



Can **We** Have Fun?

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Integrative Project

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Introduction

When I think about my experiences in Chuseok, Korean thanksgiving day, it is not a moment that I can have a fun and relaxing time with relatives and friends. In fact, it is a time of domestic distress for me. Waking up in the early morning, only women of the family prepare for Charye, an ancestral honoring ceremony, by filling a table with food including newly collected rice and fruits. During Chuseok, only women of my family spend the whole holiday making this feast set for the ancestors, while men spend the day loitering, watching TV shows, and sleeping. It is a common scene of Chuseok in South Korea, and, for most South Korean women, Chuseok is more considered as a time of tolerance with long hours of domestic labor.

Chuseok is an example of sexism in the Confucian tradition that emerged and developed in ancient Korea. Until now, the residue of Confucianism affects a fundamental part of Korean society, shaping the moral system and the way of life. According to Confucianism, it is the sole virtue and duty of women to make the home. Therefore, women have to spend the whole holiday making Charye-sang, a feast set to value predecessors, while their husbands leave all the work to their wives. The Korean traditional clothing, Hanbok, which is often worn during Chuseok, also has sexist features.¹ When Hanbok was made, the Joseon Dynasty reflected the Confucian ideal of modesty, so the modesty could be achieved by concealing the female form. Female

¹ Eunkang Koh, "Gender Issues and Confucian Scriptures: Is Confucianism Incompatible with Gender Equality in South Korea?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 71, no. 02 (2008): , doi:10.1017/s0041977x08000578.

have to flatten their breasts by tightly wrapping them, and the skirt and sleeve are too long and wide to work, eat, walk and sit down.²

My goal is to reveal gender inequality in South Korea by recreating an updated scene of Chuseok, Korean thanksgiving day. In my work, three Korean female from different generations will enjoy Chuseok rather than cooking and working the entire day. They will wear beautiful Hanbok that has also been updated to remove aspects that highlight gender inequality. I will reinterpret the typical shape of traditional Hanbok and these will be displayed along with the mannequins that are decouped with news articles about sexism in South Korea. The work will allow spreading the idea that women are equal to men and deeply rooted Confucian culture should be changed.

Contextual Discussion

Sexism in Chuseok

Chuseok is one of the most important and festive holidays of the year in South Korea. Chuseok falls on the 15th day of the eighth month on the lunar calendar when a full moon appears in the sky, and families are gathered to celebrate the time together and give thanks to their ancestors for the abundant harvest. It is supposed to be a fun and relaxing family time but, for most Korean women, Chuseok has long been a source of suffering.³

² Seunghye Cho, "Faceless Women in the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910): The Influence of Confucianism on Korean Women's Headdresses." 2014. doi:10.31274/itaa_proceedings-180814-1102.

³ "Chuseok: Korean Thanksgiving Day," Asia Society, accessed February 23, 2019, <https://asiasociety.org/korea/chuseok-korean-thanksgiving-day>.



Figure 1. "The Jesa table usually includes rice, soup, meat, fish and fruit served in the traditional order", JoongAng Ilbo

During Chuseok, a traditional ritual for ancestors called Charye takes place. The problem is that this whole feast table is prepared by only women of the family. Visiting the home of the husband's parents, women cook and work the whole day for the husband's family, while their husbands enjoy the holiday. This patriarchal culture is based on the Confucian concept that when a woman marries a man, she becomes the part of the man's family, and as the conventional role of women as homemakers, she is obligated to take care of all the family members. The custom that had insisted for centuries and been passively endured by women seem more ridiculous to younger generations.⁴

According to the study assembled by the Seoul Foundation of Women and Family, more than 80 percent of South Koreans have experienced some form of sexism including body shaming and women preparing large meals for the male of the family

⁴ "Was Chuseok Ever Fun?" KOREA EXPOSÉ, October 11, 2017, , accessed February 23, 2019, <https://www.koreaexpose.com/korean-holiday-chuseok-ever-fun/>.

during national holidays, such as Chuseok. The surveyed women heard comments from their relatives and families that “There is no need for women to be smart,” “You need to hurry now otherwise you won’t be able to find a decent man, as older women are usually not sought after (by men),” and “Women should stay fit. You shouldn’t eat too much (even if it’s a holiday).” Moreover, almost 7 percent said that women are not allowed to share a table with male members of the family when they are eating. Sometimes women are only provided with remaining food, although they’ve made the entire meal for the family, the participants said.⁵

