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Cultural Identity and Hanbok Evolution

*The Tension Between Staying True to Tradition
and Adapting to Modern Tastes*

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ABSTRACT

Cultural Identity and Hanbok Evolution

The Tension Between Staying True to Tradition and Adapting to Modern Tastes

Giulia INTROINI

Considered as one of the country's most significant and relevant cultural symbols, *hanbok* (한복) celebrates the uniqueness of Korean heritage and its strong bound with national identity; over time, the garment has evolved in function, concept, and aesthetics, mirroring the complex history of a nation that has never lost its sense of pride and identity. From its first appearance, dating back to the three kingdoms period, to the era of modernization, the first part of this thesis offers an historical and social overview of Korea, tracing a timeline of events that marked the transformation of the traditional garment into a true emblem of national identity. The advent of globalization and consequent growing foreign influence caused South Korea to begin searching for new ways to preserve and promote its cultural heritage; backed by the new soft powers gained due to the success of Korean Wave, the government launched a project aimed at the international commercialization of traditional Korean products, including *hanbok*.

The thesis explores how this strategy marked a new phase in *hanbok*'s evolution, presenting it to the public in both traditional and modern forms, aiming to restore its traditional role and widespread perception as everyday attire. Considering globalization as inevitable, cultural symbols must adapt to this phenomenon in order to survive; in the case of *hanbok*, alongside the benefits and new opportunities fostered, come challenges and controversies have emerged, threatening to strip the attire of its historical and symbolic meaning. Therefore, this work highlights the impact these issues may have on how *hanbok* is perceived, used, and understood nationally and internationally, while still recognizing the risks as predictable and understandable, naturally occurring when a cultural item is introduced to an increasingly global market. In order to support a more respectful and sustainable approach to cultural promotion, the final section proposes concrete strategies for future *hanbok*-related commercialization efforts, fostering a needed balance between heritage preservation and innovative evolution.

Keywords: Hanbok, Hallyu, Korean Culture, National Identity, Commercialization.

<국문초록>

문화적 정체성과 한복의 진화

전통을 지키려는 노력과 현대적 감각에 맞추려는 변화 사이의 긴장

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한복은 한국 문화의 독창성을 대표하는 가장 중요한 상징 중 하나로 여겨지며, 시대의 흐름 속에서 기능적, 개념적, 미학적으로 변화해 왔다. 이 옷은 한국의 복잡한 역사와, 그 속에서도 지속되어 온 국민의 자부심과 정체성을 고스란히 반영하고 있다. 본 논문의 첫 장에서는 조선 시대부터 현대의 세계화 시대에 이르기까지의 역사적·사회적 맥락을 중심으로 한복의 변천사를 고찰하며, 어떻게 한복이 국가 정체성을 상징하는 문화유산으로 자리 잡게 되었는지를 살펴본다.

세계화의 영향으로 외래 문화가 유입되면서, 대한민국은 자국의 전통 문화를 보존하고 강화하기 위한 새로운 방법을 모색해 왔다. 한류의 전 세계적인 성공을 계기로, 정부는 전통문화 상품의 글로벌 상업화를 추진하였고, 그 중심에는 한복 또한 포함되어 있었다. 이러한 배경 속에서 한복은 전통적인 형태뿐만 아니라 현대적인 스타일로도 대중에게 소개되며, 일상복으로서의 역할을 되살리고자 하는 새로운 변화를 맞이하게 되었다.

그러나 세계화는 기회인 동시에 도전이 되기도 한다. 통전문화의 보존과 세계적 확산이라는 긍정적인 측면과 함께, 대량 생산, 문화의 희석, 상업적 이용, 문화적 전유 등의 부정적 논의도 제기되고 있습니다. 이러한 현상은 한복이 지닌 역사성과 상징성을 약화시킬 수 있는 잠재적 위협으로 작용할 수 있다. 본 논문은 이러한 문제들이 한복에 대한 인식, 이미지 및 사용 방식에 어떠한 영향을

미칠 수 있는지를 분석하며, 문화 요소가 세계시장에서 살아남기 위해 겪는 변화는 불가피한 현상임을 인지한다.

끝으로, 문화의 지속 가능하고 건강한 확산을 위하여, 전통을 보존하면서도 혁신을 수용할 수 있는 한복 상업화 전략을 제안하고자 한다. 본 연구는 향후 한복의 올바른 상업화 방향을 모색하는 데에 기여하고자 한다.

INTRODUCION

“Considered as one of the most important cultural staples, hanbok defines the uniqueness of Korean culture, mirroring the turbulent history of a country that has never lost its own national pride and identity, while transforming and adapting to the necessities and events occurred in modern times.”

The first time I wore a *hanbok* was during my time in South Korea, while I was studying at Kyungpook National University, in the city of Taegu; that day remains one of the most vivid and meaningful memories of my stay: I had been welcomed into a cultural center where I had the opportunity to choose and wear the attire before taking part to a traditional tea ceremony. At last, I was embracing that very garment I had so often heard about during my academic studies back, especially in the university lecture halls.

Having grown up surrounded by wedding dresses from my family’s business, I’ve always held a deep and sincere admiration for garments rooted in centuries-old traditions; to me, they are not simply items of clothing, but powerful reflections of the bond that ties people to their own land and heritage. In the case of *hanbok*, which struck me from the very beginning as incredibly evocative, I particularly appreciated the balance it holds between style, practicality, uniqueness, and a profound respect for tradition, all woven together in a way that reflects Korea’s strong cultural identity —an identity unlike any other in the world. Coming from a different socio-cultural background, albeit genuinely passionate about Korean traditions, I found myself wondering whether my appreciation and enthusiasm might in some way distort or dilute the original meaning this symbol is meant to convey.

In an increasingly globalized and fast-paced world, traditional attire often finds itself subject to shifting perceptions and priorities. In this environment, *hanbok* is no exception: once regarded as an emblem of history, culture, and identity, the Korean traditional attire has been historically known for its ability to reflect social, political and ideological shifts encompassing the country’s chronicles. Considering this part crucial for a complete understanding of the purposes of the study, the research starts with a brief definition of *hanbok*’s main characteristics, followed by an overview of the chronological

development of the garment throughout the years, in order to display its cultural significance and deep bond with traditional Korea's ideologies first and nationalism later, when the garment starts to be recognized as a symbol of Korean identity and resistance against foreign powers. The research continues exploring the process of the transition from *Hallyu* to *Hallyu-Hwa* that, focusing on the interplay between cultural diplomacy, governmental support, and private sector innovation, transformed *hanbok* into a form of vernacular design, that fostered a shift in its perception from a declining tradition into a thriving industry, making it successfully integrated into contemporary culture, while preserving its historical essence as a vibrant and integral part of Korean culture and identity.

