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THE EVOLUTION OF HAN: HISTORICAL ROOTS, HEALING PATHWAYS, AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS

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Abstract

The concept of *han* (恨) dramatically reveals a nuanced part of the Korean people's culture along with their history, serving as the cornerstone of their emotional depth. The impact of Japanese colonial rule along with Korea's modernization—mostly studied in the 20th century while ignoring the preceding century's history—has been the focus of scholarly work for quite some time. This study attempts to contribute to this literature by exploring the evolution of *han* in the Goryeo and Joseon periods, and how it has become part of the cultural memory or the spiritual life of Korea. Rather than see *han* as simply a reference to the trauma of loss or forms of systemic oppression, this work views it as a deep spring of ongoing resiliency, creativity, and spirituality that encapsulates the essence of history of Korea.

Keywords: collective memory, *han*(恨), historical transformation, Korean identity, psychological–spiritual dimension

1. Introduction

One of the most recognisable characteristics of Korean culture, as observed by many foreigners, includes meticulousness and the fast-paced 'quick, quick' attitude towards work; a deep religiosity reflected in the prevalence of temples across mountains and fields, as well as churches with crosses scattered throughout towns; a warm, unsolicited affection expressed through spontaneous acts of help; and *ojirap*, the tendency to offer unsolicited advice or guidance [1]. However, to properly understand these characteristics, one must first grasp the notion of *han* (恨), which serves as the archetype underlying them and acts as a spiritual force guiding the lives of Korean people. While the term *han* has also been used in China and Japan—literally meaning 'inner pain' or 'suffering'—this emotional experience is nearly universal across global cultures [2]. Nevertheless, Korean *han*, cultivated over the nation's 5,000-year history and cultural context, continues

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to play a defining role in everyday life. It warrants distinct consideration, as it embodies both positive and negative expressions such as diligence, religiosity, cooperation, and, at times, unwarranted interference.

Since the start of the 2000s scholarly interest in the phenomenon of *han* has expanded considerably. Young-pil Kim initiated a new direction in *han* inquiry that sought to understand *han* as it was lived and subjectively experienced by Koreans within their own historical and cultural contexts, and as such, he intentionally disregarded theoretical assumptions and the researchers' bias [3]. His most noteworthy achievement lies in delineating the dual structure of *han*—both as an expression of personal affliction and as a transformative force with the potential to foster reconciliation—thereby avoiding simplistic or excessively sombre interpretations. Although Kim's revelations are undoubtedly useful, we see it could have been more helpful if Kim had more explicitly acknowledged the Korean people's desire for redemption and their capacity to transcend themselves through suffering. *Han* is more than just an inner emotional state; it is a symbolic expression of collective resilience and ethical striving. During the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), *han* functioned both as a spiritual reservoir and as a political impulse towards national liberation; in Korea's twentieth-century democratisation movements, it channelled accumulated historical pain into a moral quest for justice [4].

Sandra Kim's research similarly provides important contributions to the present continuities of *han* [5]. Her research convincingly argues how *han* became intertwined with colonial discourses during the Japanese occupation particularly through imperial representations of Koreans as inherently sad and passive. She further argues that this racialised depiction of *han* continues to echo in today's nationalistic rhetoric and forms of popular cultural expression–such as the Korean Wave –thus engaging in a theoretically cutting critique of cultural essentialism.

In his interdisciplinary study, 'Transforming *Han*', Whachul Oh provides an important contribution in introducing the pathological aspects of *han* [6]. His work is especially commendable in providing religious frameworks as possible directions for healing entrenched emotional realities that have been destructive or debilitating.

Most recently, Lim's article, 'Conceptualising Sorrow and Hope', has been helpful in mapping important theoretical approaches to *han* as made available via contemporary Korean researchers, thereby providing an important reference for current and future inquiries [7].

While the aforementioned studies have all made significant contributions to the conversation on *han*, it is also important to note that these inquiries focus almost exclusively on modern and postcolonial forms of *han*, leaving little opportunity for scholarly engagement with *han* as understood in light of its historical trajectory and cultural embeddedness, particularly in the context of Korea prior to the twentieth century.

In offering a complementary study, this study will examine objective cultural locations - historical periods, specifically the dynasties of Goryeo and Joseon, and seek underutilised historical sources. This study attempts to widen the interpretive frame of *han*, not merely as a representation that has emerged from

modern trauma, but as an existential and spiritual motif that can be located within the existence of Korean cultural memory and historical consciousness.

