

KOREA

ART AND ARTISTIC RELATIONS

WITH EUROPE

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Costume culture of *Hanbok* as a living heritage and Korean identity

Culture consists of behavioural patterns, explicit and implicit, constituting the characteristic attainment of human collectives. Acquired and transmitted by symbols, the vital core of culture is composed of traditional ideas and their attached values. And cultural heritage is the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society which are inherited through generations, preserved in the present and bestowed for the profit of future generations. As culture contains its embodiments in artefacts, costume culture is an excellent example. *Hanbok*, Korean traditional clothing, was established as a part of the single living culture, affected by the geography and climate of the Korean peninsula. It has passed from the past to present, boasting beautiful curved lines and vivid colours in accord with the yin-yang theory. My paper underlines the importance of *Hanbok* as Korean identity through the design elements (line/colour) appeared in the county's intangible heritages inscribed at UNESCO.

Hanbok: The cultural costume of Korea

Hanbok is combined with jacket (*jeogori*) and trouser (*baji*). With a Northern Scythian character, its style is closer to that of the nomadic tribes of the ad-

jacent countries of Western China who wore jacket and trousers, rather than Chinese people who had jacket and skirt (*chima*) in the agricultural society. The origin of *Hanbok* was recorded on a wall painting of an ancient tomb of Goguryeo. The dress was designed to facilitate ease of movement, incorporating many shamanistic motifs. The basic structure (jacket, trouser, skirt) of *Hanbok* was set up.

However, the traditional-style *Hanbok* worn nowadays are patterned after that of the Joseon Confucian Dynasty (1392–1910). Yangban, a hereditary aristocratic class according to scholarship and official position, were dressed in brightly coloured *Hanbok* of plain and patterned silk in cold weather and woven ramie cloth or light materials in warm weather. As commoners were limited by law as well as finances to bleached hemp and cotton, they were generally dressed in white, but were clad in pale pink, light green, grey and charcoal on special occasions.

Young women had red skirt and yellow jacket prior to marriage, and red skirt and green jacket after the wedding when bowing to their parents-in-law after their honeymoon. Today, women often wear pink *Hanbok* for engagement ceremonies; traditional red skirt and green jacket after the wedding. Otherwise, any colour and fabric – embroi-



Ill. 1. A hunting in the wall painting of Muyongchong, an ancient tomb of Goguryeo, 5th century; image Michael D. Gunther / www.art-and-archaeology.com



Ill. 2. A scenery on Dano day, presumably painted after 1805 by Joseon dynasty painter Shin Yun-bok; image Wikimedia Commons



Ill. 3. *Miindo - Portrait of a Beauty*, around 19th century, painted by Shin Yun-bok; image Wikimedia Commons

dered, hand-painted, or gold-stamped silk – are used.

A few basic elements of today's *Hanbok* were worn at a very early date, but its two-piece costume today did not start to develop until the Three Kingdoms period (57 BC- AD 668) when the kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla dominated the Korean Peninsula. This fact is evident in the paintings that adorn the walls of fourth to sixth century Goguryeo tombs (ill. 1). The murals describe men and women dressed in long, narrow-sleeved jackets with the left side lapped over the right, trousers and footwear. These garments could be influenced by the severe weather, terrain, and a nomadic lifestyle on horse riding. Baekje and Silla followed the similar. During the Goryeo Dynasty, the skirt was shortened, raised up above the waist and tied at the chest with a long, wide ribbon which is still intact. The jacket was also shortened with slightly curved sleeves.

In 1392, the Joseon Dynasty replaced Goryeo. As Neo-Confucianism was the ruling philosophy, its prominence on formality and etiquette controlled the costume style on all occasions for the royal family and the members of the court as well as for aristocrats and commoners. Integrity in men and chastity in women became the principal social values, reflected in the way people dressed. Men's *Hanbok* changed very little, while that of women underwent changes over the centuries. In the 15th century, women began to wear full, pleated skirts which concealed the body lines and long jacket. The jacket was gradually shortened until it covered the breasts, making it necessary to reduce the fullness of the skirt, thus it could be extended almost to the armpits. This remains the fashion today.

Two drawings of Shin Yun-bok (1758-early 19th century) demonstrate how people wore Hanbok in daily life during his time. In traditional Hanbok design, curved features are important. (ills. 2–3) As it is not meant to be tight fitting, its inherent beauty is apparent in its elegance and style created by the abundance of material. Women had many layers of undergarments for the voluminous skirt to provide a feminine elegance. Of colour, female *Hanbok* was basically red, signifying fortune and wealth, but commoners were restricted by law to everyday clothes of white. Indigo was used for skirts of court ladies and coats of court officials, and yellow used by royal families represented the centre

of the universe. The colour of skirt revealed the wearer's social position and statement. According to the Asian philosophy, women belong to south and the colour of east is red, but the basic colour of red was not used sometimes depending on person's social status or age. Women wore either a red upper or lower garment. However, the colour of *Hanbok* differed to the age of the wearer: maids in bright colours, yellow jackets and red skirts; middle-aged women for light-yellow jackets and brown skirts.

