her father was a king and her family was very rich. Nevertheless, her father threw her away into the sea because she was not a boy. She is considered property since the king can dispose of her without regard for her as a daughter or a human being.

With regard to the Princess Bari story, let us consider several elements that demonstrate a deeper understanding of *jeong*. She was abandoned by her father because she was a girl. She then lived a poor rural life, not in the palace with her biological family. She might have missed her family or might have hated those who threw her away. When she heard about her father's illness, she made a decision to go the heavenly land in order to get the needed medicine for her father. Nobody wanted to go to the heavenly realm for her father, the king, because everyone knew how dangerous the journey would be. Princess Bari also knew about the dangers, but she went there, nonetheless.

No one could expect her to go, because she was a girl and, therefore, she was seen as useless and moreover was a rejected abandoned girl. She experienced many dangers and great suffering on her journey, much more than the suffering she endured as an abandoned girl. Finally, she got the medicine for her father and he was resurrected. If she was so weak and useless, then how could she accomplish this task as a girl? If Bari's behavior was only forced filial piety, then why did her other sisters not take the opportunity

7. Jung Young Lee, ed., *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective Commentary on Korean Minjung Theology* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988), 73–74. The story of Princess Bari is a Korean legend.

to redeem themselves as Bari did? Bari lived as a poor girl with the sadness of abandonment. I think that her circumstance made her have *han*. *Han* is the feeling of resentment about abandonment and discrimination. However, her *han* is not the feeling of revenge, but is from *mi-eun jeong*, so she misses and forgives her father. Her *han* which is overcome by love (*mi-eun jeong*) has cut off her hate toward her father (*Dan*), and she becomes a strong woman.[8] It is the value of embracing *han*, which transits to *jeong*. Filial piety was forced, but Bari offered it freely with *jeong*. She showed that a woman could accomplish such a difficult task and that she was not a useless object of society. Finally, through her actions and success, she acted in the androcentric society. Additionally, she tried to reconcile with her father who had abandoned her.

The biggest reason Korean women have *han* (suffering) is from the burden of in-laws. Traditionally, daughters have suffered in the relationships between mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. This kind of suffering still remains in Korean society. It is called *Si world*, which means the world of in-laws. The suffering of daughters-in-law is expressed in folk songs even more than in written form. The following folk song shows how much daughters-in-law suffered and were miserable in their in-laws' house:

> Cousin, cousin, my cousin! How is life in your in-laws' house? People say that chili pepper is hot but even chili pepper cannot be equal to the hot and tiring life in the in-laws' house. When you work in the rice field, your enemy is leeches. When you work in the vegetable garden, your enemy is weeds. When you work in the kitchen, your enemy is your sister-in-law. When you work in living room, your enemy is mother-in-law. Cousin, cousin, my cousin! After three years of life with your in-laws, your hair will be as gray as watercress flowers.[9]

Songs expressed their suffering and relieved their stress while working in the field or keeping house. Because they could not make their voices heard in the affairs of the family-in-law, they just pushed onward, working hard. A daughter-in-law in the patriarchal society was to be a hard worker without wages. If the family-in-law became poorer after the marriage or if one of the family members became sick, everything was blamed on the daughter-in-law because she was considered to have no virtue.

This folk song shows us the hardships endured by women in their in-laws' house. It shows us nobody cares about them as family members. It seems like their life abounds with enemies. Even though they are treated as outsiders, they are expected to work hard both in housework and in farming. Many women experience extreme poverty within their husbands' families. They serve as the boundaries between two families, while paradoxically are treated as outsiders by both families. Indigenous Korean daughters-in-law survive among enemies; nevertheless, they live in *jeong*, not *han*. As Joh states, because *jeong* is a tricky emotion, even though *jeong* could be generated in a relationship. "[A] person might appear as an "enemy" because of structural relationships, but in a one-to-one relationship, the relationship between the self and that same enemy could be fraught with compassion."[10] The daughter-in-law's feeling of *han*, which would hate in-laws like enemies, transitions to *jeong*. This is the value of embracing *han.*

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Is it possible for an indigenous Korean woman to embrace a man in a patriarchal social and cultural setting? That might be the new order which God wants for suffering women. The ethical value of embracing is derived, in part, from the Bible. For example, the prophet Jeremiah proclaims "How long will you wander, O unfaithful daughter? The LORD will create a new thing on earth—a woman will surround a man" (Jeremiah 31:22, NIV).[11] There will be no more wandering and no more suffering with unfaithfulness for women because God has created the new thing on the earth, namely, "a woman is to embrace a man."

Sang Lim Ahn says, "Without embracing and loving, a man who is like a lion could not be changed. It [embracing and loving] is not a vicious circle with suffering, but sublimation to transcend suffering."[12] "Embracing" means approaching others—even enemies—with love, which sublimates suffering (*han*). It is like the love of Jesus Christ, who could die on the cross. It is like the words of God, "Love your enemies" (Luke 6:27). It is like Mother Mary embracing her son Jesus Christ; it is like Mary's suffering heart when she embraces the dead Jesus. And she also does not hate the people who killed her son Jesus. "Embracing" aims not at revenge, but forgiveness.

8. According to Chi Ha Kim, Korean women's *han* might be overcome through *Dan* which means to resolve *han.* It is to cut off the chain of *han* that creates vicious circles of violence and repression. Jung Young Lee, *An Emerging Theology*, 10.

9. Oo Chung Lee, *In Search for Our Foremothers' Spirituality* (Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology,1994), 10–11. This is Chungju *minyo* (folk song).

10. Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, 97.

11. In the Korean Bible, it reads: 패역한 딸들아 네가 어느 때까지 방황하겠느냐 여호와가 새일을 세상에 창조하였나니 곧 여자가 남자를 안으리라. In this case, the word, "surround" is translated, the Korean word, 안다 (Embrace).

12. Sang Lim Ahn, *The Story of Women's Theology* (Seoul, Korea: Deahangidokguseohoe, 1992), 159.

"Embracing" does not give up on the beloved in dangerous situations, but protects them; even though they do not know "embracing love." For example, men in the patriarchal society forced women to sacrifice and to obey male family members, treating women as dehumanized beings. So, many indigenous Korean women have *han*, which means they are wounded in their heart and have inexpressible sufferings. However, women gain their wisdom, which cuts out a vicious circle of *han* and love men even if the women sacrificed to male family members, even if they die loving them. In other words, women forgive men and love them because they are family, neighbors and one community.

"Embracing" is not to give up their identities as women and as a part of the family, of the community and of the nations, which God made. Instead, "embracing" is to find their identities as mothers, daughters, wives and human beings even within patriarchy. It is the value of embracing in *han*, Korean common pain and struggle, and it is also a positive aspect of *han.*