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BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

**Views on Korean traditional clothing in the South Korean English  
language press over the last seven years**

Pohled na korejské tradiční oblečení v jihokorejském anglickém tisku za  
posledních sedm let

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Podpis: .....

## **Abstract**

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This bachelor thesis explores the topic of Korean traditional clothing (*hanbok*) in contemporary South Korea. The main focus is on the portrayal of *hanbok* in the English Korean media. By examining and evaluating different newspaper articles, the aim of this thesis is to show the range of views. Some want to keep this attire traditional in the sense of preserving what they consider to be the pure legacy. By contrast, others contest the concept of such purity, or they emphasize a need to adjust this tradition to changed circumstances. Some want to make *hanbok* fashionable, trying to keep up with modern trends. And others ask how it can be incorporated into daily life. This thesis also tries to assess the public opinion on wearing *hanbok* by tourists and to describe the current discourse about *hanbok*, including its role and function for South Korea's entertainment industry.

## **Abstrakt**

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**Klíčová slova:** jihokorejský anglický tisk, tradiční oblečení, korejský oděv, *hanbok*, zachování dědictví, modernizace, polemika historiků

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá tématem korejského tradičního oblečení (*hanbok*) v současné Jižní Koreji. Zaměřuje se především na vyobrazení *hanboku* v anglicky psaných korejských médiích. Cílem této práce je na základě zkoumání a vyhodnocení různých článků poukázat na řadu názorů. Někteří chtějí uchovat tento oděv tradiční ve smyslu zachování toho, co považují za své dědictví. Jiní naopak koncept zachování zpochybňují, případně zdůrazňují potřebu přizpůsobit tuto tradici měnícím se okolnostem. Další chtějí, aby se *hanbok* stal módním a snaží se držet krok s moderními trendy. Jiní se ptají, jak jej lze začlenit do každodenního života. Tato práce se také snaží posoudit názor veřejnosti na nošení *hanboku* turisty a popsat současný diskurz o *hanboku*, včetně jeho role a funkce pro jihokorejský zábavní průmysl.

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## **Transcription**

This thesis uses the McCune-Reischauer romanization with the exception of the names of designers and *hanbok* ambassadors who have already made themselves a name using a peculiar and individual romanization.

## 1. Introduction

Clothing forms an important part of material culture. Clothes also have been and still are a signifier, whether this is about individuality, group belongings, class, or nationality. It is closely related to things such as customs, values, or history. This is also the case with the Korean traditional attire – *hanbok*. The quite nationalistic South Korea takes pride in their traditional clothing and tries to keep it a part of the life of Koreans. Therefore, this thesis examines the portrayal of *hanbok* in contemporary South Korea through various articles of the English Korean language press published over the last seven years.

The first three chapters following this introduction serve as a theoretical foundation, that is supposed to help with a better understanding of what *hanbok* actually is. Chapter two dives into the etymology of the word itself. Chapter three describes the visual and functional aspects of the *hanbok* design. The goal was to introduce *hanbok* in its standardized form. The description of the key pieces serves this exact purpose. Chapter four then briefly summarizes some of the design changes and purposes the attire underwent throughout the Korean history up until the 21st century based on political and geographical changes at the time.

Chapters five to seven are observations from the articles of the English Korean language press, that serve as a practical part to this bachelor thesis. The goal was to examine the recurring themes as well as different opinions voiced through the English Korean media. Some articles have more of a straightforward informative purpose while others really voice personal opinions in connection with contentious issues.

The practical part revolves around a wide range of topics. Some are related to the fact that the fast-paced world is quick to adapt and alter what is necessary to fit the modern needs and does so in various ways. The long-preserved tradition of wearing *hanbok* for important ceremonies is slowly changing in favor of more common wear. Some are convinced that the old-fashioned attire is no longer suited for contemporary society, while others are of the opposite opinion and try to preserve *hanbok* in its most historically authentic form.

Another topic is the promotion of the traditional attire through various events and programs. What are the efforts of the South Korean government to promoting *hanbok* to the local and global audience? Also, how is the correlation of *hanbok* with people from the entertainment industry related to its promotion?



Quite an extensive section is about some of the controversies surrounding the authenticity of *hanbok*, a topic that surfaces every now and then. Some of the contributions to this discussion question the efforts for modernization, or express the opinions about the *hanbok* rental industry, or mention the feud over the garment's origin. The final eight chapter offers a summary of my findings.

## 2. Etymology

For a better understanding of *hanbok* it is important not only to know the visual aspects of this traditional Korean clothing but also the etymology (origin of the word).<sup>1</sup> According to the Korean Cultural Heritage Administration, people started to use the expression *hanbok* during the final decades of the *Chosŏn* dynasty. Apparently, by *hanbok* the Korean attire of those days was meant, by contrast to foreign attire. The word appeared as a reaction to the introduction of Western clothes to the country. Presumably, the word *hanbok* did not exist before that time. It was created by combining the words *hanguk* (한국) and *poksik* (복식), in translation meaning Korean attire. An abbreviation and combination of these two words, the new coining *hanbok* has carried on the same meaning until this day without any significant change.

## 3. Design

*Hanbok* itself, however, is much older than the word and continuously underwent changes throughout the history of Korea.<sup>2</sup> In each historic period there were many differences in the design based on various factors. One of the factors that contributed to the differentiation of *hanbok* was social hierarchy. Given that royals were able to afford more intricate designs and materials, they did not hold back with showing off their wealth through their clothing. The more complicated and eye-catching *hanbok*, the better.

The need for different *hanbok* designs for ceremonies (wedding, funeral), and seasons further resulted in the creation of altered garments. Trends played a role in the everchanging design as well and mostly influenced the length of different *hanbok* components. Furthermore, since the past until the present day the structure of *hanbok* varies depending on the gender of the wearer. There are some elements that remain in both versions and some that used to be more gender-neutral. However, the key

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 11 April 2022); Löwensteinová (2018:100); Brown and Brown (2006:81).