2. Research Methods

This study adopts three methodological approaches to analyse *han*. The first is a historical perspective, using the theory of 'collective memory' proposed by Maurice Halbwachs to trace the transformation of *han* from the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392) to the present [8]. The collective memory he proposed is transmitted through historical narratives and is continuously reconstructed within the changing contexts of reality. Based on this perspective, the study explores the interaction between *han* and national identity, ranging from the problems of *gongnyeo* (tribute women) and *wonhon* (grievous spirits) in the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties to the traumatic experiences of war, industrialisation, and democratisation after the 1950s.

The second theoretical framework employed is 'logotherapy' founded by Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), a Jewish psychiatrist who survived the madness of the Nazis in Auschwitz during the Second World War [9]. His theory provides a psycho-spiritual framework that may regard Korean *han* as a resource for restorative and creative transformation as well as a power of communal solidarity. He argues that even in the worst suffering, human beings have the privilege to discover meaning in life. During the Korean War, there were horrific incidents in which Christians were massacred by North Korean communist forces. Testimonies that interpreted these sorrowful deaths as a path toward grace and spiritual growth clearly demonstrate how Frankl's insights can sublimate *han* into religious practice.

Finally, Richard Schechner's 'performance theory' helps explore how *han* is revealed through the creative expressions of Korean culture [10]. According to his theory, performance arts such as theatre, drama, and film go beyond mere imitation of reality and serve as cultural products that embody the emotions and memories of members of society in a meaningful interpretive form, thus making them useful for analysing *han*.

This study primarily employs a qualitative approach to explain the Korean concept of *han*, which suggests that future research would benefit from incorporating quantitative methods or in-depth interviews, particularly to capture contemporary experiences and generational shifts. Moreover, given the extensive span of Korean history covered, this paper inevitably had to be selective in its case studies, indicating the need for further investigation into overlooked historical events and marginalised groups. Lastly, while this research focuses on religious, theological, and artistic interpretations of *han*, subsequent studies should seek to empirically examine how *han* is manifested and transformed in lived social contexts and healing practices.

3. Historical Framework

The 'tribute women' (*gongnyeo*, 貢女) of the Goryeo era serve as a powerful illustration of *han*. Official records indicate that between 1275 and 1355, 176 young Korean women were taken to Yuan China; however, many historians estimate that the actual number reached into the thousands, as countless girls were seized beyond what was officially documented [11]. Their abduction brought immense suffering not only to the women themselves but also to their families and communities. This anguish extended far beyond personal grief—it became a collective wound embedded in Goryeo society. Unlike narratives centred on vengeance, the *han* of the *gongnyeo* stemmed from geopolitical subjugation, rendering retaliation impossible. The response took the form of silent endurance rather than armed resistance, as both victims and their families were powerless against the state's coercive measures [2]. Over time, this internal suffering found expression in folklore, where the *gongnyeo* were depicted as restless spirits (*wonhon*, 怨魂). Instead of seeking justice through physical retaliation, they pursued redress within a spiritual rather than earthly domain. These narratives served to ease the collective pain by framing it as subject to divine justice, transforming *han* from an isolating affliction into a sentiment that reinforced cultural continuity and moral adaptability. This aligns with Halbwachs's theory that collective memory sustains emotional frameworks such as *han* as enduring cultural motifs, allowing past traumas to remain potent within contemporary social consciousness [8].

While some scholars argue that the well-known Korean folk song *Arirang* originates from the Gojoseon period (circa 5th century BCE–108 BCE), predating the Goryeo Dynasty [12], it was during the Goryeo period—particularly amidst the crisis surrounding the *gongnyeo*—that the song gained prominence. It gradually evolved into a folk tradition, enabling ordinary people to articulate emotions of suffering and endurance through communal singing. Over time, *Arirang* became a cultural expression of collective sorrow and resilience. The lyrics "*Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo, Arirang gogaereul neomeoganda*" are commonly translated as: "*Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo*, we are crossing over the *Arirang* Pass" [2, p. 82].

Against this historical backdrop, Cho interprets *Arirang* as a mournful lament rooted in the tragedy of the *gongnyeo*. He suggests that 'a' functions as an exclamatory cry, '*rirang*' is a divine female figure symbolising the *gongnyeo*, and '*arariyo*' becomes a plaintive question—"Where are you now?" [13]. From this interpretation, he renders the essence of the song as: "Ah, goddess, Ah, goddess, where have you gone? You are now beyond *Arirang* Pass" [13, p. 160]. In this framework, the *Arirang* Pass symbolises not a physical location but a powerful metaphor for the eternal exile of these women. Though it may not exist on any map, it is deeply engraved in the collective memory of the Korean people.