Sexism in Traditional Hanbok

Rashimi Sacher, the writer of *Is Fashion a Reliable Mirror of Change in Society?*, argues that fashion is a mirror of change in society, which reflects society and everyday life, and even shows the choices of an individual. Therefore, fashion is beyond clothing and styling and works as a history book.⁶ Looking back into female fashion in South Korea, we can see how Korean society with Confucian idea regulated and controlled women’s body. The South Korean fashion of today is hugely influenced by Western cultures. Encounters with various cultures like Japan and Euro-America in the late 1800s caused Korean fashion to lose its traditional style and elements. However, before

⁵ Herald, "Sexism 'serious Problem' during National Holidays in South Korea: Study," The Korea Herald, September 25, 2018, , accessed February 23, 2019, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180925000072>.

⁶ Rashimi Sacher, "Is Fashion a Reliable Mirror of Change in Society?" LinkedIn, accessed February 23, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/fashion-reliable-mirror-change-society-rashmi-sacher>.

that point, during the Joseon period (1392-1897), the Korean traditional costume called Hanbok was the everyday wear for Koreans.⁷



Figure 2. Canning, Paul. *A woman in Hanbok at Beomeosain in Busan City*. 2006. Flickr.

Women’s traditional Hanbok consisted of a blouse or jacket called Jeogori and a wraparound skirt called Chima. When hanbok was made, the Joseon Dynasty was strictly ruled by the Confucian philosophy and ideals. The phenomenon of veiling of women also occurred in this period. Since women’s outdoor activities were extremely restricted, women had to use a type of veil called Nae-oe Ssuegae, whenever they were outside. Ssuegae means a veil, and *Nae-oe* is a Confucian term representing that there should be a distinct difference between the “inner” or domestic sphere of women and the “outer” or public sphere of men. That is, Korean women had to avoid public exposure and participation in social activities with men to achieve modesty based on

⁷ Seoha Min, “Korean Fashion Designers’ Use of Cultural Expression and Its Influence on Their Design.” *Fashion Practice* 7, no. 2 (July 3, 2015): 219–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17569370.2015.1045352>.

Confucian philosophy. Therefore, Korean women had to cover themselves from face to toe with this headdress in order to avoid exposing their faces and body to strange men. Moreover, married women had to wear hanbok with muted hue, rather than bright colors. Hanbok is an example of how the governing class of the Joseon dynasty used dress codes to regulate women's rights and social activities.⁸



Fig 3. Women dressed in *jangot* headdresses, 1904. Courtesy of National Institute of Korean History, Seoul, Korea.

Sexism and Contemporary Female Fashion in South Korea

In the early 20th century, Koreans started to adopt western fashion influenced by the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945) when the Japanese colonial government promoted modernization. Western-style clothing, Yangbok, was adopted for governmental official wear, and Hanbok became no longer everyday wear. During the

⁸ Seunghye Cho, "Faceless Women in the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910): The Influence of Confucianism on Korean Women's Headdresses," 2014, , doi:10.31274/itaa_proceedings-180814-1102.

Second World War and the Korean War, most Koreans suffered from severe poverty so they often wore simple and dark clothing. In the 1960s, when the economy of South Korea improved, western clothing style like the miniskirt hugely influenced Korean female fashion.⁹ However, showing too much female skin in public was regarded as overexposure in the 1970s, so wearing miniskirts became illegal in South Korea. Carrying rulers and measuring the length of women's skirt, South Korea's so-called fashion police patrolled the streets and arrested women whose skirts were over 15cm from the knees.



Fig 4. Woman getting her skirt measured by police. c. 1970s. Courtesy of Korea Daily.

⁹ Seoha Min, "Korean Fashion Designers' Use of Cultural Expression and Its Influence on Their Design." *Fashion Practice* 7, no. 2 (July 3, 2015): 219–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17569370.2015.1045352>.

The Korean government insisted that women's exposure can make others feel embarrassment or discomfort. Korean society believed that women should not show their bare skin excessively or expose parts of the body in a public place. This sexist restriction under the government have been removed after South Korea became a democratic country, but society still sees women's exposure in terms of sexual connotation.¹⁰ According to *The Cultural Politics Of Short Skirts In Korea* by Michael Hurt:

Showing any amount of shoulder or upper arm is seen in terms of a very sexual connotation and is very much frowned upon. In fact, Korean-American visitors to Korea in the late 1980s still recount tales of Korean middle-aged women slapping them hard on the shoulders for having been exposed during the summer and scolding them for having ripped jeans, which were fashionable items in the late 1980s.

