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, korsucuka (‘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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