As a consequence, the attire nowadays faces a consumer market that values aesthetics above all else; from this reflection began my inquiry into the global spread of *hanbok* and its growing appeal to an increasingly diverse international market; my focus quickly turned to the depth of meaning behind such a garment and how that significance intersects with the expansion of its commercial presence: following the global success of Korean entertainment, the process of modernization and commercialization has extended to products that are not just consumables, but also cultural symbols; for this reason, I believe this phenomenon requires deeper examination, considering both its benefits and its potential drawbacks, so as to provide a well-rounded view of its current state; lastly, a balanced and forward-looking perspective on where this trend may lead in the future will naturally lead to my final, small contribution, through the proposal of future policies catering all *hanbok*-related sectors and initiatives—from production to consumption—, considering the need to strike a delicate balance ensuring that the traditional attire continues to thrive as a living heritage, allowing for its deeper appreciation both domestically and globally.

Alongside these reflections, I chose to include my personal experiences and memories correlated to *hanbok*, both in Korea and in Italy, as well as the results of a survey conducted via social media platforms. The questionnaire reached out to both Korean and international participants—each of whom encountered the garment in different ways—and helped underlining how commercialization has shaped local and global perception of the attire; their impressions, opinions, and suggestions led to a much

more balanced and peaceful conclusion than I initially anticipated when first undertaking this research.

I would like to sincerely thank all those who took part and supported me throughout this journey — one that focuses on the traditional Korean garment, but can, by analogy, be extended to many other cultural symbols that are now entering the logic of global markets and transnational cultures: these symbols must find a way to navigate the complex balance between cultural preservation and global relevance, in order to avoid being reduced to relics of a past that no longer exists. Lastly, there are many fashion-related sociological theories that I could have explored more thoroughly, but I chose instead to keep the focus on my personal experience, my thoughts, and above all, on the Korea I came to know firsthand: a country that fascinated me from the very beginning, and that has stayed in my heart ever since. I truly hope I have managed to convey my sincere interest and deep respect for everything this journey has represented to me.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The thesis begins with a brief introduction to the history of the traditional costume, intended to provide readers a comprehensive and informative overview to embrace *hanbok* as a symbol of Korean national identity with immense cultural value. The sources consulted for this first section are mostly historical and descriptive in nature, though carefully selected with particular attention to transparency and factual accuracy. In this regard, archaeological findings will be referenced to trace the earliest appearances of the traditional costume, dating back to the Three Kingdoms period; from there, the thesis will follow the evolution of the *hanbok* through the centuries, drawing on historical manuscripts and academic studies to highlight its remarkable ability to reflect the many historical, political, ideological, and cultural shifts the nation has experienced, dynasty after dynasty, up to the present day. As the focus moves toward more recent times, the analysis of changes in the *hanbok*'s development incorporates more academic research about national identity formation amid South Korea's development and modernization, particularly during the second half of the 20th century: this was a time when the country began to rediscover its true essence and uniqueness, starting a process of economic recovery that eventually extended to the revitalization of its cultural heritage. In such context, the *hanbok* proves once again to be a valuable lens through which examine these transformations: never ceasing to evolve, the attire continued mirroring the country's social and political changes, while gaining stronger meaning as a symbol of national identity that increasingly transcends earlier ideological and social limitations. This reading is supported by academic publications that explore these themes, even if they don't always focus specifically on how such developments have shaped public's perception of the *hanbok* over time, hence remaining sometimes limited.

At this point, the thesis moves into the core of its analysis; starting from a point where *hanbok* stands as a visual representation of Korean nationalism and pride, the evaluation of more recent sources underline an increasing shift towards the perspective of the attire as a vernacular design; this occurs in a relatively recent period, just after the rise of the *Hallyu* wave—a major cultural phenomenon that helped bring the commercialization of the *hanbok* to the global stage—; given the significance of this movement, the thesis includes sociological analysis conducted on its influence on global

culture and its role in promoting Korean identity and local cultural products. A key part of this discussion looks at the crucial role played by media content; hence, the thesis draws on existing studies, promotional contents and visual sources that explore how the *hanbok* has been featured in Korean entertainment and how it has been represented in media that have gained growing international attention: these representations have brought the *hanbok* and its meaning to a broader and more diverse audience, gradually shifting public perception from viewing it as a traditional and outdated garment to seeing it as a fashionable and trend-setting icon. At this stage, the thesis moves into the heart of its analysis, highlighting how two different methods of promoting the traditional attire have led to two distinct paths in the *hanbok*'s evolution following its entry into commercialization. Taking into account the efforts put in growing the presence of the traditional costume in the everyday lives of both Koreans and foreigners, particular attention is given to official publications issued by South Korea's cultural ministries and affiliated institutions, which have launched various programs and initiatives aimed at promoting the *hanbok* both domestically and abroad, aiming to reintroduce it into daily life recover its former perception. These efforts have also led to its increasing involvement of the garment in the tourism sector, as highlighted by studies and promotional material focused on heritage and cultural tourism; in this regard, reports from organizations —such as the Korea Foundation or the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism— offer a more detailed and in-depth look at cultural trends and the broader promotion of Korean culture overseas.

Targeting the same goals, the thesis explores a second approach that, under the demand of the global market, has influenced the way *hanbok* is produced, worn, and socially perceived, reshaping it into more modern and globally appealing forms; in this context, articles and studies on the Korean fashion industry have provided valuable insights, examining how businesses have adapted by incorporating traditional elements into innovative designs, to varying extents; these developments are presented in contents from fashion magazines and online platforms, which show the *hanbok* through more contemporary lens. In the absence of fully objective data on the economic outcomes of these initiatives, a selection of interviews with companies involved in the production and retail sectors of modern *hanbok* is also included; these provided valuable export and trade data related to Korean clothing and textiles, helping to identify the countries showing the

highest levels of interest —and, by extension, the greatest influence over how the *hanbok* might continue to evolve in the future.

These insights also fostered clear indications regarding the economic impact of *hanbok* commercialization in artisanal contexts and broader manufacturing sectors, illustrating how this trend is contributing to the garment's continued evolution in a positive direction. And while objective data on the direct economic impact of these initiatives may be limited, some export and trade figures related to Korean clothing and textiles have been included to highlight the commercial significance of *hanbok* production, both in artisanal contexts and in broader manufacturing sectors.

However, while this approach has certainly opened up promising prospects for *hanbok*-related businesses, it has soon revealed itself to be a double-edged sword: another key part of the study lies in fostering a critical analysis by targeting the limitations and challenges associated to the garment's commercialization —issues that need to be acknowledged and addressed in order to ensure a more balanced and sustainable path forward. In this regard, the goal would be the one to allow both traditional and modern forms of *hanbok* to maintain their cultural roots and continue evolving on the global market, without losing their deep connection to Korean national identity and heritage; these concerns, however, are often overlooked in government-backed programs and private promotional efforts.

To better understand and give weight to these issues, the research draws on articles and sociological studies that explore the broader implications of cultural commercialization; these sources explore concepts such as commodification, cultural appropriation, dilution, and exploitation, particularly in the context of modern adaptations and the *hanbok*'s use in rental services and tourism-related activities. The findings from these studies lay the groundwork for a critical discussion that calls for deeper investigation, paving the way for possible solutions. To build on this, the thesis incorporates the perspectives of various individuals and stakeholders involved in the process of cultural commercialization: their voices play an essential role in shaping public perception and individual engagement with the *hanbok*.