<sup>2</sup> This section is based on Löwensteinová (2018:103); Lee (2013); Kim (2004:43).

components of female and male *hanbok* became more distinguishable as the years went on, creating the iconic silhouettes.

Despite modifications and alterations throughout the years, the essential form of *hanbok* remained the same. With the focus on the balance between lines and curves as well as the beauty of movement and flutter, this attire embodies the Korean aesthetics. Hence it would be difficult to describe every version and components of *hanbok*, here is a description of the standard version based on the *Chosŏn* attire, that remained until today as the cultural heritage and a part of national identity of South Korea.

### **3.1. Female *hanbok***

The traditional female *hanbok* consists of two main parts which include a jacket (*chogori*) and a skirt (*ch'ima*).<sup>3</sup> The combination of the two is often called *ch'ima chogori* and is said to create an image of “reserved beauty”. This term correlates to the fact that *hanbok* manages to draw attention to the delicate feminine beauty while covering most of the body with the long-sleeved jacket and the long skirt.

Since the jacket covering the bodice is cropped with a tighter fit and the skirt is high waisted and loose, the overall fit of the female *hanbok* is flattering to a wide range of body types. The adjustability of both pieces allows for alterations based on people’s personal preference.

As previously mentioned, movement plays an important role in both female and male *hanbok*. The female *hanbok* is often praised as allowing to show the beauty and elegance of movement through the swaying of *ch'ima* and the tie of *jeogori*. Accessories that are commonly worn with a *hanbok* are also said to help enhance the charm of subtle movement.

#### **3.1.1. Jacket (*chogori*)**

The jacket for both men and women is called *chogori*. However in the traditional *hanbok*, there is an obvious factor differentiating the two, which is the length. That was not always the case. With the female *chogori* becoming progressively shorter since its appearance during the Three Kingdoms period, the distinction between the two became more apparent.

The front and the back of the jacket create the “body” of the *chogori*, that ends right under the bust. A piece of folded fabric frames the top hem of this main part, creating a

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<sup>3</sup> This section is based on Löwensteinová (2018:103–106); Condra (2013:412); Lee (2013); Ministry of Culture (2009:29); Kim (2004:28); Clark (2000:108).

collar under which is another hidden collar that is traditionally white. The bottom hem of *chogori* slightly flares out which makes the jacket comfortable to wear with its spacious dimensions. The front of the *chogori* is constructed from two pieces of fabric that cross over from left to right.

The female *chogori* is tied at the bust using a wide ribbon (*korŭm*) that is sewn directly onto the jacket. One piece is connected to the end of the collar while the other one is sewn onto the front part of the *chogori*. *Korŭm* is not only used for its functionality. It can act as a decoration with the use of different materials, colors and patterns. Similarly to a tie in western cultures, there is a specific way to tie a *korŭm* to achieve an elegant appearance.

Other important parts of *hanbok* are the long sleeves attached to the bodice. Often different colored cuffs complete the long sleeves that have a slightly rounded shape at the hemline located at the inner part of the arm. The aim is to create a combination of long flowy elements and gentle curves.

### **3.1.2. Skirt (*ch'ima*)**

The term *ch'ima* is not only specific to *hanbok*, but it is a general Korean expression for a skirt. *Ch'ima* provides the iconic silhouette of a traditional female *hanbok*. As with the other parts, even the skirt has its variations. However, the classic *ch'ima* is a pleated skirt that wraps around the body and ties above the waist, with its full length reaching all the way to the ankles.

Even though *ch'ima* usually comes in one size and universal length, with the way it is fastened with fabric sashes, it allows the wearer to tie the skirt comfortably above or around the waist. The high waisted fit, the length and the adjustability of the skirt is what makes *hanbok* flattering to different body shapes.

## **3.2. Male *hanbok***

With female *hanbok* usually being the center of attention, the male *hanbok* sometimes tends to be overlooked, even though it plays an equally important role when it comes to the Korean traditional clothing. The main components of a traditional male *hanbok* are a jacket (*chogori*) as well as trousers (*paji*).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This section is based on Löwensteinová (2018:105–106); Kim (2004:29); Clark (2000:108).

### 3.2.1. Jacket (*chogori*)

Just as the female *hanbok*, male *hanbok* includes *chogori*, a Korean traditional jacket. With not many differences in structure, the male and the female *chogori* are very alike. It even underwent similar changes with shortening the overall length, but still managing to keep the male version significantly longer, extending below the waist.

There are no differences in the crossing of the front piece from left to right. The *chogori* is than fixed in place with *korŭm*. There can be differences in the width of the sleeves along with the tendency to omit the traditional sleeve cuffs, unlike the female *chogori*.

### 3.2.2. Trousers (*paji*)

A distinctive feature of a male *hanbok* are the typical trousers called *paji*. *Paji* are historically not male exclusive, but they managed to become the statement of the traditional Korean male attire. *Paji* are wide legged trousers, with quite a simple design. They are adjustable, just like all the *hanbok* pieces mentioned thus far. The most obvious adjustable part being the waist, that is tied with a cloth sash. Since the legs of *paji* are so loose-fitting, it is necessary to tie them as well. The bind at the ankles makes the trousers more practical and allow comfortable movement.

## 4. History

Any aspect of human culture is subject to historical change and thus also *hanbok* underwent numerous transformations throughout the past. Looking at these changes can provide insight into Korean history, since they were often the reflection of governance, social circumstances and other local conditions. Ultimately, *hanbok* evolved throughout the centuries into what we now know as traditional Korean clothing. All while visually representing the essence and values of Koreans in the various historical periods.<sup>5</sup>

### 4.1. Three Kingdoms period

*Hanbok* has a long history that dates back to the Three Kingdoms period (57 BC – 668 AD). Murals found in tombs, and the historical records in the History of the Three Kingdoms (*Samguk sagi*) suggest that there were only slight variations between the attire of the kingdoms Koguryŏ, Paekche and Silla.

