

## **Traditional Korean Costumes, up to the Present and into the Future**

### **Focusing on the Internationalization of the Traditional Korean Costume by Accentuating its Aesthetic Characteristics**

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#### **Abstract**

*This study was undertaken to discuss the traditional Korean Costumes up to the present and into the future, focusing on the internationalization by accentuating its aesthetic nature. In order to introduce the beauty of traditional Korean costume to the rest of the world, it is required that Korean fashion industry go through a full-scale renovation so that it can be concord with the contemporary world of information-technology. By having a deeper knowledge and understanding of the aesthetics in traditional costume and using them as guidelines, the present Korean fashion industry can accomplish an advanced level of research and development.*

*The implications of the study are as follows.*

- 1) It is important to recognize the functional aesthetics sociality of traditional costumes and to utilize it through appropriate application.*
- 2) It is imperative to comprehend plasticity and expresiveness of meanings of traditional costumes.*
- 3) Rationality and practicality of uniplanar character of the traditional costumes should also be recognized.*
- 4) The globalization of the traditional Korean costumes will become more suitable to today's information-technology society and recreation of korean costumes by establishing a database through collecting information and systematic analysis of the world fashion trends.*

Key words : expresiveness(meaning), plasticity, sociality, creativeness, rationality, internationalism

## I. Introduction

As we can see in the discussion of the origin of clothing, aesthetics have played an important role in design with a substantial emphasis on decorative quality. Thus the history of clothing is conceivably the history of human aesthetic perception, and to a great extent, the history of the development of human aesthetics. By the same token, one can view the history of the Korean clothing culture as the history of the symbolic expression of the Korean ethnic identity as well as an opportunity to facilitate the process of redefinition and globalization of the beauty in the traditional costume.

- Purpose and scope of the study

This study was undertaken to introduce the traditional beauty of Korean costumes to the world, according to the reason for the sense of the times of information and globalization now. In this study, the approach was made to the easy understanding of the beauty properties of Korean costumes for Koreans and foreigners all together, by means of expanding the object and scope of the study to all periods and the future of Korean costumes. The Purpose of the study in particular is to grasp the universal validity of the beauty properties of Korean costumes through the history of ancient and present times and to suggest the scheme for the traditional costumes to be world-fashioned on the basis of the beauty properties of Korean costumes.

- Methods of the study

It is very difficult for the general public to approach aesthetics in order to grasp the traditional beauty of Korean costumes.<sup>1)</sup>

Kim Heyin discussed in her thesis the history of Western costumes through ancient to present times and abstracted the beauty properties concerned properly with fashion among the principles of plasticity, expressiveness, sociality and creativeness in general aesthetics. This kind of approach is regarded as the proper reference frame of work to explore the traditional beauty of Korean costumes through ancient times as well.

The reference frame of the findings of previous study was applied to this study. By means of the reference frame the universal validity of beauty properties by periods

to refine the traditional beauty of Korean costumes was abstracted, thereby trying to follow up the scheme for the traditional costumes to be world-fashioned the nature of information age now.

## II. The Aesthetics of the Traditional Korean Costume

To begin with, it is helpful to understand the aesthetics of clothing in general to extract the features of the traditional Korean costume.

### 1. The Aesthetics of Clothing in General

The aesthetics of clothing in general includes plasticity, expressiveness, sociality, and creativeness.

- **Plasticity:** plasticity refers to beauty of the corporeal form that is created by the incorporation of the human body and its environment as well as clothing construction and it is considered one of the general features in the universal standard of human aesthetics. Among the principles of plastic beauty are unity in diversity, balance, proportion, harmony, emphasis, and rhythm.<sup>2)</sup>

- **Expressiveness:** Clothing is utilized as a way of displaying the aesthetic shape, color, and patterns play important roles in expression. As for shape, there are three divisions; drape for dynamism, two-dimensional materials for power and authority, contrast, and decoration. More than evoking a visual sense, colors convey symbolic effects as well as the social standing of the wearer. Pattern adds a sense of vitality and energy and also makes a useful resource in revealing the nature of a culture by examining its origin.<sup>3)</sup>

- **Sociality:** Sociality in clothing is understood as a source of the spiritual/mental foundation which concludes all cultural ideology and it is developed through the adoption of climate and other natural features, ethnicity, and the lifestyle of a people.<sup>4)</sup>

There are three factors in sociality as the source of spiritual foundation to determine all of the cultural thoughts. Among three factors in sociality, there are (1) racial factor to represent the peculiar national spirit and physical features, (2)

environmental factors to involve the natural, social and spiritual surroundings, and (3) periodic factor to be produced and formed between the races and environment.