At the heart of the thesis is a set of new qualitative data gathered through surveys, interviews, and personal field observations, that offer direct insights from a culturally

engaged group of both locals and foreigners who had encountered *hanbok*—often through rental experiences—at least once in their lives, reflecting its reach and appeal as a cultural export; in these discussions, participants (mostly university students and young professionals) were invited to share their thoughts not only on the positive aspects—like the *hanbok*’s growing visibility and practicality in everyday contexts—but also on the more problematic dimensions, including cultural appropriation, questions of authenticity, and the risk of reducing the garment to a superficial tourist attraction. Each of the two versions has been divided into two defined thematic sections, one concerning traditional *hanbok* and its rental practice, and the second one regarding modern versions and their vision as innovative, everyday wear; the surveys redirected a mix of experience-based, cultural and interpretative questions, often asking for personal opinions and perceptions.

The data gathered through the survey indirectly highlighted the *hanbok* as a meaningful cultural bridge, bringing together individuals with a certain level of cultural awareness: in fact, the responses collected offered a surprisingly rich and diverse range of perspectives, which ended up significantly enriching the research. As we will see, interviews with young Koreans provided valuable insights into their attitudes toward *hanbok*—revealing a shift from seeing it as reserved for formal occasions to embracing it as part of everyday life; the same voices also expressed a generally positive view of foreigners wearing the attire, which in turn helped ease concerns about cultural appropriation—an issue that, at this point, seems to arise more often among foreigners rather than locals. Additional qualitative insights were gathered through direct field observations, carried out in both Korea and Italy, spanning everything from cultural promotion events to *hanbok* rental and retail experiences; these firsthand observations added depth to the research, helping to form a more balanced picture of how the garment is currently being marketed to both domestic and international audiences, allowing space to explore differences and similarities in the promotional strategies adopted by public institutions and private businesses.

The thesis concludes with a series of proposed directions for future promotion, informed by ideas shared by survey participants as well as suggestions drawn from various articles and studies on the future outlook of the traditional costume; still, building on the strong message introduced at the very beginning—regarding *hanbok*’s immense historical and cultural significance—many of the proposals and new approaches aimed

at further modernizing the garment should be implemented with caution: while innovation is welcome, *hanbok* remains a powerful symbol of Korean identity and uniqueness, and preserving its original values should remain a priority, especially in light of recent concerns previously mentioned. Alongside a wide range of proposed solutions and initiatives aimed at fostering a respectful and sustainable commercialization —addressed to all sectors involved in its production, promotion, marketing, and consumption— the thesis emphasizes the importance of strengthening the *hanbok*'s role as a symbol of national and cultural identity through long-term, mindful promotion strategies; a meaningful example of how to strike the right balance between tradition and innovation comes from the designer Kim Young-Jin of the modern *hanbok* brand “Tchai Kim”, which generously contributed to this study with an interview where she shares the values and methods adopted by a fashion house that is deeply committed to honoring *hanbok*'s roots, while seeking thoughtful and sustainable ways to support its development on the global stage.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the idea that reality is socially constructed and shaped by individual's interpretations based on experiences, cultural backgrounds, and historical context, this study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy; hence, rather than treating *hanbok*'s modernization and commercialization as a simple, observable shift, this approach focuses on how different stakeholders assign meaning to the garment within changing narratives. Concretely, by pairing subjective interpretations with *hanbok*-related government initiatives and brand promotions, this framework is ideal for exploring the evolving perceptions of *hanbok* as both a symbol of heritage and a modern lifestyle product, while allowing space to examine the outcomes of commercialization, including concerns and future challenges. Although positivism was considered, its focus on objectivity and measurement would have made it less appropriate for a study centered on lived experiences and diverse perspectives. At the same time, while critical theory provides relevant insights into the mentioned issues, generating controversies and debates within modern society that have been taken into consideration anyways, relying uniquely on this philosophy would have framed the topic in an excessively adversarial way; therefore, considering this research's aim primarily to understand rather than critique, interpretivism offers the most suitable lens for analyzing how *hanbok* is being reimagined in today's cultural and commercial landscape.

Rather than starting with a predefined hypothesis, this study takes an inductive research approach, focused on generating insights from real-world observations and actual initiatives. Induction allows the emersion of patterns and meanings from the data collected, making it well-suited for exploring and understanding how *hanbok*'s commercialization is experienced and interpreted by different cultural and social actors; by grounding its analysis in the lived realities of individuals and institutions, the study aims to build a nuanced understanding of *hanbok*'s evolving role in contemporary society.

Given the study's exploratory and interpretive nature, along with its inductive orientation, a qualitative approach is chosen in the exploration of the evolving meanings and perceptions of *hanbok* in modern Korean society. This method supported the collection of rich, contextual data from multiple sources, including governmental initiatives, brand strategies, and media influence surrounding the commercialization and

integration of the traditional costume into modern society. The qualitative research turns out to be especially suited for examining complex cultural dynamics, allowing for deeper insight into both the positive transformations and the emerging tensions. Hence, by prioritizing meaning-making and contextual understanding, this methodological choice fully aligns with the goals of the study, which are best explored through subjective interpretation, rather than quantitative measurement.

Following an interpretivist and inductive approach, the research follows an exploratory design that aims to offer a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of *hanbok*'s role in contemporary Korean identity. Supporting a deep examination of both the advancements and the critical debates emerging from its modern revival, the study combines multiple qualitative methods (academic literature consultation, document analysis, semi-structured interviews, commercial practices, digital media review, and field observations) to capture a contextually grounded view of *hanbok*'s evolution, that also takes into account individual's experience, interpretation and perception of the garment in the context of its commercialization.

In line with the study's interpretivist philosophy and inductive approach, a range of qualitative data collection methods is employed to capture the evolving dynamics of *hanbok* commercialization and its contested meanings; the first phase involves a review of relevant academic literature to establish the garment's historical and cultural foundations; these sources trace the garment's origins, symbolic role in Korean society and its visual and philosophical transformations across time, providing an essential context for understanding its deep connection to national identity and supporting the significance of wider interpretations of its commercialization, particularly in relation to debates on tradition, modernity, and cultural adaptation. Next, government documents and policy materials are analyzed, including official programs, cultural initiatives, and public promotions, whose documentary evidence reveals how institutional frameworks and state strategies are shaping the modern perception of *hanbok*, as well as its role in cultural and economic policies.