Earlier, I underlined the importance of curved feature and vivid colours in *Hanbok*. Why is *Hanbok* beautiful? Do Korean ancestors have aesthetic eyes for design? A brief explanation of line and colour as design elements is needed for its reasons.

Elements of design (line and colour)

Design elements include line, colour, shape, texture, space, form, and value, while design principles are unity-variety, balance, emphasis, rhythm, proportion, size. Principles of design show the way in which the elements are aesthetically combined to arouse a sensory response. Elements, the raw materials of works of design, are arranged to produce order in composition, supported by principles. Thus the beauty of design depends on how to apply design elements and principles.

Line consists of extended point, featuring length.¹ It links other visual elements, draws the outline of boundaries, produces shapes, and gives clarity of the surfaces of planes. The character of line – bold or soft, elegant or shabby – is determined by human perception of its length-width proportion, its outline, and its degree of continuity. Line is a making of the human sense of sight, constructed for simplicity, borrowing the French Romantic artist Eugène Delacroix's (1798–1863) idea of the straight line as “never occurs in nature; they exist only in the brain of man”.² Line proposes a direction, either one way or in diverse ways, although it does not possess actual movement.³

Lines can be divided into straight or curved. A straight line is meant as the shortest distance between two given points. It can be vertical, horizontal or diagonal, and appears stronger and more direct than a curved line. A vertical line is structur-

al, upward, and the strongest, expressing a state of equilibrium with the force of gravity. A horizontal line represents stability on the ground plane, while a diagonal line indicates action, due to its disturbing effect.⁴

Referring to a curved line, the English painter William Hogarth (1679–1764) introduced the aesthetic concept of his serpentine line as “the line of beauty”.⁵ He considered S-shaped curved lines to be the ideal sign of artistic craftsmanship. Furthermore, the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl (1858–1905) claimed that line was the principal tool of the artist, and decorative art was the application of line to solve ornamental problems.⁶

In symbolism, lines are associated with the ideas of praise, aspiration, and ascension. Vertical lines increase this feeling, but downward bent lines convey despair. A line is a most sensitive and vigorous speech for all purposes as a language.⁷ Line is applied as a means to record nature and human features, appealing to human emotions and evoking sympathies with the life of nature and humanity.

About a relationship between symbol and colour in terms of culture, ancient Mayan culture accepts the cycles of the creation in five symbolic hues (red: blood/birth; yellow: the nourishing corn; blue-green: water/fertility; black: death; white: mutation), while the Chinese corresponded five primary colours to the five primary elements, the five directions, and the four seasons. To indigenous Torajan people in Indonesia, red is a colour of blood, representing human life, and white from flesh and bone symbolises purity. Yellow is god's blessing and power; black for death and darkness. As understanding colour transcends us to the realm of God, symbols of colour and religion are closely connected, changing with time, place and culture. Even one colour can play its role differently in the same place.

Referring to the Korean costume, a king or queen, court ladies, police chief and five performers wore the costume with five colours, indicating five spirits. In tradition, white, black, and red are used as witchcraft to prevent from plagues and evil spirits. Yellow is the colour of the center or an emperor: blue symbolises hope as the colour of youth.

¹ Ching (1996: 8).

² Arnheim (1974: 183).

³ Krommenhoek (1975: 40).

⁴ Stoops (1983: 36).

⁵ Hogarth (1753, cited by Burke 1955: 160).

⁶ Riegl (1893, cited by Olin 1992: 82).

⁷ Crane (1900: 20–1).



Ill. 4. Design elements of straight-curved lines with combination of colours display the beauty of *Hanbok*; Lee (1992: 655)

Particularly, *saekdong* (stripes of many colours) was developed in Korea, according to Yin-Yang and Five Element theories. Yin-Yang in harmony explains the origin and destruction on the universe and human. And Five Elements describe its changes from wood, fire, earth, metal, to water. Korean ancestors predict good and ill luck, expressing them onto the five elements in colour. Wood is for blue, metal for white, fire for red, water for black, and earth for yellow. Four directions and a center are the five elements as well. *Sakedong* dress was worn by children on the eve of New Year's Day, praying for their longevity and removal of misfortune. (ill. 4) The popularity of the five colours can be seen not only in art and architecture but also even in wrapping papers.

Various contradictory meanings on colours are caused by: (a) cultural associations – the colour of traditions, celebrations or geography; (b) political and historical associations – the colour of political parties or royalty; (c) religious and mythical associations – the colours of spiritual or magical beliefs; (d) linguistic associations – colour terminology within individual languages, and (e) contemporary usage – objects generated by modern conventions and trends.