In addition to being a farewell song, *Arirang* expresses the *han* associated with severed ties and unresolved grief. Cho underscores the tragic reality that the *gongnyeo* taken to China would, in their lifetime, never return to Goryeo—their homeland—nor be reunited with their parents or siblings. In this sense, the

Arirang Pass becomes an emblem of final separation, marking the irrevocable nature of their parting. And yet, despite mourning lost hope, *Arirang* does not simply yield to despair; rather, it facilitates a confrontation with suffering, transforming pain into an enduring strength. This interpretation aligns with Viktor Frankl's theory of logotherapy, which holds that individuals must search for meaning even in the midst of the most harrowing circumstances [9]. Accompanied by song, the agony of separation is not only expressed but also processed—providing sufferers with a source of cultural identity and communal pride. Thus, in *Arirang*, one finds compelling evidence of Frankl's approach to suffering: that pain, when imbued with purpose, need not result in despair but may instead signify a meaningful form of existence.

In the narrative traditions of the Joseon Dynasty, *han* was expressed through folkloric depictions of women who suffered unjust deaths and lingered as spirits in search of vengeance. These stories serve as key examples of how the suffering of women became a central theme in the formation of traditional Korean tales. During the late Joseon period, numerous accounts emerged featuring women who died under tragic and regretful circumstances, transforming into *won'gwi* (怨鬼, vengeful ghosts) who roamed restlessly in pursuit of justice [14]. A notable exemplar of this genre is the historical novel *Janghwa Hongryeon Jeon (The Tale of Janghwa and Hongryeon)*, which vividly portrays the intertwining of women's suffering and retribution—a narrative so potent it transcends death itself. In the tale, the two sisters, Janghwa and Hongryeon, become victims of extreme cruelty at the hands of their stepmother, ultimately leading to their deaths. However, their *han* persists beyond physical demise, re-emerging as a spiritual force that seeks to avenge the injustices inflicted upon them. Unlike conventional ghost stories designed merely to evoke fear, *Janghwa Hongryeon Jeon* frames supernatural intervention as a form of moral reckoning. Here, *han* becomes a vehicle for justice: suffering remains unresolved, but ethical order is ultimately restored. The transformation of *han* into spiritual reparation demonstrates its role not only in reflecting trauma but in initiating cultural responses to injustice.

The annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910 further deepened the Korean people's yearning for justice [15]. A profound artistic expression of *han* during this period is found in the poetry of Yong-un Han (1879–1944), a Buddhist monk and independence activist. His renowned poem *Nim-ui Chimmuk (The Silence of the Beloved)*, though framed as a romantic lament, functions allegorically as an expression of grief for the colonised nation. Korea is personified as the Beloved, whose absence evokes a poignant and enduring sorrow: "I cherish my dear Beloved, who sighs; my Beloved [Korea] has vanished ... My Beloved is gone, but I choose to hold on to the memories" [16, p. 1]. The poem allows for a reconsideration of national loss, through multiple lenses of emotional and political interpretation. The structure of the poem moves through separation, suffering, despair, grief, waiting, hope, and, ultimately, closure. The structure indicates that the poem is more than romantic longing and invites a socio-political reading. Instead of being a traditional love poem, *Nim-ui Chimmuk* expresses a quiet contemplation on resistance which describes the dialectical tensions between hope and despair, destruction and regeneration.

Recognising the dialectical nature of *han* within this poem enables a deeper understanding of its colonial context—not as passive suffering, but as active resilience. It grieves what was lost while simultaneously anticipating what must be reclaimed, symbolising the Korean people's unwavering determination to regain sovereignty. In embracing a positive rendering of sorrow, *han* evolves from a mere emotional state into a potent creative strategy—one that resists cultural erasure and sustains a shared identity under threat.