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<sup>5</sup> This section is based on Löwensteinová (2018:101–103, 105–106); Lee (2013); Kim (2004:17–18).

The attire worn during this time was a two-piece *hanbok*. The *chogori* worn by both men and women was longer, with wider sleeves and a different method of tying than is known today. The way a *chogori* was fastened changed numerous times even during the Three Kingdoms period, from a front closure to a fold that changed from left to right. At some point during this historic period, *chogori* was also tied around the waist using a *twii*, a piece of fabric that served as a belt. However, during the sixth century the right folding method slowly became the standard way of tying the jacket.

Men primarily wore *paji* and women wore a *ch'ima*, with some instances of a more gender-neutral use. Men sometimes wore the skirt for formal occasions and women wore *paji* as an undergarment. A popular piece of clothing became a long outer coat *turumagi* worn over the two-piece *hanbok*.

There were major differences in the *hanbok* designs caused by concerns for social hierarchy. Having an attire made from expensive colorful fabrics and decorated with intricate ornaments was a way to flaunt one's social status. The aristocrats had a tendency to wear more layered clothing than the lower classes, with a variety of hats.

#### **4.2. Unified Silla**

After the nation's establishment as the Unified Silla (668–935 AD) the culture began to thrive. The development of interactions between the Unified Silla and China resulted in the influence of *Tang* dynasty, which among other things impacted the Korean traditional attire. Thus, the country adopted a more Chinese-style clothing as found in Kyōngju tomb.

The changes in design of the *hanbok* was again based on social status. Moreover, it was a way to distinguish various ranks of officials, members of the military as well as the members of the royal family. The distinction was often achieved by using patterns similar to the ones from *Tang* dynasty. Similar to the Three Kingdoms period, the high-ranking members of society used more expensive fabrics (silk, brocade, ramie) and complicated designs for their *hanbok*. During this time, the lower class was only able to wear white clothing usually made from hemp or cotton, exceptions being only for special occasions where the people were allowed to wear more colorful clothing.

#### **4.3. Koryō**

The influence of *Tang* dynasty grew weaker after to Mongol invasion to the new nation *Koryō*, which led to the increased influence of the Mongol *Yuan* dynasty. Koreans adopted some of the *Yuan* headwear along with a coat that was pleated from the waist down (*ch'öllik*). When it comes to the changes of the two-piece *hanbok*, during this time,

the *chogori* started to become progressively shorter. With that, the *ch'ima* started to be worn more high-waisted and became more of a statement piece for women.

The previously established system of rank distinction of *hanbok* changed into that of the newly established Chinese *Ming* dynasty. The attire in Korea, however, did not exactly correlate to the one of the *Ming* dynasty, being multiple ranks lower than its corresponding Chinese counterpart. The historical evidence (murals, portraits, historical records) of clothing worn during the *Koryŏ* period was found in the tomb of Pak Ik located in Miryang.

#### **4.4. Chosŏn**

In contrast with the previous generations, scholars of the *Chosŏn* dynasty were more keen on historic documentation. Mentions of the traditional attire can be found in the historical records of *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* (National code) as well as the *Sŭngjŏngwŏn ilgi* (Journal of the Royal Secretariat). In addition, artifacts found in tombs and royal portraits serve as similar historic evidence.

After the establishment of the *Qing* dynasty, the influence of China subsided. This resulted in subtle changes of the traditional attire. Nevertheless, the system of differentiation based on social status was still present and remained without any significant change until the end of 19th century. However, during the 19th century the attire signifying ranks became equal to the ones in China.

During the reign of the *Chosŏn* dynasty, the number of *hanbok* designs grew. Variations were now worn for different seasons and ceremonies, where even among the already spectacular attire were still more intricate design than those meant for daily wear. The traditional attire however stayed as the two-piece *hanbok*, which the *Chosŏn* dynasty managed to maintain as the standardized design going forward.

#### **4.5. 20th century**

With the beginning of the 20th century the introduction of Western clothing began. During this change, Koreans were wearing both *hanbok* and western clothing until the end of the 1950s. Nonetheless, the traditional Korean attire started to be used only for special occasions from the 1960s. *Hanbok* was no longer practical to wear every day during the 20th century and the influence of western fashion trends and clothing brands was on the rise.

New trends replaced old ones every decade and with elements such as the starting K-pop industry and exposure to Hollywood, fashion became more fast paced. However,

there have been successful attempts to return to the Korean roots during the 1990s. Korean designers came up with *hanbok* designs that would combine the traditional elements with modern ones to fit in with any current fashion.

## **5. Modernization**

There is a constant need for change and improvement in many fields of the modern era. What does this mean for traditions? One might expect that the form of *hanbok* would remain as the standardized version since its establishment. However, as in the past, the design keeps evolving. Especially during the 21st century, the efforts to make *hanbok* a fashionable clothing item have been increasing. The causes are nonetheless not based on the fashion trends only. Numerous designers and their brands focus on making *hanbok* more suitable for the contemporary world, making it an attire one can wear on a daily basis. They are trying to get rid of the prejudices and inconveniences that hold people back from wearing the attire independently on national holidays and family gatherings.

Some expressed their concerns of losing the centuries long cultural heritage by this modernization. But is it truly necessary to preserve the *hanbok* as the standardized version, or is it acceptable to move on from old traditions and allow the new generations to do what they are good at – modernization and improvement? The modifications of the traditional attire are often in accordance with admiration and respect for *hanbok*. It is possible that by these interventions of trying to implement *hanbok* into people's lives, the tradition could live on much longer and be more appreciated.