Sexism is still happening in South Korea. South Korean women's bodies and clothing choices are often policed and shamed by society. Because of the past belief and residue of Confucianism, South Koreans are conditioned to see women as objects rather than human beings.¹¹ According to *Let's Talk About the Toxic Way South Korea Is Handling Its Rape Problem* by Royce Kurlmelovs, women's bodies are over-sexualized, and this sexist idea brings larger problems such as blaming rape victims because of what they were wearing at the time of the assault. I strongly think that a woman should be allowed to wear whatever she wants, and should not have to cover up

¹⁰ Brian Ashcraft and Brian Ashcraft, "Why Mini-Skirts Could Become Illegal in South Korea," Kotaku, June 19, 2013, , accessed February 23, 2019, <https://kotaku.com/why-mini-skirts-could-become-illegal-in-south-korea-5991862>.

¹¹ Michael Hurt, "The Cultural Politics of Short Skirts in Korea," The Seoul Fashion Report, July 13, 2014, , accessed February 23, 2019, <http://www.seoulfashionreport.com/blog/2014/7/13/the-cultural-politics-of-short-skirts-in-korea>.

in order to be respected. In my work, I reinterpreted the typical shape of Hanbok, which can be interpreted as the root of Confucian fashion. It is a woman's decision to dress modestly or show skin, and it should not influence people's decision to respect women.¹²

Contemporary Hanbok

Today, Hanbok is not everyday wear for Koreans. It is usually worn on festive events or special anniversaries like Chuseok and wedding. While the conventional Hanbok is beautiful in its own right, there have been several efforts to change the fabrics, colors, and features of hanbok, reflecting the latest trend. Many Korean women reject to wear traditional Hanbok even on special occasions. Seo Kyoung-Duk, a professor at Sungshin Women's University, surveyed 300 Koreans in their 20s and 30s who live in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province, and 84.7 percent of Koreans in this age group do not wear hanbok during Chuseok. Respondents cited reasons as hanbok being "uncomfortable," and "unfashionable." To have people wear hanbok, they said, "designs would have to be modernized," and "the costume would have to become more comfortable to wear."¹³

In *Fashioning Tradition in Contemporary Korean Fashion*, Yunah Lee reveals how traditional Korean fashion changed during the twentieth century and performed

¹² Royce Kurlmelovs, "Let's Talk About the Toxic Way South Korea Is Handling Its Rape Problem," *Vice*, May 21, 2016, , accessed February 23, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/yvjnjg/south-koreas-rape-problem-is-actually-a-gender-inequality-problem.

¹³ Koreatimes. "Young Koreans Reject Holiday Hanbok." *Koreatimes*. February 05, 2016. Accessed February 23, 2019. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/12/113_197456.html.

case studies of two Korean fashion labels, Tchai Kim and Isae, who have challenged the typical images of Hanbok providing styles and brands that are relevant to local Korean characteristics as well as global fashion concerns.



Fig 5. Tchai Kim, Heori chima worn over cheollik dress. Tchai Kim (2014), 'Comment: tchaikim mosi heori chima (soldout)', Tchai Kim, 6 June, <http://blog.naver.com/tchaikim/220022174072>. Accessed 13 September 2016. Courtesy of Tchai Kim.

Tchai Kim's Hanbok is famous for a new style. Inspired by the proportion, line, and shape of the traditional Hanbok, Youngjin Kim, the designer of *Tchai Kim*, reinterpreted Hanbok for women which offer the same ease for a busy modern lifestyle. Focusing on the ease of movement, Youngjin updated Jeogori, the blouse of Hanbok, with a v-neckline in cotton fabric and patterns such as plaids and polka-dots. Moreover, the skirt became much narrower and shorter than the traditional Hanbok. The skirt was shortened to a below the knee hemline and it is tied around at the waistline instead of the breast in the conventional style. Although the form has been updated into modern style, *Tchai Kim's* Hanbok still adheres the beautiful features of traditional Hanbok.



Fig 6. Isae, Philosophy – How to Make Clothes 2009–2010, catalog, 2009, Seoul: Isae. Courtesy of Isae.