The Korean War deepened the division between North and South Korea, thereby redefining *han* in explicitly political and ideological terms [17]. Whereas previously *han* had largely been understood in relation to colonial oppression, the post-war period gave rise to a new form of *han* characterised by intergenerational trauma, wartime violence, and ideological conflict. For those who lived through the war, *han* became an inescapable sorrow embedded in personal and collective memory, transmitted across generations. In the novel *The Guest* by Sok-Yong Hwang, *han* is described as a tormenting condition that demands resolution [18]. The protagonist, Pastor Yoseop Ryu, returns to his hometown of Sincheon after forty years, only to find it haunted by the restless spirits of those who perished in the war. Among them is the soul of his brother, still yearning for peace. The narrative poignantly illustrates how competing ideologies turned ordinary people into enemies and tore apart communities that had once coexisted in harmony. Prior to Japan's annexation of Korea, the residents of Chansaemgol in Sincheon County—now located in present-day North Korea—lived peacefully with minimal ideological conflict. However, this equilibrium was shattered during the post-liberation period, when tensions between Christians and Communists escalated, ultimately contributing to the brutality of the Korean War [19]. As ideological hatred consumed the village, basic human decency eroded. The novel depicts scenes of unimaginable horror: unarmed women and children executed by Christian youth militias, childhood friends Sangho and Yohhan violently turning on one another, and Yohhan slitting the throats of Communist soldiers whom his brother Yoseop had sought to save. Hwang portrays this violence as a consequence of moral collapse—one that cannot be justified by religious conviction. It is religious zealotry gone awry. The novel's title, *The Guest*, functions as a central metaphor for understanding *han* in this historical context. Initially, Hwang refers to a 'guest' as smallpox—a deadly visitor arriving uninvited, leaving permanent scars on its hosts. By extension, he likens the ideological struggle between Christianity and Communism to such an intruder, one that devastated Korean society. Just as pre-modern Koreans performed shamanic rituals to repel perceived spiritual contamination, the novel concludes with a *salpuri* dance—a traditional exorcistic performance intended to cleanse unresolved grief and negative energies. Through this, Hwang proposes that Korea's indigenous shamanic practices hold the potential to heal the *han* borne by those who fell victim to opposing political ideologies.

Since the 1970s, South Korea has experienced rapid industrialisation and economic development. However, this transformation has come at considerable socio-political cost. Urban labourers and other marginalised groups have endured severe working conditions, and their suffering—accompanied by a profound sense

of injustice and sorrow—has played a crucial role in shaping contemporary interpretations of *han* within Korean society [20]. This widespread frustration and despair eventually coalesced into a collective *han*, galvanising the working class into a potent force of resistance and forming the emotional bedrock of South Korea's pro-democracy movements in the 1980s. The 1980 Gwangju Uprising marked a popular revolt against the military dictatorship of Doo-Hwan Chun. Protesters—mainly composed of students, workers, and ordinary citizens—flooded the streets in response to the regime's brutal suppression. As state forces responded with severe military violence, killing demonstrators and suppressing media coverage, the *han* of Gwangju deepened, evolving into a lasting memory of injustice. Although the uprising was brutally crushed, the trauma it left behind continued to fuel a persistent pursuit of justice, ultimately establishing Gwangju as a pivotal symbol in South Korea's democratisation process. During this period, *han* became firmly entrenched as a shared emotional experience—defined by grief and resentment—among students, workers, and civic organisations, uniting them in their demands for democratic reform. In due course, the collective *han* of the Korean people culminated in the pro-democracy movement, which achieved a historic breakthrough with the implementation of direct presidential elections in 1987.

Psychological-religious Analysis

Christian teachings and traditions offer a valuable framework for understanding *han* as something that can be resolved and reinterpreted—where suffering is not merely a condition to be endured but a redemptive and unifying process. Within the Christian worldview, disagreement or inner turmoil does not signify an eternal state of mourning. Rather, it becomes a transformative force, capable of change through faith, forgiveness, and socially just action. This perspective aligns with Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, which posits that suffering is never experienced in isolation but is continuously restructured within historical and communal contexts [8]. In this sense, Korean Christianity understands *han* not simply as an emotion, but as a moral and spiritual impetus—one that transcends temporal boundaries and influences both national history and personal faith.

A powerful example of this theological transformation is found in the life of Pastor Yang-Won Son (1902–1950). His suffering and faith bear witness to how *han* can be fruitfully resolved through Christian forgiveness. Born in Haman County, South Gyeongsang Province, Son's life was closely intertwined with Korea's struggle for independence [21]. He actively participated in the March 1st Movement of 1919, which led to his expulsion from school and firmly established in him a lifelong conviction that faith and justice are inseparable [22]. During Japanese colonial rule, he was later imprisoned for refusing to bow at Japanese Shinto shrines—acts that were designed to suppress both Korean national identity and Christian belief. Yet even in prison, Son preached to fellow inmates and guards, transforming his *han* not into bitterness, but into a channel for evangelism.