### **5.1. Daily wear**

*Hanbok*, a part of Korean culture that lasted for centuries is slowly disappearing from the contemporary society, as the standard *hanbok* is now worn mainly for special occasions (*Korea Herald*, 1 June 2021). Arguments of *hanbok* not being suitable for the modern lifestyle have appeared in regard to this statement (*Korea Times*, 5 February 2016). Reasons can differ from person to person, but some of the factors that make *hanbok* unsuitable for daily life might be its length, overall spacious dimensions, as well as the relatively difficult and specific way of attaching different components of the attire (such as the *korŭm*). Although there is a variety of *hanbok* design to choose from, it is still lacking in contrast to the fashion worn today.

Despite these arguments, the attempts of the government to keep this tradition alive have been increasing. The Korean government has begun its attempts of making adjustments and incorporating *hanbok* to fit the modern needs mostly through the

Ministry of Culture. Over the past three years, the ministry set out to create *hanbok*-inspired clothing that could serve as daily wear, allowing for self-expression as well as diversity, while incorporating an important part of Korean culture. This way, the purposely designed *hanbok* daily wear could fulfil the same needs that people expect from clothing in this day and age.

#### **5.1.1. School uniforms**

One way of familiarizing the new generations with traditional Korean attire and proving that it can indeed be incorporated into daily life might be through the creation of *hanbok* inspired school uniforms. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in collaboration with the Ministry of Education as well as the Korea Crafts & Design Foundation took this exact approach. As reported in multiple articles of the Korean English press like the *Korea Herald* and *Korea JoongAng Daily*, their school uniform project is meant to transform *hanbok* from more of a ceremonial clothing to one suited for the modern world.

The project began in 2019 but was launched about a year later, during 2020. Since school uniforms are mandatory in many Korean schools, the goal of the project was the implementation of uniforms inspired by *hanbok*. The typical school uniforms were altered to resemble *hanbok* by creating the traditional collar as well as adding a tie similar to *korŭm*. The designated designers also paid attention to preserving the overall shape of the male and female two-piece *hanbok*.

In the beginning there were 50 different designs with more added later on. Different middle schools and high schools were able to apply for this project that was meant for only 20 schools at first. Nonetheless, the number of schools involved in this project kept on rising. Some of which received funds from their office of Education while others received funds from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. Furthermore, other educational institutions are encouraged by the Korea Crafts & Design Foundation to adopt the uniform designs that are available on their website (*Korea Herald*, 11 July 2020).

#### **5.1.2. Work attire**

Clothing can be a great tool for portraying a personal or corporate image at the workplace. With that in mind, the Korean government – to be precise, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in collaboration with the Hanbok Advancement Center – continuously tries to promote work attire inspired by *hanbok*. With joint efforts they launched a project in 2021 that focuses on the creation of business casual clothing that could be worn at work.



The appointed designers created 64 looks for both men and women that could be worn as office wear. Similar to the previous project of *hanbok*-inspired uniforms, the focus was primarily on the overall shape and some other key elements of this traditional attire. Making the designs more suitable for everyday wear in contrast to the standard *hanbok*, as well as paying attention to the comfort of the wearer, this office attire should be able to compete with modern designs (*Korea Herald*, 1 June 2021).

The first attempts of the implementation took place in state-run institutions, since they act as a representative of the South Korean government. Foreigners visiting South Korea along with the general Korean public engages with the employees of these institutions on a regular basis. Thus, with this project, the government hopes to use this opportunity to preserve a long-established tradition as a part of the contemporary society while promoting the national culture to incoming foreigners. The Culture Ministry has also devised plans for the future expansion to other sectors outside the state-run organizations (*Korea Times*, 2 June 2021).

## **5.2. Brands reinventing *hanbok***

*Hanbok* has been gaining popularity among national and international brands. Even high fashion brands like Gucci started to take advantage of the beauty the traditional dress has to offer. And not only the dress, but other parts of Korean culture as well (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 9 October 2021).

When it comes to the clothing, the goal is to combine traditional aspects with modern ones while preserving the essence of what makes *hanbok* unique. The designers are experimenting with using modern elements that are commonly seen in today's fashion. Some of these include the use of various fabrics, not making *hanbok* gender specific or adjusting the fit of *hanbok* pieces. While making *hanbok* trendy is an important objective of these brands, making it more convenient and wearable have also been some of the goals.

This new approach received some criticism at first, but the more it has been shown, the more normal and praised it became. The designer now get primarily positive feedback from both Koreans and people from overseas, that are starting to take interest in the Korean culture as a result of globalization and the popularization of the Korean pop culture.

The well-known Korean brand Leesle run by the designer Hwang Lee-sle (Hwang Yi-sŭl) has been in the fashion industry since 2014. Hwang Lee-sle still focuses on the

preservation of the more authentic *hanbok*. She even owns another brand specialized on the manufacture of this traditional dress. However, the designer expresses the desire for altering the attire to make it more wearable and innovative. Adding lace, changing the materials to contemporary ones or changing the length of various parts (sleeves, skirts etc.) are some of the modifications commonly seen on the Leesle *hanbok*-inspired clothing. The designer wants people to feel happy while wearing her designs (*Korea Herald*, 5 February 2018).

Another example of a *hanbok* inspired brand is a brand in the making – Cycloid. The owner and designer Kim Cheong-eum (Kim Ch'ŏng-ŭm) has different goals in mind than the previous brand. The designer focuses on getting rid of the distinctions that hold people back from confidently wearing the modernized *hanbok*. With that in mind, the altered designs are not supposed to be assigned to a specific gender or make differences based on if a person is disabled or non-disabled. Cycloid is the first *hanbok*-inspired brand that acknowledged this problem and tries to make a change (*The Hankyoreh*, 1 July 2021).

Another fashion brand worth mentioning is Rieul. Led by Kim Ri-eul (Kim Ri-ül) – the owner and designer – the brand creates formal suits with *hanbok* touches. Inspired by the Korean traditions, he started to design fashionable suits that could be worn daily while aiming to spark peoples' interest in the culture of Korea. Kim Ri-eul quickly gained popularity on social media and became a well-known designer. His brand is now adored among South Korean celebrities such as BTS, Monsta X or Zico (*Korea Herald*, 30 April 2021).