At the core of the study stand a semi-structured survey conducted with Korean locals —familiar with both traditional and contemporary *hanbok*— and international visitors engaging with Korean culture through tourism and media; all interviewees participated voluntarily and were fully briefed on the purpose of the study before giving

informed consent; anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research. Additionally, interviews with designers operating with modern *hanbok* are incorporated into the plot, providing a significant contribution. Fostering in-depth analysis, collected data provide a range of personal perspectives and shared opinions on the opportunities and tensions emerging from *hanbok*'s commercialization, mentioning themes such as cultural pride, authenticity, appropriation and identity negotiation. In addition, digital promotion materials, collected from brand websites, advertisements and social media content, are analyzed to understand how *hanbok* is framed and consumed in the contemporary era, revealing both aspirational branding and points of cultural contention. Finally, personal field observations have been conducted at cultural heritage sites, rental shops and exhibitions in and outside Korea, offering firsthand insight into how *hanbok* is worn, interpreted and experienced in everyday public settings by locals and tourists alike.

By triangulating findings from academic sources, institutional documents, interviews, commercial materials and personal observations, this study builds a rich and layered understanding of view of *hanbok*'s current revival and its implications, allowing for a deeper reflection on how commercialization can both celebrate and challenge cultural heritage, while also indicating possible paths to follow for sustainable and respectful cultural practice. In order to ensure relevance and diversity across the selected data, a purposive sampling strategy is used: participants for the semi-structured interviews have been selected based on their direct engagement with the garment — either through cultural familiarity, commercial practice, or personal experience — including Korean locals, international visitors and representatives from traditional and modern *hanbok*. Governmental documents have been selected for their clear focus on cultural heritage promotion and *hanbok*-related commercialization efforts, while field observations have been carried out in sites where the attire's public presence is most visible. During the whole process of data and information gathering and analysis, special care was taken to avoid misrepresenting or commodifying cultural practices.

After data collection, a thematic analysis is conducted to identify and interpret recurring patterns across the collected sources. This method is chosen for its ability to capture both expected and emerging themes within the complex cultural and commercial landscape of *hanbok*. Interview transcripts have been coded to extract perceptions, responses and viewpoints on *hanbok*'s revival and related controversies, while policy

documents and promotional materials were reviewed for collecting strategies and narratives around cultural identity promotion among globalization. Observational notes have been incorporated to complement and deepen the analysis, particularly by highlighting contrasts between public representation and everyday practices. Consistent with the study's inductive approach, the analysis highlighted both celebratory narratives and more critical discourses, supporting a refined understanding of how *hanbok* is being reimagined in contemporary contexts.

This study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged: the small, selected sample limits the generalizability of findings, as the insights reflect context-specific experiences from a reduced range of participants, rather than broad trends. Additionally, although data were triangulated across multiple sources, each carries its own potential bias: governmental documents and brand materials may present idealized narratives, while interviews and field observations are shaped by individual and cultural perspectives; additionally, the interpretivist and inductive approach involve an inevitable degree of subjectivity in data interpretation, despite efforts to remain reflexive and impartial. These limitations, however, do not undermine the study's value; instead, they highlight the depth gained through exploring lived cultural experiences and contribute to a richer understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding *hanbok*'s commercialization and its evolving contemporary significance, capturing both cultural opportunities and critical tensions surrounding its modern revival. In general, I use the McCune-Reischauer romanization system for translating *han'gŭl*; exceptions, however, occurs where other romanizations are more widely known (particularly, in proper names and for the Korean capital city Seoul).

CHAPTER I: *Hanbok* as a Symbol of National Identity

1.1 Defining *Hanbok*: Features and Characteristics

Worn for centuries, *hanbok* (한복) is far more than mere clothing: deeply embedded in Korea's history, cultural identity, and Confucian values, it stands as a symbol and reflection of the Nation's heritage and pride, embodying social customs, artistic aesthetics, and centuries of meticulous craftsmanship.¹ Other than being visually striking, its distinctive structure, features, and characteristics serve as a testament to Korea's enduring traditions and philosophies. Despite it may appear at first to be a daunting attire to be worn every day, *hanbok* maximizes practicality and comfort. Because *hanbok* is sewn in a curved fashion in accordance with the general shape of the human body, it allows easy movement and mobility; additionally, because its silhouette and flowing lines are not directly tied to the wearer's physique, *hanbok* can be worn by people of all body types without compromising individual dignity or elegance.²

Mirroring the ideals of simplicity, adaptability and harmony with nature in its fundamental design, *hanbok* features flat fabric compositions, straight lines, and loose, flowing shapes that drape naturally around the body, prioritizing ease of movement and practicality. In Korea, such philosophy also extended into the realm of architecture and living spaces with the *ondol*, an innovative underfloor heating system present in traditional houses that, while providing physical warmth, shaped a culture of sitting close to the ground, in connection with the surroundings; this practice, deeply cherished in Neo-Confucian principles, reflects a broader cultural pursuit of balance and coexistence with

¹ The Korean in Me. "Exploring the Cultural Significance of the Korean Hanbok." The Korean in Me, October 6, 2024. <https://thekoreaninme.com/blogs/hanbok-wear-and-care/exploring-the-cultural-significance-of-the-korean-hanbok/>.

² Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS). "Hanbok Embodies Age-Old Philosophies." Korea.net, January 28, 2014. <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=117325#:~:text=Although%20it%20may%20appear%20at,without%20compromising%20its%20original%20colors>

nature that is manifested in everyday life through the composition of traditional garments.³

Despite differentiations deriving from internal and external influences that will be further reviewed in the next sections, *hanbok* always consists of the same distinct elements, designed for both aesthetic appeal and practicality; the traditional structure of women's *hanbok* (*yŏsŏng hanbok*, 여성 한복) mainly consists of an outer skirt (*ch'ima*, 치마) and a jacket (*chŏgori*, 저고리), of two different colors with each other;⁴ they are paired with accessories including traditional shoes, socks, pendant decoration (*norigae*, 노리개), rings, and chignon ornaments.⁵ The *chŏgori* is a cropped and asymmetrical and long-sleeved jacket, with an overlap to tie with a ribbon (*korŭm*, 고름) on the wearer's right side and refined with a soft, rounded collar (*tongjŏng*, 동정); in its women's version, the jacket ends just below the bust, creating a high waistline that elongates the silhouette. The *ch'ima* is a voluminous, high-waisted and full-length skirt made of three widths of fabric gathered onto a two-and-a-half-inch-wide band, that wraps around the body, attached with shoulder straps and tied just below the bust with a simple ribbon;⁶ the overall structure and silhouette conceals the natural body shape, creating a drape flowing outward that embodies the essential feminine qualities of elegance and modesty cherished in the Confucian society: the garment's structural features have been originally designed in order to create an illusion of height and movement, giving a floating and ethereal effect, while allowing only subtle movements, mirroring the expectation of women to move gracefully, speak softly, and carry themselves in a way that aligns with the role of

³ Infokorea 2023. "The Development of Korea's Traditional Clothing Culture - 1 Changes in Traditional Korean Dress over Time." CEFIA Newsletter Vol. 235, February 2024. https://www.aks.ac.kr/cefia/webzine/2402/focus_eng.html.

⁴ D., Marianna. "Hanbok, l'abito Tradizionale Coreano." Web log. *GoGoHanguk* (blog), June 2022. <https://gogohanguk.com/it/blog/hanbok-abito-tradizionale-coreano/>.