His faith was tested again during the Yeosu–Suncheon Rebellion of 1948, when his two sons were murdered by communist insurgents. In circumstances that would naturally evoke rage and despair, Pastor Son made a radical choice. Rather than seek vengeance, he publicly forgave his sons' killer, Jae-Seon Ahn, and went so far as to adopt him as his own son. This extraordinary act of grace marks the culmination of *han*'s transformation—demonstrating how suffering and loss can be transfigured into reconciliation and spiritual healing. Pastor Son's actions exemplify Viktor Frankl's logotherapeutic principle: that suffering can be transcended when it is endowed with meaning [9]. His decision to receive the man who had taken his sons' lives not as an enemy but as a fellow child of God illustrates how *han* can cease to be a destructive force and instead assume a redemptive quality, shaped by a higher spiritual purpose. Pastor Son's reinterpretation of his pain as an opportunity to demonstrate unconditional Christian love is a living embodiment of Frankl's assertion that human beings, even in the depths of sorrow, possess the freedom to determine their response and find meaning in their suffering. Yet Pastor Son's journey did not end there. During the Korean War in September 1950, he was captured by communist forces in Yeosu and taken to Gwangju, where he was executed by firing squad. In his final moments, he prayed for the souls of his executioners—embodying a spiritual transcendence in which *han* no longer cries out for revenge but is transfigured into radical forgiveness. His martyrdom does not simply exemplify the redemptive nature of *han*; rather, this act of sacrificial suffering elevates *han* into a theological paradigm in which suffering becomes a sacred channel through which divine grace, reconciliation, and moral transformation are enacted

Beyond individual experiences, *han* functions as an ethos—a social and spiritual force that facilitates communal integration and the pursuit of historical justice within the Christian community. The division of the Korean Peninsula, a profoundly painful source of national *han*, continues to cause anguish for millions, particularly among families separated since the Korean War [23]. Yet, *han* also poses a lingering theological dilemma for some lay Korean Christians: can suffering be transformed into a force for reconciliation rather than antagonism? A compelling answer emerges through the humanitarian and missionary efforts of Korean churches committed to inter-Korean reconciliation. Organisations such as 'Open Doors Korea and Durihana Missions' have established robust support networks for North Korean defectors, offering food, shelter, and spiritual care [S. Kim and H. Shin, The Past and Present of Open Doors Mission, 2025, https://www.opendoors.or.kr/board/list.do?iboardgroupseq=2&iboardmanagerseq=59]. These missions exemplify *han* transfigured into faith—where historical and ongoing suffering becomes a spiritual vocation to serve the afflicted. Such faith-based action reflects a reconfigured understanding of *han*, one that resonates with Richard Schechner's normative theory of performance [10]. Like other forms of trauma, *han* is never entirely forgotten; rather, it is ritualised and re-enacted through religious practices, personal testimonies, and humanitarian engagement. North Korean underground churches continue to practise clandestine worship despite the threat of death, bearing witness to *han* through steadfast endurance and spiritual transformation. These communities embody the living memory of *han*,

wherein affliction is the crucible through which God refines the soul, producing longsuffering, unwavering faith, and, in the fullness of time, a foretaste of eschatological grace.

Korean Christianity, far from being a mere import of Western religious tradition, has been profoundly shaped by the lived reality of *han*—from the persecution of early Korean Catholics in the 18th and 19th centuries, to the martyrdom of Pastor Yang-Won Son, and the ongoing trials of the North Korean underground church. *Han* has evolved into a lived theology of pain and hope. The Korean Church does not regard *han* as a burden to be passively endured; rather, it seeks to actively transform it into justice, solidarity, and divine reconciliation.

4. Cultural Performance and Expressivity Approach

Korean culture encompasses a wide range of expressive forms—such as literature, music, theatre, and cinema—each offering a distinctive means of articulating *han*. While *han* is not explicitly addressed by Taylor, his insights into storytelling and national identity provide a helpful framework for interpreting *han* within Korean cultural narratives [24]. This perspective resonates with Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, which asserts that memory is not fixed but is continually reconstructed in response to shifting sociopolitical circumstances [8]. In harmony with Taylor's emphasis on narrative and identity, Halbwachs similarly contends that cultural recollection is an evolving process, shaped to meet present needs. Together, these frameworks suggest that the dynamic expressions of *han* in Korean culture are not only reflections of personal or historical suffering but also serve broader functions in the ongoing construction of national identity. The following section focuses on the expressive and performative dimensions of *han* as manifested in traditional Korean music and contemporary popular culture (*Hallyu*), excluding literature, which has already been addressed in an earlier section.