Colours have a crucial role in our life as a driving force of identity, emotion, appreciation, creativity. And emotions are a key point of interest in personality theories, attacking the senses, providing strong feelings or causing reactions to colour in a space. Each colour bears a history and a set of meanings physically and emotionally. Red has the longest wavelength, demanding attention and creating excitement. As a bright and deep colour, it is a sacred religious colour in many cultures. Blue is the calm-

ing colour from nature. Rarely disliked, it can turn from positive to negative. Yellow is a strong, bright colour, and is expansive, cheerful and stimulating with the highest reflective level of all the colours. Green is the most restful colour, often used in institutions. It is associated with nature and tranquillity.

Korean costume culture in UNESCO intangible cultural heritages

According to UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the intangible cultural heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, along with the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith, that communities, groups and sometimes individuals identify as part of their cultural heritage. It needs to be transmitted through generations, constantly recreated by communities in response to their environment, interaction with nature and history, supplying them with a sense of identity and continuity, as well as enhancing respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

A relationship between *Hanbok* and Korean intangible heritages can be asked. The six examples (*Cheoyongmu*, *The Jeju Chilmeoridang Yeongdeunggut*, *Namsadang Nori*, *Yeongsanjae*, *The Gangneung Danoje Festival*, and *Ganggangsullae*) inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity at UNESCO can explain the Korean costumes in variations. They express the beauty as that of *Hanbok* through design elements, and here is an example.

The Committee (...) decides (...) the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, as follows:

R.1: *Ganggangsullae* offers its practitioners a sense of identity and provides a channel of free expression for the women who have been passing it on from generation to generation;

R.2: The inscription of *Ganggangsullae* on the Representative List would give an example of intangible heritage as a resource for the invigoration of friendly and harmonic bonds between human beings and would promote respect for cultural diversity and human creativity while encouraging continuity among practitioners.⁸

⁸ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00011&RL=00188>



Ill. 5. *Ganggangsullae*; photo National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage, 2004

Ganggangsullae is a seasonal harvest and fertility ritual popular in the south-western part of Korea on Thanksgiving day (*Chuseok*) in the eighth lunar month. Traditionally, it was performed on the nation's representative seasonal occasions, such as the lunar New Year, the first full moon day of the year, etc. (ill. 5)

Under the vivid full moon, dozens of young farm or fishing village women dressed in black and white colours, join hands to make a circle and sing and dance all night under the guidance of a lead singer. The moon is for women, in contrast to the sun which symbolizes men, thus their physical features are represented by a round shape. And as traditional Korean society was male oriented, young women were not permitted to sing aloud or go out at night, but on Thanksgiving day, they could freely sing and enjoy outdoor entertainments under the full moon, echoing their joys and sorrows of life.

Moreover, *Ganggangsullae* assumes the characteristics of the law of imitation, one of the laws of magic, reflecting primitive aesthetics. In other words, *Ganggangsullae* – a prayer for a good harvest – is considered to be a transmission from pagan religion, corresponding to the lunar year and women's fertility.

Now preserved by middle-aged women in cities as a representative folk art and a custom celebrating the Thanksgiving day, it is a hereditary tradition for two millennia drawn from the agricultural rice culture of a Korean state, Mahan, according to ancient Chinese historical texts. The dance had other extraordinary function. It is said that in 1592, Admiral Lee Sun-sin had women perform *Ganggangsullae* at night around a fire. The flickering shadows

fooled the invading Japanese into overestimating the size of Lee's forces.

Hanbok had played many roles: (1) aesthetic beauty, (2) symbolic connotation, (3) expressing emotions, and (3) a war strategy.

Conclusion

The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz claims that culture is "a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life".⁹ Culture can be considered to be a set of social rules, providing a framework that gives meaning to events, objects, and people, and making sense of our environments. Acquired and transmitted by symbols, the core of culture consists of traditional ideas, complex behaviours, and their attached values at the contemporary time and space. Culture is learned, transmitted to inter-generations, symbolic, dynamic, and ethnocentric.¹⁰

For instance, the costume culture is attributed by a society through generations, preserved in the present and is beneficial for future generations. Therefore, *Hanbok*, the Korean traditional clothing, is an absolute cultural heritage. Its beauty and connotations are underlined in curved lines and vivid colours in harmony with Taoistic Yin-Yang philosophy.

This raises a final question: did Korean ancestors create an extraordinary task of inheriting *Hanbok* to their descendants as a living costume culture, in order to enforce Korean identity? Whether or not, *Hanbok* endows visual pleasure to outsiders' eyes beyond Korea.

Imagine how uncountable lines and colours arising from *Hanbok* can produce its ultimate elegance through daily life, ceremonies, even *Ganggangsullae*! And how all appearing lines and colours of *Hanbok* express its ephemeral splendour individually or in a group! And how unpredictable metamorphoses in *Hanbok* take places under the sun, full moon, bon fires and neon lights!

Another charm is waiting for us: The *Ganggangsullae* proposal to Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage maintained that a di-

⁹ Geertz (1973: 89).

¹⁰ Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2009: 24–7).

versity of indigenous cultures would feel the virtue of coexistence through dancing *Ganggangsullae* in unity. If so, many intercultural lines and colours will bring us a wonder this time.

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