### **5.3. Modern K-culture**

The presence of *hanbok* has been evident even in popular forms of the South Korean entertainment industry. Of course, *hanbok* plays a significant role in period dramas, since they try to portray an accurate image of the past. Other forms of media tend to feature the attire mostly on national holidays, weddings or similar formal occasions. However, quite a recent phenomenon has been the adaptation of the traditional dress in Korean pop music (K-pop).

Idols get attention from the media regardless of what they wear, nevertheless their way of wearing *hanbok* has been a recurring topic in the Korean English press. More articles keep taking interest in the incoming historical inspired concepts of K-pop idols, that try to incorporate some of the Korean traditional elements such as dance, musical instruments or clothing (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 20 April 2021).

One might think that since the *hanbok* is considered inconvenient for the modern world, that would also be the case for idols. It might be the case when it comes to the female clothing, with the spacious dimensions and length of a *ch'ima*. However, in the case of the male attire the *hanbok* is quite loose fitting, which allows the idols to perform comfortably on stage (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 20 April 2021).

The way a *hanbok* is modernized for K-pop idols differs from the one meant for daily wear. It is altered by keeping the key elements that make *hanbok* distinguishable (collar, *korŭm*, standard shape), but it is supposed to be more eye-catching, flashy and certainly trendy. To make the outfits more fashionable, the designers tend to use different fabrics, colors, shorten and lengthen certain elements or add trendy accessories and shoes.

The famous idol group BTS has played a big part in the globalization of K-pop in the past few years. Thus, their attire worn in the music videos as well as on stage did not go overlooked. Their songs *Idol* and *Taech'wit'a* made global fans curious about the *hanbok* inspired outfits (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 20 April 2021). In both *Idol* and *Taech'wit'a*, the garments maintained the traditional structure of *paji* and *chogori*, although altered in various aspects. Some of the obvious changes in *Idol* include altering the shape of the collar and *chogori* into more of a suit jacket, adding modern jewelry and wearing modern shoes. However even with these alterations, the overall shape stayed intact. The use of silk like fabric and a traditional hat helps to maintain the atmosphere. Similar ways of modernizing the attire are visible in *Taech'wit'a*, where the singer combines a royal like attire with more hip hop styled elements like sneakers, necklaces, and common trousers. The group did not focus only on the outfits but based their entire concepts around motifs from old Korea.

Girl groups are no exception to this upcoming trend. Blackpink with their hit song *How you like that* has been mentioned multiple times by the news articles. Unlike BTS, Blackpink incorporated only the modified *hanbok* dresses. That was still enough to get attention from the media (*Korea Times*, 9 July 2020). The basic structure of the outfits included a *chogori*, that was purposefully left untied in some cases. The *ch'ima* was for the dance purposes replaced with shorts. Except the colors, the fabric and patterns used were left quite traditional. The clothing was also decorated by a number of ornaments used to embellish the *hanbok*.

With the positive feedback the idols received from fans and the media, the implementation of *hanbok* into K-pop might be a good option for promoting the traditional Korean attire nationally as well as overseas. Moreover, it might be a good way

to familiarize younger generations with traditions that are slowly disappearing from the public eye.

## **6. Promotion**

South Korean government has been making great efforts to promote Korean culture in numerous ways. In the case of the Korean traditional garment, primarily the governmental institutions organize *hanbok*-focused events or programs that range from short-term to long-term. Some of the long-term projects include the already mentioned school uniforms and work attire. These projects want to gradually incorporate and keep the traditional attire as a part of the contemporary society.

Events often serve as a way of familiarizing people with the clothing as well as showcasing the beauty and traditions connected to the attire, such as the Hanbok culture week (*Korea Times*, 9 April 2021). Some events tend to only feature *hanbok* without the attire being the main topic. An example of this instance is the Seoul fashion week that only featured *hanbok*-inspired designs in the year 2018 (*Korea Herald*, 20 March 2018).

In most cases these ways of promoting are out of appreciation for the *hanbok* origins and the desire to keep the culture present. The following events and programs are only a small fragment among the various efforts of *hanbok* promotion.

### **6.1. Hanbok Day**

A day dedicated to the traditional dress is a great example of the importance *hanbok* has in the Korean culture. Hanbok day was officially acknowledged in 1996 by the Ministry of Culture. However, people working in the *hanbok* industry also played an important role in its proclamation. It was decided that Hanbok day will be on October 21. October is supposedly ideal for wearing the attire since the weather is neither hot or cold. Thus, it is perfect for wearing the long sleeved *chogori* with either the long *ch'ima* or *paji*. The main reasons for the creation of this special day were for people to celebrate and take a moment to think about the origins of *hanbok*, as well as encourage efforts to continue with the preservation and promotion of the attire (*Korea Times*, 9 April 2021).

### **6.2. Hanbok Culture Week**

An annual event in honor of the long-standing traditional dress is the Hanbok Culture Week. This event has been gaining the attention of the South Korean English press primarily in the recent years. However, it has been an ongoing project since 2018. It was created by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in collaboration with the Hanbok

Advancement Center. The event takes place during the third week of October. This date was chosen for two main reasons. One of them correlates with the opinion that October is ideal for wearing *hanbok* because of the slightly chilly weather. The other reason is that the week-long event is usually held around 21 October. This day marks the previously mentioned Hanbok day (*Korea Times*, 9 April 2021).

With a different theme or a motto every year (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 17 October 2022), this event has plenty of activities for its visitors in various parts of South Korea. The busy program includes workshops, theater plays, seminars, exhibitions and more, that are all related to the traditional attire. In 2021 for example, an exhibition showcasing the incorporation of *hanbok* into K-pop was part of the event (*Korea Times*, 9 April 2021). Many manufacturers and brands take the opportunity to show their repertoire and offer discounts for their designed *hanboks*. Some are left traditional while others are altered to fit in more with contemporary fashion. To encourage people to dress in an already owned *hanbok* or one bought at the site, multiple cultural institutions offer free or discounted entry to their grounds (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 17 October 2018).

