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By Virtue of Vengeance: Affective Histories of *Wŏnhan* in North Korea

The cultural study of Korea has often relied on notions of *han* as a quintessential Korean emotion or affect that emanates from suppressed sorrow and bitterness. On the surface, the emotion is often traced historically to the experience of oppression in Korea from the Japanese colonial occupation to the division of the country and the subsequent Korean War. However, the treatment of *han* has been largely ahistorical, central to essentialist arguments about the uniqueness of Korea, whether through the study of *p'ansori*, shamanism, or the singularity of Korean oppression itself. Directly challenging such generalizations of an archetypal Korean emotion, North Korean materials rarely include references to *han* at all. Rather, *wŏnhan* (원망할 원 + 한할 한 怨恨), or resentment, is the principal emotion by which North Korean grievances are expressed through cultural production, public memorials, and political commentaries. Using specific examples to illustrate the discursive use of *wŏnhan* in North Korea, I argue that in contrast to the ahistorical and reactive notion of *han*, *wŏnhan* constitutes an alternative exemplary emotion. This is not because it is “Korean” but because it intimates liberation from past wrongs by seeking justice – that is, the virtue of vengeance as a form of retribution and historical reckoning.

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