• Creativeness: Creativity realizes suitable aesthetic values with creation and technology as its foundation.<sup>5)</sup>

## 2. The Origin of Korea's Ancient Costume and its Functional Aesthetics; Sociality

The Koreans as a people belong to a northern race, the Mongolians. In fact, the close connection of the Koreans with the northern races are supported by evidence that the people of Puyŏ-descent Koguryŏ, who played a pivotal role in the early formation of states in the Korean Peninsula, led a typically belligerent nomadic lifestyle of hunting and horseback-riding. Then it can be concluded that the origin of Korean costume shares the same genealogy as the so-called "northern barbaric clothing (hobok 胡服)" that ranges from Southern Russia, Mongolia, northeast Asia all the way to Japan. The ethos of the belligerent, energetic Koguryŏ people is illustrated in the murals of Koguryŏ tombs.

The typical Koguryŏ men's apparel was a simple combination of trousers, a blouse-like jacket called *chŏgori*, and a belt around their waist. They also wore kerchiefs and hats called *chŏlpung* and long-necked leather boots.

Koguryŏ women, like their male counterparts, clothed themselves in *chŏgori* and *paji* (trousers) for everyday occasions. Only on special ceremonial occasions did they wear a skirt on top of their trousers. The little difference between the men and women's everyday clothing suggests that the ancient Korean costume was intended to express the dynamic and functional aesthetics of clothing.

As for the decorative beauty of Koguryŏ, it is observed that they patched up an extra piece of clothing which was different from the rest of the parts in color and pattern to places that could become easily soiled or abraded. Not only was the added cloth effectively decorative, it also enhanced the bright, neat, and clean look of clothes.

In short, the characteristics of the aesthetics of ancient Korean costume are featured with dynamism, functionalism, and cleanliness.<sup>6)</sup>

In terms of the ornaments of the ancient times, we have the hoards of precious ornaments that have been excavated from the royal Silla tombs. Silla is renowned for

its unparalleled craftsmanship of gold work. Jade work is also noteworthy. Specifically, the elegant and delicate details in the earrings are worthy of notice. The Silla gold crowns demonstrate sophistication in the workmanship of gold and also a whimsical capture of “mobility in stillness”. *Kwadae* (belt) and *yopae* (waist string) are not only of splendor but also of grandeur and elegance.

If we combine the previously discussed characteristics of the costume and accessories of Koguryŏ and Silla we learn that the ancient clothing culture was efficient in that its main concern was comfort and convenience yet freely included or spared the use of ornaments and decorations.

### **3. The Formation of Pre-Modern Clothing; Expressiveness(Meanings) and Plasticity**

Adopting the tradition of Koryo costume, Chosŏn trimmed the patterns of the clothing according to the ethos of the people and transformed it into what is now called “the traditional costume”.

#### **1) Expressiveness(Meanings)**

Expression in Chosŏn costume culture includes both Confucian notions along with the concept of “respect man and despise woman (*namjon yŏbi*),” and shamanistic notions.

Women as daughters-in-law, wives, and mothers, but not as equally full-fledged individuals as their male counterparts, wore accessories of shamanistic ceremonial nature wishing for fecundity and production of male offspring. They also carried around *norigae* (ex: bat *norigae*, cayenne *norigae*, child *norigae*, etc. symbolizing many sons) which was inscribed with auspicious patterns both as ornament and luck omen.

Moreover, the Confucianism’s secularist characteristic of wishing fulfillment, wealth prosperity, and longevity in this world and love for nature are reflected in the Chosŏn costume. The sumptuous patterns embroidered on the wide red silk of the bride’s *hwal’ot* included numerous images of worldly luck; *Sipjangsaeng* (ten items reflecting human desires for longevity), peony and lotus flowers for richness and fame, *manbokjiwŏn* letters for luck omen, and phoenix for power.

The typical *sŏnbi* in their formal attire of *Dopo* echoes Confucian values such as nature-loving, integrity, and staunch loyalty. The generously wide sleeves of white or jade color of *Dopo* not only give a sense of highly managed decorum but also enhance aesthetic value.