The event has grown in popularity year by year, which has been evident with the expanding scale. During 2021 the event was organized twice, once in autumn and once in spring (*Korea Herald*, 8 April 2021). In 2022 it even became international. Korean culture centers from different countries all around the world (Brazil, Poland, Hungary, etc.) joined and arranged events with *hanbok* related activities similar to the ones in Korea (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 17 October 2022).

The government strives to bring awareness to the traditional dress through this event and to maintain its place in the life of Koreans. Hanbok Culture Week is also held in the hopes of people participating in events of this kind (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 17 October 2018), where people gather to appreciate a piece of culture and history.

### **6.3. Hanbok Expo**

A *hanbok*-focused exposition held by the Ministry of Culture with the Korea Craft and Design Foundation is the Hanbok Expo. It is a four-day event, that has been held every year since 2018 (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 23 August 2022). Even during the pandemic in 2020, the event managed to adapt to the times and move to an online platform (*Korea Herald*, 11 September 2020). Throughout the years, the exposition focused on giving space to *hanbok* manufacturers to showcase their designs. Some focused on keeping the attire traditional while others focused on modernizing and making the clothing fit the

contemporary needs. Nevertheless, the choice is left to the visitors that are annually able to view and purchase said designs with additional accessories (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 23 August 2022).

#### **6.4. Ambassadors**

Celebrities from the entertainment industry tend to get attention from the media when dressed in *hanbok*, as seen in the case of K-pop idols. The Korean government has taken this opportunity and decided to establish a post of a honorary *hanbok* ambassador. This project was launched in 2014 and since then, the Ministry of Culture along with the Korea Craft & Design Foundation name a *hanbok* ambassador every year. In most cases, an actress, female singer or an artist that focuses on both, is chosen for this post. For example, actress and former idol Jun Hyo-seong (Chŏn Hyo-sŏng) was appointed *hanbok* ambassador in 2021 and was replaced by the trot singer Song Ga-in (Song Ka-in) in 2022. The main purpose of this honorary *hanbok* ambassador appointment is to promote the traditional attire. Accordingly, the ambassadors typically wear *hanbok* for events in Korea as well as overseas. That way not only the locals can appreciate and maintain the tradition, but it is also a way to familiarize foreigners with an important part of Korean culture (*Korea Times*, 21 March 2022).

### **7. Controversies**

By examining various articles of the South Korean English language press it was possible to gain some insight into the range of opinions related to various topics. It is not possible to have everyone share the same views, so it is only natural that dispute would occur. This diversity of opinions of the South Korean government, the general public as well as *hanbok* designers and manufacturers are thus expressed through the media including those written in English.

The most heated debates about *hanbok* were on three main topics. One of them correlates to modernization. Even with people praising the innovation of tradition, not everyone is in favor of these interventions. The second debate has been about the rental *hanbok*. Many question its authenticity as historically accurate and worry that tourists do not wear it with the right intentions. The last topic that caused a veritable uproar in the South Korean English language press was the appropriation of the Korean traditional dress by China. This has been seen as controversial, with the origin of *hanbok* as a traditional Korean attire suddenly at stake. Raising the awareness of these problems usually leads to increased promotion of *hanbok* by the media as well as the government.

### 7.1. Keeping the tradition

The modernization of *hanbok* and its incorporation into the daily life has been on the rise in the recent years. As previously mentioned, designers keep up with the times and try to innovate and alter the attire to a form that people today would enjoy wearing. As said by the *hanbok* designer Lee Ji-eon (Yi Chi-ŏn) “I hope *hanbok* can be adopted into the popular fashion in various ways” (*Korea Herald*, 6 November 2018). The previously mentioned designer Hwang Lee-sle also expressed that “we need change and innovation” (*Korea Herald*, 5 February 2018). Many other brands and designers share similar goals and opinions.

However, while modernization received quite a lot of positive feedback, not everyone is in favor of altering the traditional attire to fit the modern needs. They do not see it as preserving tradition but rather destroying it. Some of the designers expressed their concerns in the Korean English language press. An example is the opinion of *hanbok* designer Koo Hye-ja (Ku Hye-ja), who believes that there is a need for distinction of *hanbok* for different occasions (ceremonies, popular media, everyday life etc.), since it is important for the people to understand when exactly it should be seen as traditional; if people are shown in the streets and the media the modernized garments, it could alter the perception of what is actually the authentic version (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 11 April 2022). A middle ground between the two completely opposing views are the opinions of some designers who believe that both versions of *hanbok* are valid, and thus should be acknowledged equally (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 11 April 2022).

The craftsmanship and the whole traditional *hanbok* industry have been in a state of decline. The tradition of making the attire that has been passed down for centuries requires skilled and knowledgeable sewing masters (*Korea Herald*, 28 January 2023). *Hanbok* made by machinery and the one made manually might look similar at first, but it is the quality and the subtle details that are important. The beauty and tradition lies in the whole process, not only the outcome. In its traditional form, *hanbok* needs the human element that makes it worth the appreciation as a cultural heritage (*Korea Herald*, 28 January 2023). Therefore, it is important that the old ways of *hanbok* manufacture should be preserved.

Not only the process of making *hanbok* is considered an important part of Korean culture, the wearing of the garment itself has been designated as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 11 April 2022). Wearing the traditional attire carries deeper meaning than just putting on the contemporary fashion pieces. It is a form

of respect that is related to a specific etiquette and customs (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 11 April 2022). Putting on the whole ensemble is not an easy task either. It requires knowledge about how to properly put on and tie the various pieces to fit correctly and look neat.