4.1. Han in Pansori: Heungboga as a Narrative of Social Justice and Redemption

Pansori serves as a powerful cultural medium in Korea for expressing, negotiating, and transforming *han*. As a historical art form, it conveys narratives of injustice, suffering, and endurance, enabling such emotions to be remembered and collectively re-enacted. *Pansori* blends storytelling with song, spoken word, and dramatic gesture, accompanied by the rhythmic beat of a *buk* (drum), played by the *gosu* (drummer). In recognition of its cultural richness and artistic significance, *Pansori* was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2003 [25].

According to Schechner, performance functions as an active cultural process through which ways of life are intimately linked to collective memory, and social consciousness is continually reshaped [10]. This framework is especially pertinent to *Heungbuga (The Song of Heungbu)*, a prime example of *han* expressed through *Pansori*. The narrative explores the contrasting lives of

two brothers, Heungbu and Nolbu, presenting a moral dilemma that reflects the sociocultural tensions of the late Joseon period. Through their diverging experiences, two contrasting forms of *han* emerge: one grounded in virtuous endurance, the other fuelled by unchecked greed and systemic exploitation.

Heungbu's *han* arises from both the harsh realities of poverty and the deliberate cruelty of his elder brother, Nolbu. Cast out and marginalised, Heungbu endures severe deprivation. Yet rather than succumbing to bitterness, he embodies ethical restraint and compassion. In one defining moment, he tends to an injured swallow not out of self-interest, but from a sincere moral impulse. His care is later rewarded when the bird returns with a magical gourd that brings prosperity. This mirrors Frankl's logotherapeutic principle, which maintains that authentic moral actions arise from conscience rather than an expectation of reward [9]. Heungbu's act of compassion resonates with Frankl's notion that suffering can be transcended when imbued with moral purpose—turning pain into a pathway for healing, justice, and spiritual growth. Conversely, Nolbu's *han* is shaped by avarice and moral corruption. Witnessing Heungbu's unexpected fortune, he attempts to replicate the deed—but with selfish motives. His manipulation leads to misfortune, underscoring the perils of exploitative ambition and self-interest. Nolbu's downfall reflects broader social critiques of the late Joseon period, where the rise of landowners and moneylenders contributed to widening social inequality. Here, *han* becomes unresolved and destructive—a manifestation of injustice devoid of moral virtue, resulting in ruin rather than redemption.

The Song of Heungbu also introduces two key emotional concepts in Korean culture: *jeong* (情) and *ojirap* (오지랖) [26]. *Jeong* signifies warm, unsolicited affection or help, while *ojirap* refers to unnecessary interference. Both are marked by unilateral action without the recipient's explicit consent. In this context, Heungbu's spontaneous care for the injured swallow can be interpreted as *jeong*, while Nolbu's persistent meddling in Heungbu's affairs exemplifies *ojirap*. Interestingly, these concepts are not fixed moral categories; the same action can be interpreted differently depending on the perspective of the observer. For instance, had the swallow perceived Heungbu's intervention as intrusive, what was intended as compassionate aid might be reinterpreted as *ojirap* rather than *jeong*. Thus, *Heungbuga* offers a rich performative space in which *han* is not only expressed but morally tested—where intention, action, and interpretation converge to reveal deeper layers of Korean ethical and emotional life.

4.2. The Evolution of Han in Contemporary Popular Culture

Han has long been integrated into Korean narrative traditions and folk dance, but it has also found new forms of expression in contemporary popular culture, particularly during the rise of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*). In the world of K-pop, *han* has been transformed, reinterpreted, and even rebranded to suit a broader global audience. Among the most prominent cultural figures of the postmodern era, BTS have articulated themes of self-respect, defiance, and self-embrace through their music and artistic vision. Formed in 2013 by producer Si-Hyuk Bang, BTS—short for *Bangtan Sonyeondan* (Bulletproof Boy Scouts)—

embody a mission to resist societal prejudice and adversity [27]. This ethos resonates with *han* as a collective emotional phenomenon rooted in suffering and endurance. Through their music, BTS have shifted the portrayal of *han* from one of deep sorrow to one of self-acceptance and perseverance, offering a reimagining of pain not as something to be concealed, but as a wellspring of inner strength.