⁵ Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST). "Korean Traditional Hanbok Clothes, Expressing Linear Beauty." Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of the Republic of Korea. Accessed May 8, 2025. <https://www.mcst.go.kr/english/useful/issue.jsp?pTab=02>.

⁶ DeLong, Marilyn Revell, and Sook Geum Key. "Korean Dress and Adornment." Encyclopedia.com, May 5, 2025. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/fashion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/korean-dress-and-adornment>.

women's quiet and obedient presence in domestic and family-centered spaces, rather than physical activity or labor.⁷

Compared to its women counterpart, the design of men's *hanbok* (*namsŏng hanbok*, 남성 한복) appears to be more linear and structured, reflecting a different Confucian philosophy that requests an emphasis on practicality, authority and mobility: its structure features straight lines and a dignified silhouette, as male wearers were expected to be active in public life, whether as scholars, warriors or officials. Consequently, men's *hanbok* presents a longer and looser *chŏgori*, extending to the hips or slightly below; the longer length, shorter ribbon tie and straight-cut design create a structured, balanced silhouette that conveys stability, control and rationality. Unlike women's *chŏgori*, which is tied at the chest by a shorter ribbon, men's version features a broader, V-shaped neckline, and it's typically fastened at the waist, displaying a more rigid and formal appearance; another defining feature of men's *hanbok* are the traditional trousers (*baji*, 바지), cut and sewn from rectangular and triangular shapes;⁸ unlike modern Western-style pants, they are loose-fitting and secured at the ankles and waist with cloth strings or belts; designed for practicality, *baji* allowed greater mobility, making them ideal for a variety of activities, from scholarly pursuits to horseback riding, displaying Koreans' historically active lifestyle. Also, the composed and authoritative appearance is reinforced even more when displayed in formal settings, as scholars and noblemen often wore a dark coat (*turumagi*, 두루마기) during colder seasons, showcasing their elevated intellectual and social status, contrasting with commoners' and laborers' tendency to wear simpler, shorter versions of *hanbok* for ease of movement.

⁷ Tsui, Christine. "The Design Theory of Contemporary 'Chinese' Fashion." Design Issues, May 21, 2023.
https://www.academia.edu/102104183/The_Design_Theory_of_Contemporary_Chinese_Fashion.

⁸ DeLong, Marilyn Revell, and Sook Geum Key. "Korean Dress and Adornment." Encyclopedia.com, May 5, 2025.

Other than its visual and practical features, *hanbok* showcases its cultural heritage through a rich variety of symbols and practices that are deeply rooted into the history of Korea: each feature, from the design to



Figure 1. Illustration of the female and male hanbok's main components. 2021. (korea.net)

the cuts and from the choice of the textile to the one of the colors, carries a deep meaning that is tightly bound with cultures, social classes, seasons and ceremonies.

In Korea, color has never been merely decorative, but it has always held deep symbolic significance, mainly based on Confucian ideals and social hierarchy; the hanbok reflects such vision, as its hues traditionally varied according to the status and occupation of the wearer, as well as its age and gender: while scholars and government officials wore more neutral tones such as white, navy blue, and brown to reflect humility and wisdom, military officials and higher-ranking nobles could wear brighter colors, representing their elevated rank, wealth and status.

While being associated to specific values, traits and meanings, every color of the *hanbok* is not only connected to the identity of individual wearer, but also to cosmic and natural values that follows the “Theory of the Five Elements” (*obsangsaek*, 오방색), which plays a pivotal role in Korean philosophical thought, influenced over time by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism; the theory argues the world to be based on the interaction of five elements, (water, fire, earth, metal and wood) that are respectively embodied in five primary colors (blue, red, yellow, white and green); since each human being is seen as a different combination of these elements, garments need to be chosen accordingly to them, in order to balance, contract or emphasize certain aspects of the individual, harmonizing the body with the surrounding environment, while also protecting it from evil influences, resulting in an overall contrast in complementary colors

that adds to the elegance and refined beauty of *hanbok*.⁹ Hence, this feature underlines that the garment also showcases Korea's strong bond with spiritual beliefs and philosophical worldview, that determine the application or the omission of specific details.

Looking more carefully into the theory, it is possible to spot the different meanings associated with the five primary colors, plus black and white; often associated to happiness, good fortune, passion and protection against evil spirits, red is the color mainly worn by brides during marriage and other celebrations, while it also symbolizes youth and beauty in unmarried women's attire. Blue reflects calm, dedication and stability; considering the ideals of purity and freshness, it is another color chosen by young women, together with the green, often worn by children as well, as it symbolizes youth and vitality, while also connecting to the concept of rebirth and continuity of life; on the other hand, black and darker tones, giving a sense of maturity, respect and dignity, tended to be preferred by married women and were commonly used in formal and solemn occasions. Reflecting center and power, together with energy and balance, the yellow was an exclusivity of the royal family. Lastly, white was traditionally connected to mourning and funerary ceremonies, as it gave a sense of modesty and integrity;¹⁰ however, since it was mainly showcased by lower social classes undergoing fabric restrictions and economic struggles, such natural and undyed features also served a strong contrast with the vibrant tones worn by nobility and officials. Lastly, while the Theory of Five Elements technically pushed toward harmonious color combinations, another popular color scheme was the one combining contrasting complementary tones, such as bright yellow against deep blue, or light green against solid red.¹¹

⁹ Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS). "*Hanbok Embodies Age-Old Philosophies.*" Korea.net, January 28, 2014.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ "SimCorner® Australia. "*Hanbok Color Symbolism: Decoding Traditional Meanings.*" SimCorner® Australia, February 15, 2024. <https://simcorner.com/blogs/travel-guides/hanbok-color-symbolism-decoding-traditional-meanings>.

Just like colors, further symbolical and practical meaning were carried by the textiles composing the *hanbok*, determining not only the importance of the wearer, but also the comfort and durability of the attire: despite modern versions will see the incorporation of synthetic fibers, traditional *hanbok*'s natural components were historically carefully selected for seasonality, comfort, symbolism, social status and context in which the attire was used. Specifically, lighter textiles like ramie and hemp were used for lightweight, breathable summer *hanbok*, while thicker fabrics such as silk, cotton and wool provided warmth and durability during colder seasons.¹² Such differentiation of materials accordingly to the seasonal needs underlines once again the flexibility and adaptability of the Korean culture, that has always tried to find a connection with nature through a respectful approach.



Figure 2. Color theory in seasonal hanbok. n.d. (hanbokbeauties.com)

Under the influence of Confucian doctrines, the aforementioned features were also used by the population to convey the wearer's position in the society: while commoners' *hanbok* was mostly made out of lighter and practical fabrics, aristocratic versions showcased their wealth and status, particularly during special occasions and formal ceremonies, wearing *hanbok* featuring luxurious materials with a wide number of fine embroidery patterns holding deep cultural and spiritual significance; again, the patterns' quality and manufacture changed accordingly to the gender, age and social status of the wearer, as royal *hanbok* featured most intricate and luxurious embroideries, while scholars and middle class commonly displayed simplified versions of the decorative patterns.¹³

¹² Tani's Story. "Hanbok by Season." 키키네 기숙사, June 7, 2023.
<https://kikidormitory.com/articles/647d8fdff82def1288472bf8>.