## **7.2. Tourist attraction**

When visiting South Korea, there are many opportunities through which tourists as well as Korean citizens can experience the culture, history and traditions. One of them is the opportunity to try on the traditional attire. The rental *hanbok* industry has been on the rise due to the masses of tourists visiting palaces and traditional villages every year. It is quite common to see people dressed in *hanbok* taking photos near these architectures. Since the most famous palaces (Kyōnbok, Ch'angdōk, Ch'angynōg, Tōksu) offer free entry when wearing *hanbok* (*Korea Times*, 5 October 2016), the rental shops take this opportunity to offer their services. People are able to borrow an attire of their choice. Some shops even offer to do intricate hairstyles to suit the overall look (*Korea Times*, 5 October 2016) and add accessories to go along with the traditional dress. This way, the visitors can fully immerse and experience the Korean culture while roaming around the historical parts of Korean cities.

Not everyone wants to spend that much money on a one-time experience and renting the dress is less expensive than buying it. This goes for Korean citizens as well. With the decrease of the traditional *hanbok* in contemporary society, less people buy a well-made *hanbok* since the price can get to exorbitantly high digits and they do not have that many opportunities to wear it (*Korea Herald*, 5 February 2018). It is also difficult to store at home and to take care of, since the fabric is quite delicate. The safe option for maintenance is then dry-cleaning, which is not very convenient and affordable (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 11 April 2022). Thus, the hour-long or day-long *hanbok* rental (*Korea Times*, 5 October 2016) is a great alternative.

More people are getting interested in the traditional dress as a result of the popularization of *hanbok* in the media such as K-dramas (Korean dramas) and K-pop. However, there has been a debate on whether it is actually a good thing. A lot of the designs used in popular Korean media, primarily K-pop, are not accurate. They use modern fabrics, patterns and various colors that are not authentic to the traditional *hanbok* since they are supposed to be eye-catching and dramatic. People then might get the wrong impression and take it as historically accurate (*The Korea Herald*, 29 September 2017).



There are however instances when people are aware of the fact that the design does not exactly correlate to the one of the past, but they prefer it nevertheless. It supposedly looks better in photos or it is similar to the designs worn by their favorite celebrity (*Korea Times*, 20 September 2018).

The concerns of people misinterpreting the altered *hanbok* as authentic have been expressed by multiple *hanbok* designers and shop owners such as Lee Hye-soon (Yi Hye-sun) (*Korea Herald*, 29 September 2017) and Kim In-ja, which is the holder of Korean Important Intangible Cultural Properties No. 89. The sewing master Kim In-ja appreciates the promotion of the attire through the popular media such as K-pop, since it spreads awareness about the traditional attire. She also expressed that it is important for people to enjoy wearing the dress. However, she is apprehensive about the impact that media has on the future of *hanbok* in its traditional form (*Korea Times*, 20 September 2018).

Opinions of the need to take action have been mentioned in the Korean English language press. Some expressed the need to differentiate between the modernized version from the traditional one. There should be set rules for wearing *hanbok* to palaces and in some cases even the omission of free entry for people dressed in the modified versions, since it should not be thought of as authentic (*Korea Times*, 20 September 2018). It can seem as going against the purposes of the free entry policy that is meant to preserve the tradition rather than making the attire into a form of costume that does not carry the meaning of the traditional dress.

There have also been statements that not only are the designs and materials used modernized, but the fabrics for rental *hanboks* are not of a good quality, making the attire less expensive. Supposedly Chinese or Vietnamese production of low-cost imitations is quite common in the *hanbok* rental industry. They might look appealing to the tourists with their flashy and colorful appearance, but they should not be mistaken for a quality manufactured silk *hanbok* (*Korea Times*, 20 September 2018).

All these rising problems regarding *hanbok* as a tourist attraction lead to the apprehensions that the rental shops as well as the tourists might be neglecting the importance of some key elements. Concerns of people not being considerate of the history and meaning behind *hanbok* have been mentioned by a *hanbok* designer Lee Hye-soon in an article for the *Korea Times*. She expressed her worries of people not taking the attire seriously enough. She wished for the people in the *hanbok* industry to not only focus on profit, but to “teach the wearers about its cultural origins and its significance” (*Korea Times*, 5 October 2016).

### 7.3. Cultural appropriation

The relations between South Korea and China have not been ideal especially in the last few years.<sup>6</sup> Things have been gradually escalating with multiple attempts from China to make (at least in the eyes of many South Koreans) Korean history and culture a part of their own. These acts led to the recent rise of anti-Chinese sentiment in Korea. In the following chapter, I summarize three of the most memorable bones of contention that caused an uproar among the Koreans and that the South Korean English press took a notice in.

The first one was The Northeast Project which happened in 2002 and lasted five years. Even though it has been a number of years since this project was conducted, the Korean media tends to bring it up when talking about the controversies that happen later on. The research project strived to study Chinese history and came to the conclusion that the Northern Korean kingdoms were under the rule of the Chinese empire. This incident caused Korea to see this as an attempt to steal their history and influenced the opinions of some Korean netizens even till this day.

Koreans saw this not only as an attempt to steal Korean history, but also as a way to steal the Korean people that now reside in China, which caused an uproar in the nationalistic country that South Korea is. This motivated South Korea to launch a research of their own that would hopefully resolve the dispute (one might also say: with an outcome congruent with Korean nationalist assumptions). Korea saw this as a need to show how much importance is attached to the ethnic homogeneity of Koreans, but some foreign geneticists (especially Japanese) criticized ethnic homogeneity and began to reconsider it (Hyun 2019:359–361).

The second controversy that occurred in 2021 was caused by the debate over the origin of *kimchi*, a common Korean side dish made from fermented vegetables. The whole situation started with a regulation from the International Organization for Standardization. Its goal was to manage the manufacture of the Chinese salted fermented vegetables. This regulation was not taken as a controversy at first since it did not in itself state that kimchi is of Chinese origin. It also clearly stated that the document is not a kimchi regulation. However, the Chinese media greatly escalated this regulation and presented it as a

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<sup>6</sup> This section is based, if not stated otherwise, on Yang Haley's very informative article "Dress at Winter Games' opening ceremony fails to impress," published in the *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 8 February 2022.

regulation for the kimchi manufacture as well. Korean people were offended by this statement and the issue got to the point where even the Korean agricultural ministry had to step in and state the Korean kimchi differs from the Chinese pickled vegetables, thus should not be confused with one another.