Unlike previous generations, BTS do not bear direct experience of the traumatic suffering inflicted by Japanese colonial rule or the Korean War. The weight of these historical atrocities does not affect them in the same way it does those who lived through them. Instead, they engage with *han* as a cultural memory—an inherited emotional imprint embedded in Korean identity. As Halbwachs argues, collective memory is not a fixed remnant of the past but is continuously reshaped through new social interactions and contexts [8]. For BTS, *han* is not a historical abstraction, but a living trace of identity expressed through their creative work. Even without first-hand trauma, their art reflects an internalised form of *han* that resonates both locally and globally. A striking example of this reinterpretation is found in BTS's global chart-topping single *Dynamite*, released during the COVID-19 pandemic. The upbeat and cheerful character of the song contrasted sharply with the sombre tones often associated with traditional Korean expressions of *han*. Yet, embedded within its vibrant energy lies a transformed *han*—one that redefines endurance not as the silent bearing of pain, but as the power to inspire collective renewal and hope. In this way, *Dynamite* captures a generational shift: *han* is no longer solely about mourning the past, but about drawing resilience from it to affirm life in the present. BTS's achievement as the first Korean group to top the Billboard Hot 100 chart further demonstrates how *han*, reimagined through music, can transcend cultural boundaries. The emotional content they express may not articulate an authentic Korean experience in the traditional sense, but it channels a universally relatable sentiment. Their success shows how *han*, when reframed as a source of determination and solidarity, becomes a powerful medium for global connection [27].

BTS's reinterpretation of *han* is further magnified through their global fanbase, ARMY (Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth). Distinct from conventional fandoms, ARMY actively engages in social issues and philanthropic activities, reflecting the performative dimension of *han* as theorised by Schechner [10]. Their collaborative 'Love Myself' campaigns with UNICEF, aimed at promoting mental health awareness and reducing youth violence, exemplify BTS's use of Korea's cultural heritage of sorrow to deliver messages of healing and solidarity [1]. While the emotional themes of *han*—including resilience, perseverance, and transformation—are integrated into K-pop and the wider *Hallyu* phenomenon, *han* remains a distinctly Korean concept. It is therefore important to distinguish between the specific historical and cultural experiences of *han* in Korea and the struggles faced by global audiences, in order to avoid conflating fundamentally different kinds of suffering. Nonetheless, despite these conceptual differences, the universal theme of suffering offers a bridge through which *han* can be shared across cultures. BTS do not merely internalise *han* in its traditional sense; they also expand it into a culturally and artistically accessible

emotion that resonates globally. In this way, *han* becomes both particular and universal—anchored in Korean identity, yet reaching outward through shared human experience.

Contemporary South Korea's '*ppalli-ppalli*' ('hurry-hurry') culture also traces its psychological and cultural foundations to historical experiences of *han*. While urgency and efficiency are now core features of Korean daily life, this was not always the case. King Sejong (1418–1450) famously warned against idleness, encouraging Korean people to work quickly and precisely so that "rain does not leak through the thatched roof when it rains" [K.-M. No, *Koreans Do Things Quickly*, 2024, https://www.koreaherald.com/article/3473195]. However, up until the early 20th century, including the final years of the Joseon Dynasty, Koreans generally did not prioritise speed in daily labour. In fact, Confucian scholar-officials, who dominated the social hierarchy, discouraged brisk walking, deeming it undignified [28].

The trauma of the Korean War (1950–1953) dramatically altered this cultural tempo. The peninsula was left in ruins, and countless individuals wandered in search of food, shelter, and safety. To eat three meals a day was considered a rare fortune. In this climate of desperation, survival necessitated tireless labour. Following his military coup, General Chung-Hee Park (1917–1979) established an authoritarian regime, but his legacy includes transforming post-war despair into national economic aspiration. Park channelled the collective *han*—the sorrow, longing, and frustration of a people emerging from devastation—into a new national ethic embodied by the slogan '*Jalsarabose*' ('Let's live well'). This vision was embedded in the lyrics of the '*Saemaul* (New Village) *Song*', which he personally penned: "The morning bell has rung, a new dawn has come ... Help one another, work hard with sweat, Increase income, and make our village rich" [C.-H. Park, *Saemaul Song*, 1972, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_xYeDoXP_s]. This song was broadcast across the nation and adopted almost as a second national anthem, sung in schools, workplaces, and rural villages. Inspired by its message, farmers and communities modernised rural infrastructure—replacing dirt roads and wooden bridges with paved roads and concrete structures. Within just over a decade, reforestation campaigns transformed barren hills into green woodlands. President Park tirelessly travelled the country, urging citizens to work quickly and accurately, regardless of weekends or holidays. In this post-war context, idleness was stigmatised, and industriousness became a civic virtue.

It is within this *han*-saturated environment—marked by poverty, trauma, and the relentless drive for survival—that 'the *ppalli-ppalli*' culture took root and evolved. Today, its legacy is reflected in various aspects of Korean society: the rapid choreography and tempo of BTS's performances, the efficiency of Korean medical practitioners, the punctuality of Seoul's subway system, and the ubiquity of 24-hour food delivery services. All serve as living testaments to the Korean people's historical struggle to overcome deprivation—a struggle shaped and sustained by the emotional and cultural force of *han*.