¹³ Lee, Samuel Songhoon. "Hanbok: Timeless Fashion Tradition". Seoul, Korea: Seoul Selection, 2013.

During ceremonies, *hanbok* carried further different meanings depending on the occasion in which it is worn, as every important event required a specific version of the ceremonial attire, designed to respond to a precise symbolical function. For example, wedding *hanbok* displayed specific characteristics that were varied based on the couple's rank, while the mourning attire was usually white: this color, other than reflecting purity and simplicity, also symbolized rebirth and the hope for the deceased's soul to reach peace in the other world, while stripping away all vanity and status.¹⁴ In contrast, traditional festivals like *Sŏllal* and *Ch'usŏk*, celebrating the family while honoring the ancestors, required more colorful and rich versions of the garment, reflecting the connection with the past and the importance of family bounds. Despite its fit might have been modernized and adapted to contemporary tastes, ceremonial *hanbok* is still worn today, primarily for weddings, traditional festivals and reenactments of Confucian rituals, showcasing the same symbolic motifs and vibrant colors. This enduring tradition reflects Korea's deep cultural roots and the long-lasting influence of Confucian principles on its identity.¹⁵

¹⁴ K_Guide. "White Hanbok and Korean Funerals: The Silence, the Color, the Meaning." Korean Culture Guide, April 12, 2025. <https://koreancultureguide.tistory.com/5>

¹⁵ Simodreams. "Sŏllal, Il Capodanno Lunare Coreano: Storia e Tradizioni." KOREAMI, February 10, 2024. <https://koreami.org/Sŏllal-capodanno-lunare-coreano-storia-tradizioni/>

1.2 Historical Development of *Hanbok*

*“The evolution of the Korean hanbok is a lens into the history of the country”.*¹⁶

Historical sources and academic documents reveal that *hanbok* has evolved over time, reflecting shifts affecting social hierarchy, politics and artistic expressions; consequently, many details and features have varied across different historical periods, adapting to the needs and tastes of each era, while its fundamental form, values, and bound with Korean culture has remained relatively consistent throughout time. This section will give a brief and exhaustive overview of Korea’s chronological development, analyzed through the lenses of Korean fashion, whose evolution and changes through history highlight the deep connection between *hanbok* and developments in the historical, social and economic context of Korea. Other than showing Koreans' abilities to survive, adapt, interiorize and reinvent local and foreign ideas, the reflection of such changes into the evolution of *hanbok* also reinforces the idea of the garment as a national symbol of Korea’s unique cultural heritage.

Rare studies about the era reveal that the Three Kingdoms Period (57 BCE – 668 CE) is when *hanbok* first appeared,¹⁷ as depictions in murals and painted ceramics found in tombs from this period, encompassing the kingdoms of Koguryŏ, Paekche and Silla, are the earliest available evidence of the clothing worn by the inhabitants of the Korean Peninsula, each with their own identity: located in the northern area and part of Manchuria, Koguryŏ was known for its military force and its aims to territorial expansion. At the same time, Paekche, placed along the southwestern coast, developed a strong maritime culture that opened it up to strong relationships with neighboring China and Japan. Lastly, Silla, situated in the southeastern part, adopted a more conservative approach, focused on the internal consolidation of power and cultural development,

¹⁶ Kwun, Ayleen. “One Garment’s Journey Through History.” The New York Times, April 9, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/09/style/one-garments-journey-through-history.html>.

¹⁷ Jeong, Sarah H. “*Hanbok, Korean Traditional Dress: A Selected Annotated Bibliography*.” BYU ScholarsArchive, 2006. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol2006/iss138/5>.

particularly following the embracement of Buddhism.¹⁸ Each standing with their own distinct political entities, ruling dynasties, administrative structure and military goals, the three Kingdoms engaged in extensive trade and cultural exchange with each other and with neighboring states, establishing contacts that eventually facilitated the spread of shared artistic styles, religious practices and technological innovations, that influenced the development of the traditional attire, as well. However, this situation eventually ended up in conflicts of interest and fierce rivalry among the states, fighting for sovereignty over the peninsula; this generated a strong sense of localized national identity and heavy distinctions between the three kingdoms, as emphasized in historical records publicized later, such as *Samguk Sagi* and *Samguk Yusa*.¹⁹ Nevertheless, even though compiled in posthumous times, these records tended to emphasize Koguryŏ, Paekche, and Silla as part of a collective historical narrative that, despite political divisions, shared the same historical, linguistic, cultural and ethnic foundations that served as a basis of a wider sense of Korean identity, creating a common ground for moral values and social structures that lead to the development of distinct, yet interconnected, artistic traditions and stylistic similarities.²⁰ Along with Korea's political and cultural development, this period saw the emergence of the *hanbok*'s foundational elements, that already reflected early Korea's cultural and historical identity, artistic innovations and societal values. The early *hanbok* maintained common primary elements of structure and design within the three kingdoms, sticking to *chŏgori* (jacket) and *baji* (pants) or *ch'ima* (skirt), originated from Korea's ancient traditions and designed focusing on their functionality and adaptability an agrarian lifestyle, with the implementation and adjustment of features, such as hats and overcoats, accordingly to the different climate and lifestyle needs.²¹ Additionally, regional and local variations were displayed in early *hanbok*, as a result of the influences from different external cultural exchanges, resulting in the introduction of new materials, patterns, and construction techniques, as well as local adaptations of the garment up to

¹⁸ Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS). "Three Kingdoms and Other States." Korea.net. Accessed March 9, 2025. <https://www.korea.net/AboutKorea/History/Three-Kingdoms-and-Other-States>

¹⁹ Cho, Hyo-sook. "Hanbok, the Timeless Carrier of Korean Aesthetics." KOREAN HERITAGE. Accessed April 9, 2025. <http://www.koreanheritage.kr/feature/view.jsp?articleNo=210>.

²⁰ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Three Kingdoms Period." Encyclopædia Britannica, October 11, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Three-Kingdoms-period>.

