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. 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 or hear han again because they think that han does not matter for them anymore… 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.

1. Korean Minjung theologians such as Hyun Young-hak, Shu Nam-dong, Kim Yong-hoek, 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.

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.
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,1 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.

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

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1. 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 reunitites 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 on 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 sub-consciousness. 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 sub-consciousness 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, 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.

Wonhee 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:

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.

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.6 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


5. Ibid., 97.

6. Ibid., 122–123.
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*.

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 a girl. 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 to 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

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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. 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. 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.”9 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.

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.
11. In the Korean Bible, it reads: 폐역한 민들아 나가 이는
때까지 방황하였느냐 여호와가 세일을 세상에 창조하였나니
곧 여자가 납자라 안으리라. In this case, the word, “surround” is translated, the Korean word, 안다 (Embrace).
“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.