4.3. The Performative Nature of Han: Memory and Ritual

As Schechner argues, performance serves as a space where history and identity are continually reawakened and reimagined [10]. *Han*, whether expressed through oral storytelling, traditional folk music, or contemporary K-pop, has the capacity to recall the past while simultaneously projecting a vision for renewal and transformation. The emotive power of *pansori*, the global activism of BTS, and the multi-generational transmission of *han* through artistic practice all reveal its performative essence and its profound connection to the inner spiritual life. Han is not merely a cultural sentiment; it is a source of existential vitality that often leads towards expressions of religious consciousness.

Frankl observed that, during the Second World War, many Jews entered the gas chambers of Nazi concentration camps without fear, chanting '*Shema Yisrael*'—'*Hear, O Israel*'—the central confession of Jewish faith, as they "entered [Auschwitz] gas chambers upright" [9, p. 123]. For Frankl, such religious ritual holds the power to preserve human dignity even in the face of death. Similarly, in Korea, religiosity has historically been expressed through an enduring stream of ritual practices that span generations and belief systems. As previously discussed, author Sok-yong Hwang highlights the significance of the *salpuri* ritual, central to Korean shamanism, as a means of addressing the *han* rooted in national division. Among Confucian Koreans, ancestral rites are performed to honour family spirits, seeking blessings in this life and protection from misfortune: a practice deeply woven into the ethical and emotional fabric of society [29, p. 426]. Buddhist traditions, too, are closely connected to the lives of the people. In response to *han* arising from natural disasters, famine, epidemics, and war, Buddhist monks have long conducted ceremonial rites in temples, offering comfort to the afflicted and spiritual balance to the community [30]. Christianity in Korea also interprets *han* through sacramental practice. The Eucharist, for instance, has increasingly been understood as a redemptive pathway through which believers—bearing burdens akin to *han*—are sanctified in communion with Christ [31]. Throughout Korean history, people have never hesitated to express sorrow and joy through the religious rituals they have embraced. Thus, religious consciousness must be recognised as a central element in understanding *han* within the Korean cultural and emotional landscape.

5. Research findings

Han's defining features have undergone significant transformations across time and space in Korea, particularly from the Goryeo Dynasty to contemporary society. Far from being merely an emotion of despair, *han* has functioned as a driving force for healing, the exercise of collective will, and the promotion of social trust, democratisation, and reconciliation. It has played a crucial role in shaping Korean national identity, finding expression in poetry, literature, *pansori*, and various forms of mass media. With the global expansion of the Korean Wave,

han has also been reimagined as a prominent spiritual and cultural symbol beyond Korea's borders.

6. Conclusion

In light of broader philosophical and religious traditions, *han* may be reinterpreted through universal frameworks of suffering and redemption. In shamanism in Korea, experiencing sorrow is a form of embodied release—it is expressed in lamentation, song, and dance--to restore harmony across the visible and invisible realms. In Buddhism, suffering is identified and mitigated through devotionals - for example, bowing before the Buddha or meditative prayer that focuses on detachment and compassion. In Confucianism, rather than experiencing a cathartic release from deep sorrow and ideas of injustice, the remedy is ethical education and a sense of ritual obligation, or duty, which centres around self-restraint and moral exemplarity, as well as be balanced relationships within that confine of one's household and collectively, in society. Ancestral rites, a vital part of Confucian practice, enable an institutionalised way of expressing grief while honouring one's duty to burgeoning filial obligations. For Confucius, the rites were not an empty formality but an essential act to embody private emotion into public virtue. They allowed for individuals to honour the past, make sense of their suffering, and re-instate order and balance from their own and their communities sadness. Thus, confucianism allows sorrow to be presented such that it can be dignified, assimilated and eventually transcended through a life of moral goodness and relational harmony, while Christianity provides the invitation to place one's suffering before God through prayer and song and, ultimately, forgiveness—even that of one's oppressor—as a form of transcendence and divine grace. By placing *han* within these different spiritual traditions, we understand that its cultural specificity is affirmed, but that it also provides a way of constructing bridges from one person's experiences of suffering, reconciliation and, ultimately, hope, to those of others. Thus *han*, rooted in Korea with its five-thousand-year history and cultural memory, is to be thought of through a more profound interpretive lens, reflecting on the broader and common human condition of suffering, and of humanity's diverse and complicated quests for restoration and transcendence.

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