²¹ Cho, Hyo-sook. "Hanbok, the Timeless Carrier of Korean Aesthetics." KOREAN HERITAGE. Accessed April 9, 2025.

own cultural and political backgrounds, highlighting differences in identity perception and aesthetic preferences that played a significant role in shaping the style and construction of the garment among the three Kingdoms.²²



Figure 3. Painting depicting a hunting scene with men wearing hanbok. Tomb of the Dancers of Koguryō, Korea. 5th century. (Korean Cultural Center)

The *hanbok* of the Koguryō kingdom is the one believed to have established the basis of Korean traditional attire. This version, just like the others we will see, reflected the kingdom's geographical position, socio-political structure, militaristic nature and close interactions, in this case with northern nomadic tribes and Chinese Han, that provided high collars and added layers to the garment.²³ The result,

as vividly depicted in tomb murals, is a style characterized by fitted forms, long sleeves, and wide, baggy trousers, regardless of the gender of the wearer, that reflects a coexistence of practicality for movement and aesthetic sensibility rooted in the research of harmony with nature.²⁴

By contrast, the *hanbok* of the Paekche kingdom reflected the elegance and cultural vibrancy of a kingdom known for its advanced craftsmanship and artistic achievements, that led to the development of a unique style of traditional clothing, showing both the influence of local traditions and international exchanges occurred due to Paekche's strategic geographical location: the result of this blending with foreign aesthetics is a more decorative and elegant, yet functional *hanbok*, this time characterized by a simple and sophisticated incorporation of softer lines and intricate designs;

²² The Korean in Me. "The Rich Heritage of Korean Traditional Costume." The Korean in Me, October 9, 2024. <https://thekoreaninme.com/blogs/hanbok-wear-and-care/the-rich-heritage-of-korean-traditional-costume/>.

²³ Ahn, Hwi-Joon. "Development of Goguryeo Tomb Murals." JOURNAL OF KOREAN ART & ARCHAEOLOGY. Accessed February 10, 2025. <https://www.ijkaa.org/assets/pdf/136/jkaa-9-8.pdf>.

²⁴ Hanbok Heroes. "Three Kingdoms Period." Hanbok Heroes, March 10, 2020. <https://herohanbok.wordpress.com/history/three-kingdoms-period/>

additionally, fabric scraps uncovered from Baekje tombs suggest highly developed weaving techniques for elaborate patterns and rich colors during that time period.²⁵

While sticking to the original two-piece structure, Paekche's version emphasized harmoniously flowing lines, wider sleeves, roomier *baji* and lighter fabrics, which gracefully enhanced the wearer's movement and silhouette, highlighting a peculiar artistic sensibility that reinforced the values of harmony and balance as central to Korean design. For the kingdoms of Koguryō and Paekche, *hanbok* began to subtly reflect social distinctions, with the royal family and aristocrats wearing finely woven silks adorned with intricate embroidery, showing wealth and status and contrasting with commoners' modest and practical clothing, much less elaborate and colorful than those worn by the rulers.

Pre-Unified Silla's *hanbok* was more isolated and presented a style rooted in native Korean traditions, reflecting a stronger influence from neighboring kingdoms of Koguryō and Paekche, rather than from foreign cultures. Before Buddhism became dominant in the region, *hanbok* carried minimal religious or symbolic designs, as it was predominantly shaped by the practical needs of a society built around agriculture and shattered in small states, resulting in a utilitarian and simple design with tighter and closer-fitting silhouettes compared to the designs of latter Unified Silla. Materials such as hemp and linen were commonly used, while luxurious textiles were limited; the color palette tended to be muted compared to the one of the other kingdoms due to the limitation of hues typical of natural dyes. Nevertheless, the modest and simple style, designed to convey harmony and order through simplicity seem to redirect the king's ambition to unify the kingdoms under a cohesive and unique identity, with the help of Chinese Tang Dynasty.²⁶

²⁵ Suh, Mi Young, and Kil Soon Park. "Traditional Textile Materials of Baekje Kingdom." DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln, September 2008. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/135>.

²⁶ Lee, Samuel Songhoon. "Hanbok: Timeless Fashion Tradition". Seoul, Korea: Seoul Selection, 2013.

Such idea of unification, while being a politically divisive theme, underlined the belief that the peninsula was a single cultural and geographical entity and cumulated in 668 CE, as Silla allied with Tang China and defeated Koguryŏ and Paekche, finally unifying the peninsula under the Unified Silla kingdom (676-935), that further reinforced the idea of a shared Korean identity, in an era that brought stability, flourishing trade, and cultural development to the country.²⁷ As the kingdom expanded its diplomatic and cultural



Figure 4. Burial mound figures from unified Silla, Gyeongju, Korea. (National Museum of Korea)

relations, particularly with Tang Dynasty of China, Silla attire began to reflect a more cosmopolitan and sophisticated style, with the introduction of flowing designs and layered, looser-fitting garments, while being worn in a manner where the skirt was firmly wrapped around the bust, on top of the jacket, as displayed through clay feminine figures: a typical characteristic of Tang dynasty people style of donning dress that confirms the existence of a clear nod to Chinese fashion that opened up Korea to a new idea of elegance and refinement.²⁸

Compared to Early Silla attire's reflection of local traditions and a self-contained society, Unified Silla *hanbok*'s progression highlights a shift to a more artistic and spiritual aesthetic, underscoring not only the profound impact of international influences, but also the one of Buddhism on Korea's traditional clothing.²⁹ As it started to gain prominence and soon became the state religion, Buddhism served as an authentic unifying force that influenced all aspects of Silla society, expanding also to the ceremonial attire, presenting it in symbolic designs, motifs and styles, associated with the spiritual values of the period;³⁰ as confirmed by ancient records, clothing related laws were enforced

²⁷ Hanbok Heroes. "Unified Silla." Hanbok Heroes, March 5, 2020.
<https://herohanbok.wordpress.com/history/unified-silla/>.

²⁸ Lee, Samuel Songhoon. "Hanbok: Timeless Fashion Tradition". Seoul, Korea: Seoul Selection, 2013.

²⁹ Kim, Soohyun. "Cho Jihoon's Korean Aesthetics: The Concept of 'Meot.'" ESPES, January 1, 1970.
<https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=1050638>.

³⁰ Lee, Samuel Songhoon. "Hanbok: Timeless Fashion Tradition". Seoul, Korea: Seoul Selection, 2013.

during this period, highlighting once again the importance of clothing style in a traditional society and culture.³¹

After centuries of prosperity, increasing internal and external pressures weakened the kingdom of Silla, that ended up being replaced by Koryŏ Dynasty (918–1392); the new Dynasty immediately proceeded actuating a new program aimed to consolidate its government and legitimacy, through the cultivation of cultural heritage and improvement of Korean international presence, fostering an economic growth and a more centralized cultural identity.³² These changes were reflected not only in the political and social structures but also affected the evolution of traditional means; as fashion played an important role in the promotion of a cohesive identity, *hanbok* became a symbol of the dynasty's ability to integrate diverse influences under a unified cultural expression, while reflecting the evolving political and cultural ambitions, artistic sensibilities, spirituality and social structures.

The evolution in the style involved a diversification of structure, materials, techniques and stylistic elements of the attire, displaying a successful outcome of the diplomatic and trade relations entertained with neighboring states such as Song China, the Khitan Liao and Jurchen Jin states in Central Asia and other cultural influences flowing along the silk road.³³ These contacts introduced new materials, patterns and tailoring techniques, that got assimilated and adapted to local tastes. Eventually, Koryŏ was also forced to acknowledge a tributary relationship with the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), during which the civilian and military attire changed to that of the Yuan costume system.³⁴ However, despite the significant amount of external influences, Koryŏ *hanbok* retained uniquely Korean elements, resulting in a blend of foreign and indigenous features that helped promoting a distinct Koryŏ identity that showcased a new style of dress that served as a symbol of resilience, adaptability, and unity amidst diversity in an era of social, political and cultural changes.