The situation got even worse with the most recent controversy. The 2022 Winter Olympics held in Beijing included an opening ceremony that is common for these types of events. During the opening ceremony, China decided to include its 56 minorities by having them carry the Chinese flag. However, what took the South Korean public by surprise was a woman dress in the traditional Korean dress – *hanbok*.

The ceremony received much backlash because it was seen as a form of cultural appropriation and distortion of Korean culture and history. The reasoning was that the global audience ignorant about the different minorities that reside in China might not question the true origin of this traditional attire and think of it as Chinese. Some also worried that “such an act will likely fuel anti-China sentiment among Koreans” (*Korea Times*, 2 February 2022). In view of the previous controversies, Koreans also questioned if the use of *hanbok* at the opening ceremony could serve some underlying political purposes. A part of the Korean public wanted to file an official complaint which the minister of culture was opposed to. During the opening ceremony, China did not declare that *hanbok* is of Chinese origin, which is why there was no need to take any legal action. The minister maintained that South Korean government should remain diplomatic and try resolve this issue carefully.

There are some explanations that try to clarify that the whole Olympics fiasco could be seen as a subjective assumption of an appropriation of the Korean traditional culture based on the previous feuds. The inclusion of the 56 Chinese minorities is a common sight at major events such as the Olympic games as well as the annual CCTV New Year’s Gala (Mack 2019). The same case was in 2008 during the Beijing Summer Olympics. However, no heated debate followed this appearance of Chinese minorities at the event. By including the minorities that make up a part of the Chinese population, the Chinese government strives to unify the nation.

The Chinese Embassy denied the accusations and assumptions connected to the case (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 10 February 2022) and later stated that the woman wearing *hanbok* was in fact of Korean origin (*Korea Times*, 12 February 2022). This quite important information was omitted in some South Korean media. An example of such an instance is an article of the *Korea Herald* that did not mention anything about the

woman's ethnicity (*Korea Herald*, 6 February 2022). In a similar vein, when the *hanbok* wearing performer at the Olympic Games is referred to as "the supposedly ethnic Korean woman" (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 8 February 2022), this sounds like an unwillingness to just dismiss completely all doubt regarding the Chinese explanation.

Instead of cultural appropriation it could be rather seen as honoring Korean roots even when the person was living in China. An interesting point was made by Scott Shepherd in an article for the *Korea Times* (12 February 2022), where he questioned whether wearing *hanbok* as a Korean with Chinese nationality can even be taken as cultural appropriation. After all, how can someone steal something from their own culture?

As stated in an article of the *Korea Times*, the South Korean government (specifically the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) put emphasis on the need to change China's ways. The allegation is that China lacks respect for its diverse cultures, including Korean, because it claims that all of them are ultimately "Chinese." These debates also resulted in heightened efforts of the South Korean government to put more focus on publicizing and promoting *hanbok* as an important part of Korean culture, especially when it comes being recognized globally (*Korea Times*, 6 February 2022).

## **8. Conclusion**

The main goal of this thesis was to examine the portrayal of the traditional clothing – *hanbok* – in articles published in newspapers of the South Korean English language press, from over the last seven years. My aim was to find the recurring themes as well as opinions in relation to the contemporary role of *hanbok*. My findings were the following.

A popular topic that appeared quite frequently in these articles was the modernization of *hanbok* and its incorporation into the daily life of Koreans. Designers who own brands focused on *hanbok*-inspired clothing were often interviewed, and from I gathered, they tend to garner positive reactions from the public. Since in contemporary society *hanbok* is mostly worn on special occasions, the transition of traditional to modern has started to be appreciated and desired. Thus, designers try to find innovative ways to alter the handed down garment designs while keeping the key traditional elements. Similar efforts have even been made by the South Korean government that tries to implement *hanbok*-inspired school uniforms and work attire into the daily life of Korean citizens. The modernized *hanbok* has also become a popular choice of K-pop idols who play an important role in popularizing as well as promoting Korean culture, both nationally and, with the recent rise of K-pop, even globally.

The promotion itself was another topic that appeared in a number of articles. The South Korean government has been trying to create awareness for the traditional attire and show what *hanbok* has to offer by organizing various events, such as the Hanbok Culture Week or the Hanbok Expo. The creation of a *hanbok* ambassador that tends to be chosen from the entertainment industry also serves as a way to promote the long-standing traditional garment, since these personas get a lot of attention from the media regardless.

A lot of the articles served only informational purposes and lacked the personal views and the special contributions to a discourse about *hanbok* that I had hoped for. Of course this changed when it comes to the various explicit controversies connected to *hanbok*. Consequently, the longest chapter of the practical part of this thesis is devoted to these controversies. I included the opinions of those who disagree with the overly modified versions of *hanbok* and would instead prefer to keep it in its historically accurate form. Since clothing is not only for show and carries deeper meanings, it should not be taken lightly. Similar concerns were voiced by people who are not in favor of the rental *hanbok* industry. Rental shops that make their outfits from less expensive materials and without the authentic design, are distorting the Korean tradition, only intent on making good profit. Tourists who rent these garments might get the (wrong) impression that they are wearing the traditional design of a *hanbok*.

A summary of some of the infamous bones of contention between South Korean and China forms part of the last chapter. This includes the various heated debates regarding the Northeast Project, the debate on the origin of kimchi, because it is within this context that we have to understand the debate on the Chinese “appropriation” (or not) of a *hanbok* during the Olympic games. Obviously, these disputes shifted the relationship of the two countries and affected the opinions of Koreans towards China negatively.

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