What we see in the design of woman's bat *Norigae* that reflects shamanistic custom and the *sŏnbi's* formal attire of *Dopo* that show Confucian social values are the very example of how human's inner thoughts are expressed in designing.

## 2) Plasticity

One of the best illustrations for the plastic beauty of Chosŏn costume is found in the paintings of Hyewŏn. Women in Hyewŏn's paintings are voluptuous and sensual. Their top is so scant both in width and length that women's upper body looks disproportionately reduced. Women would spread out their skirts on the floor when sitting but lift one corner of their skirts to the level of their top was so that a drape effect could be formed. Such a simplistic plastic beauty and diverse rhythmic aesthetics is something only a *Hanbok* could create.

The veiling of women underneath *ssugaechima* or *changot* on their outings added seductive, subtle beauty.

In short, the costume during Chosŏn dynasty is featured with two themes: Expressiveness(meanings) and plasticity. Expressiveness(meanings) is found in woman's *hwal'ot* embroidered with auspicious signs reflecting women's wish for fecundity and producing male offspring as well as in *sŏnbi's Dopo* echoes Confucian decorum. Plasticity is found in Hyewŏn's portrayal of the woman's body as summarized in *hahu sangbak* style (reduction of the upper body and exaggeration of the lower body).

## 4. Re-Creating the Traditional Beauty into the Modern Clothing

It is proposed that the aesthetics found in the traditional costume are innovatively re-created according to the needs of contemporary use and used as a useful reference as well as a guide post in modernizing the *Hanbok* design.<sup>7)</sup>

According to Margaret Mead, an American cultural anthropologist, the cultural identity of the developing countries is formed by undergoing three broadly defined stages; namely, the vertical, horizontal, and finally the identity stage. Korea prior to

the end of 19th century, belongs to the first stage. The second stage, which is the post- to the end of 19th century up to the present day Korea, is the so-called “foreign culture stage.” Mead observed that the existing traditional elements and the foreign adoption of the first and the second stage create a new cultural identity with characteristics of its own. The third stage is formed when traditional culture is combined with foreign elements to form a distinct cultural identity.

If we are to apply Mead’s observation to the situation in Korea today, we see a cultural identity that is situated in a transitional period between the second and the third stage, where the flooding influx of Western culture is perceived with a growing skepticism.<sup>8)</sup>

The Korean clothing culture is the very illustration of such a cultural phenomenon. Koreans in their every day lives are appareled in Western clothing which has been part of most of the world fashion since the European industrialization. On the other hand, the Korean traditional costume, the *Hanbok*, has been marginalized and merely regarded as ceremonial costume for special occasions or festivals. Some people have begun to clothe themselves in the so-called “*Saenghwal Hanbok* (everyday *Hanbok*)” and such a movement certainly testifies to the imminent transformation of the Korean cultural identity into the final stage in Mead’s cultural identity theory.

If we agree that an excessive fixation on the past results in drawbacks in development and that an appropriate adaptation and modification of tradition<sup>9)</sup> will contribute to the expansion of the traditional beauty into the contemporary world, then, there is no doubt that now is the time for Korea to re-create and globalize its traditional costume.

### III. Globalization of the Korean Traditional Costume

The following is a detailed sketch for innovative re-creation and globalization of the traditional Korean costume by mean of the findings mentioned above.

#### 1. Emphasis on Functional Beauty(Sociality)

It is generally believed that the *Hanbok* is not suitable for everyday life in

modern society. However, It would be argued(sociality) that viewing the *Hanbok* as less practical and inferior to Western clothing is an unfortunate by-product of industrialization. The root of Korean costume traces back to the northern nomadic clothing culture, which places a great emphasis on functionality. As discussed earlier, the murals of Koguryŏ tombs depict the people of Koguryŏ comfortably riding horses and hunting tigers in their *chŏgori* and *paji*. Furthermore, in terms of natural evolution of clothing, the trousers even predate the Western pants. The functionality and quiet charm of the traditional costume are important elements that are potentially applied to everyday use.

## **2. Appreciation of Expressiveness(Meanings) and Plasticity**

By enhancing our understanding of the symbolic expressions and plastic beauty of traditional costume,<sup>10)</sup> we can apply its beauty to the present and future clothing industry.

## **3. Attention to Rationality**

Another prevalent misunderstanding is that European design is more rational in that it is three-dimensional (i.e. accentuating body curves). However, the uniplanar characteristic of traditional costume makes it flexible in size. The straight cutting of uniplanar design creates effects such as variety in form and multiple shades of colors through overlapping. The modern “layered look” and “loose look” are good examples of this uniplanar technique.