The design of *Isae* clothes is inspired by the traditional Korean attitude towards nature and traditional Hanbok shapes. *Isae*'s Hanbok also is reinterpreted for the modern lifestyle, however, compared to *Tchai Kim*'s Hanbok, *Isae* is much more loosely fitted, simple and natural. Colored by using natural dyes and made with one hundred percent biodegradable fabric, traditional Habbok emphasizes the harmony between human beings and nature. *Isae* placed concern for nature at the center of its identity, and the English text of the catalog states: "We love nature in its pure state. We make clothes capturing the purity, with light, wind and loving care". Two brands, *Isae*, and *Tchai Kim* made a significant impact in bringing Hanbok into everyday fashion.¹⁴

Methodology

Planning and Research

My initial purpose was to bring traditional Korean clothes, Hanbok, into everyday use. Since I thought Hanbok is a beautiful and unique Korean tradition that is

¹⁴ Yunah Lee, "Fashioning Tradition in Contemporary Korean Fashion." *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 4, no. 2 (October 1, 2017): 241–61. https://doi.org/10.1386/ifs.4.2.241_1.

disappearing and getting rejected by most of Koreans, I wanted to reinterpret the typical shape of traditional hanbok and make it modern. However, researching the history of traditional Hanbok, I learned that the form of Hanbok hugely reflects the sexism from Confucian philosophy and the concept does not fit into this era. I became more interested in studying Confucian culture and how sexism influenced female fashion in South Korea. I looked at photographs, books, newspapers, magazines, and articles about traditional and contemporary Hanbok, and sexism in Confucian philosophy. By the end of this stage, I decided to create an updated scene of Chuseok and Hanbok, which are the two great examples that reflect sexism in South Korea. I planned to create a Chuseok scene that women from three different generations are having fun instead of working and cooking the whole day. I wanted to make garments for three different generations because Chuseok is the only time when three generations can communicate and share their history and beliefs. Even though women from different generations have been through different histories and backgrounds, I want women to be more supportive of women of other generations by knowing what women share in common by wearing updated hanbok.

Ideation

When my idea was settled, I started to design new Hanbok that is against the sexism existing in traditional hanbok. I want my Hanbok to be more revealing and colorful which women in South Korea are banned to do. Women's bodies often get overly sexualized, and I wanted to express the freedom of women's bodies through my garments. I designed three different garments for three different female generations in

South Korea and I incorporate certain forms, line, colors, texture, and fabrics that hanbok uniquely has.



Fig 7. Garment sketches for middle generation.



Fig 8. Jeongchul Choi, *Geot Chima*, March 1st, 2015. In Book Hanbok Story. Seoul: Hanbok Center, 2015

This design (Figure 7) is for the middle generation. The design is inspired by the form and line of traditional Hanbok dress. Figure 8 is the picture of traditional Hanbok

skirt, Chima. It is a long pleated skirt which enabled women to hide their natural form. Moreover, it has strings in front of the breasts which is used when women had to tightly flatten their breasts. For my design, I incorporated strings, long, pleated and voluminous forms but I opened the middle part of Chima. In my hanbok, women no more have to flatten their breasts or hide their legs into an overly voluminous skirt. I also put more colors on the skirt part while adapting the same pleated form.

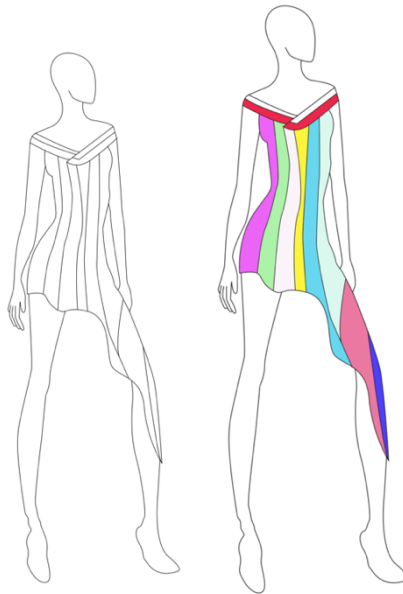


Fig 9. Garment sketches for the eldest generation.