Also, scholars who are interested in the notion of “The oriental” as a communication<sup>11)</sup> between the West and the East might find the rationality of the traditional costume useful in analyzing of “Oriental” elements and techniques and proving a continuous cultural exchange between the West and the East.

## **4. Understanding and Applying the Clothing Patterns in Technological World**

Being a “developed country” is determined by the failure or success in capitalization and industrialization. Indiscriminate imitation and blind absorption of foreign



cultures must be replaced by a firmly established sense of cultural identity and restoration of the traditional culture. Only by combining the already-existing foreign elements and the re-created traditional beauty a cultural identity can find a way to its uniqueness.<sup>12)</sup>

We live in a period where we see the vestige of the industrial age as well as the transformation caused by the advent of global information age. Alvin Toffler in his book 『The Third Waves』 diagnosed the new world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>13)</sup> In agricultural society, people wore clothes befitting one's ascribed status such as King, nobles, and peasants. In the advent of the industrialization, the clothing became democratized so that the president, urban residents, and laborers wore clothes according to their needs. Then, what about the clothing of the 21<sup>st</sup> century where technology allows us to experience conveniences such as the home office, videoconferencing, and solar energy? A film called "Back to the Future II" directed by Robert Zemeckis gave a good idea of what the future American costume would be like and the importance of the "power of science." Jackets and shoes that are automatically adjusted to the wearer and clothes that are automatically dried are such examples.

What then will the future costume of Korea be like as a product of the third cultural stage? In which direction and in what manner should the future of Korean fashion be pursued? I believe the answer lies in the "power of tradition by globalizing the beauty of traditional costume."

In order to introduce the beauty of traditional Korean costume to the rest of the world, it is required that Korean fashion industry go through a full-scale renovation so that it can be concord with the contemporary world of information-technology. The fashion industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will advance only by the sharing of information and technology and by endeavoring to design the kind of clothing that characteristically incorporates traditional design. By having a deeper knowledge and understanding of the aesthetics in traditional costume and using them as guidelines, the present Korean fashion industry can accomplish an advanced level of research and development.

A promising future for the Korean fashion industry requires the establishment of a database for a systematic analysis of not only the Korean fashion trends but also that of France, Italy, and USA.<sup>14)</sup>

## IV. Conclusion

In this study the beauty properties of Koreans traditional costumes was abstracted on the basis of the findings of the beauty properties of general aesthetics. The representing beauty property of ancient times (three kingdoms) was functional beauty and that of modern ages (Chosun dynasty) was the beauty of expressiveness and plasticity. The 21<sup>st</sup> century fashion industry will prosper in technology and the sharing of information. A winning strategy lies in a unique design that is blended with traditional beauty. In other words, it is the "power of tradition"

A concrete proposal for globalization the traditional Korean costumes is as follows.

- Traditional clothing placed emphasis on functionality of clothing and at the same time pursued beauty. It is important to recognize the functional aesthetics of traditional costume and to utilize it through appropriate application.
- It is imperative to comprehend plasticity and expressiveness(meanings) of human minds and social values in traditional costume.
- Rationality and practicality of uniplanar character of the traditional costume should also be recognized.
- It is imperative to establish a database<sup>15)</sup> of the patterns and types concerned properly with the fashion trends in Koreans and the world, thereby contributing to analyze and design systematically of Korean costumes.

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 “Hyöndaehwa (modernization) nün hyöndaesigi e hyöndaesöng i ettön kwajöng ül köch'e kuch'ehwa doeötnünga e taehan munje ida. Ttohan “modönichm” ün munhwa yösul punya e hanjöngjök üro ssüigo, “hyöndaesöng” ün ponjijökin myön esö yöksa iron ina ch'ölhak iron kwa kwallyön toenün kaenyöm ira myön “hyöndaehwa” nün sahoe kyöngjejök kaeyöm ida.”  
 [English translation]  
 Modernization (Hyöndaehwa)” is an issue that concerns how and in what way modernity wasrealizd in the modern period. Also, “modernism (modönichm)” is used limitedly in the field of art and culture and modernity (hyöndaesöng)“ is essentially associated with historical or philosophical theories while modernization (hyöndaehwa) is a socio-economic concept.
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