Fig 10. Negin, Brian. *A model of a young girl in the late Joseon period wearing Saekdong Jeogori, that has been displayed at National Folk Museum of Korea, Seoul, South Korea. 2008. Flickr.*

This design (Figure 9) is for the eldest generation. It is inspired by the colorful Hanbok blouse, Saekdong Jeogori (Figure 10). Saekdong Jeogori was only worn by children in the past since old or married women could not wear colorful Hanbok. I changed the collar part of Saekdong Jeogori into straps of the dress. I also included colorful vertical lines it has to my design. Some part of the skirt is short and some part of the skirt is long as I combined the long traditional style with short contemporary style.

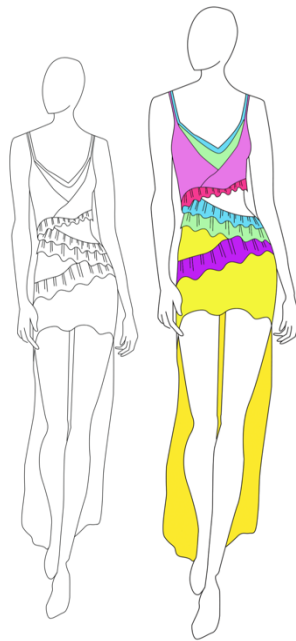


Fig 11. Garment sketches for the youngest generation

This design (Figure 11) is for the youngest generation. Since the youngest generation is not familiar with Hanbok, it has the least hanbok form compared to other generation's garments. I combined the design of the middle and the eldest generation. Three garments may seem very different from each other but they are all made out of Hanbok cloth and are inspired by traditional Hanbok design.



Fig 12. Decoupage Mannequins

I also put news articles about sexism in South Korea on the mannequins so that the mannequins can function as a little booklet. The news articles are printed in both Korean and English, so the audience can understand my work is about sexism in South Korea. Each mannequin shows what women in South Korea have been through. I also put some of the tableware that is used in Charye-sang, a table set of ancestors, around the mannequins in order to create a clear Chuseok scene.

Manufacturing and Display

The last stages of the process included making garments, putting news articles on mannequins, and putting the pieces together. I spent about 2-3 weeks for each garment and glued news articles on the mannequins using Mod Podge. I made sure arranging the news articles in different pattern and context in order to have different styles. First, I made a pattern for my designs and cut the fabrics. I mainly used a sewing machine to sew the fabrics together.



Fig 13. Cutting fabric with pattern Fig 14. Sewing dress parts with sewing machine

Creative Work

Can We Have Fun? is an installation which presents an updated scene of Chuseok, Korean thanksgiving day. The installation is comprised of three Hanbok dresses, Korean traditional costumes, and tableware from Charye, a feast set to value predecessors. Chuseok and Hanbok are examples of sexism in the Confucian tradition that has emerged and developed in ancient Korea. According to Confucianism, it is the sole virtue and duty of women to make the home, so only women of the family have to spend the whole holiday making Charye, while their husbands spend the day loitering, leaving all the work to their wives. Moreover, when Hanbok was made, society hugely reflected the Confucian philosophy, so the modesty could be achieved by concealing the female form. Therefore, women have to flatten their breasts by tightly wrapping them when they wear Hanbok, and the skirt and sleeve are made too long to move or work.

In *Can We Have Fun?*, both Chuseok and Hanbok have been updated to remove aspects which highlight gender inequality, and news articles on the mannequins show the continuous sexism and struggles of South Korean female. Hanbok dresses in the installation are colorful and reveal the female body which was banned in traditional hanbok that follows the Confucian ideal of modesty. Audiences can walk in the installation, and they can understand what South Korean females have been through by reading the news articles about sexism in South Korea on the mannequins while they see the garments. The colorful and bright Hanbok creates joyful and pleasant Chuseok scene as if the three women from different generations share their suffering, history, beliefs, and longing for freedom.

Conclusion

As a woman who grew up in South Korea and studied abroad in different countries, I always wanted to create something to address sexism in South Korea for myself, my family, and friends. Sexual discrimination is everywhere in South Korea and the residue of Confucianism affects a fundamental part of Korean society. Women raise their voices to fight against it, but most of Korean culture brands feminism a dirty word now. When I decided to create *Can We Have Fun?*, I started with the hope to spread the idea that women are equal to men and deeply rooted Confucian culture should be changed. Moreover, even though women from different generations been through different histories and backgrounds, I want women to be more supportive of women of other generations by knowing what women share in common by wearing updated hanbok.



Fig 15. Installation in the A&A gallery



Fig 16. Detail shot of decoupage mannequin

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