³¹ Infokorea 2023. “*The Development of Korea’s Traditional Clothing Culture - I Changes in Traditional Korean Dress over Time.*” CEFIA Newsletter Vol. 235, February 2024.

³² Prorok, Carolyn V. “*Koryo Dynasty.*” EBSCO Information Services, Inc., 2022.
<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/koryo-dynasty>.

³³ Infokorea 2023. “*The Development of Korea’s Traditional Clothing Culture - I Changes in Traditional Korean Dress over Time.*” CEFIA Newsletter Vol. 235, February 2024.

³⁴ Lee, Samuel Songhoon. “*Hanbok: Timeless Fashion Tradition*”. Seoul, Korea: Seoul Selection, 2013.

While the basic structure inherited from the Three Kingdoms persisted in Koryŏ clothing, allowing an ease of movement that made it suitable for both daily life and ceremonial occasions, the *hanbok* during this era became more elaborate and diverse, reflecting both the refinement of Korean identity and the increasing stratification of the society. Additionally, Koryŏ era saw the skirt becoming to be more associated with woman's attire, while in the past both males and females were wearing it. Pants, however, were still worn by both men and women, as Koryŏ's historical narrations mention ladies riding horses wearing trousers,³⁵ while a new variation of *hanbok*, specifically for men, called *ch'ŏllik* (철릭) emerged in this era. Another significant influence reflected in the garment during in this era, has been the one exercised by Buddhism: becoming state religion, Buddhist aesthetics inspired lavish artistry and decoration in textiles, also introducing modifications of the garment in the proportions and lengths of the *ch'ima* and *chŏgori*'s silhouettes, making them longer and looser, reflecting a preference for a more refined, flowing appearance.

During the last phases of the dynasty, Koryŏ also began embracing Neo-Confucian values; the formation of social hierarchies caused people to start appropriating dress codes to social classes, gender and status; such development of a more defined social stratification was mirrored by the clear differentiation in *hanbok* designs, as the advancements of sericulture and innovative embroidery and dyeing techniques of the era allowed the creation of new, richer and colorful fabrics, that were often embellished with gold and silver threads and fine patterns, used by nobles and royalty to convey their prestige and rank. Social status was further displayed by the elite through layered styles imported from Song China, paired with elaborated accessories such as belts, hairpins, decorative pendants and headdresses, often enriched with precious materials. As we see, *hanbok* worn by royalty and court officials became increasingly opulent and differentiated during the dynasty, incorporating detailed new elements that provided an immediate recognition of the wearer's status. In contrast, commoners still stucked to simpler versions of *hanbok* with comfortable textiles with minimal decoration,

³⁵ Kočovská, Monika "How has the women's traditional Korean garment "hanbok" been modernized in terms of design in recent years?". Palacký University Olomouc, Faculty of Arts. 2024. <https://theses.cz/id/b3qspm/>.

prioritizing practicality in the daily use while reflecting Confucian ideals of modesty and frugality.³⁶

The Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1897) rose to power over Koryŏ in 1392, as the military leader Yi Seong-gye, after leveraging Koryŏ's weakened state from internal corruption, factional disputes and repeated Mongol invasions, seized the opportunity to found a new dynasty, through a coup d'état. He relocated the capital to Hanyang (modern-day Seoul) and replaced Buddhism with Confucianism, establishing it as the dominant ideology and the basis of the government, hence fostering order and peace based on the cultivation of harmonious interpersonal relationships and proper conduct, through education and science. This approach successfully led to the so-called “Golden Age” of Korea, during which great cultural and scientific advancements in many fields occurred, including the creation of the Korean alphabet — *han'gŭl*— by King Sejong in 1443, considered the most important cultural event of the era, as it contributed to drastically enhance communication between the people —especially commoners— and the government, determining Korea's progressive detachment from China and a consequent cultural advancement and claim of an independent National Identity that progressively rejected the idea of the Chinese superiority above all other nations, shifting the center to Korea.³⁷

While leading to a strong centralization of power, the unique adaptation of Confucianism as state ideology in Korea also expanded over all means, marking significant cultural, political, and societal changes that solidified Chosŏn's long-lasting hegemony on the peninsula and shaped all aspects of society, including fashion: sources about clothing from the Joseon dynasty include written texts, findings from tombs in the form of surviving *hanbok*, paintings, and many more. These sources provide valuable insights into the materials, construction, and styles of clothing worn during this period, revealing the ongoing discourse about fashion within the Joseon society.³⁸ In fact, the traditional attire reflected Confucian supremacy, ending up functioning not only as a

³⁶ Hanbok Heroes. “*Goryeo Kingdom*.” Hanbok Heroes, March 3, 2020.
<https://herohanbok.wordpress.com/history/goryeo-kingdom/>.

³⁷ Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS). “*Joseon Dynasty*.” Korea.net. Accessed February 10, 2025. <https://www.korea.net/AboutKorea/History/Joseon-Dynasty>.

³⁸ Kočovská, Monika “*How has the women's traditional Korean garment "hanbok" been modernized in terms of design in recent years?*”. Palacký University Olomouc, Faculty of Arts. 2024.

physical covering, but also as a tool for sustaining the state religion's ideals of social order and ethical practice on a daily basis and in all social classes, increasingly delineating a first collective idea of unique nation. Turning into a visual representation of one's identity, role and status in the society, the *hanbok* presented a more structured approach realized using standardized, yet differentiated and specific symbolic features and clothing styles that varied depending on gender, class and occasion, reflecting the rigid social stratification standing at the core of Confucian doctrine.³⁹

While the core design principles of *hanbok* have been mostly kept untouched, there are clear distinctions standing between early and late Chosŏn versions, as the garment evolved for about five centuries, along with the dynasty and around different and new societal values, cultural influences and practical needs. Early Chosŏn *hanbok* (15th–17th Century) reflected some influences from Ming China, with whom Chosŏn court of that time established tributary relationships and cultural exchange; this determined the introduction of cotton in Korea during the late 14th century, producing a revolutionary impact in the clothing industry of Korea.⁴⁰ With Confucian restraint and formality dominating over aesthetic choices, the garment presented conservative, simpler and more restrained designs and gender-specific features, while emphasizing external presentation as a reflection of internal virtues of social order, modesty, discipline and hierarchy.

These sartorial distinctions caused by a strong relationship between dress and Confucian governance got institutionalized and regulated by The State Code (*kyŏngguktaejŏn*, 경국대전, 經國大典, 1485): a proper legal code written and revised throughout the period that, stressing over the fact that the attire needed to be in accordance with one's status for the virtue of propriety to be exhibited, explicitly outlined what types of clothing were appropriate for different ranks and occasions;⁴¹ in this way, the regulated patterns and vibrant, yet orderly, hues of the garments could, in this way, allowed the

³⁹ Hee, Oh Jae. "Hanbok Class Distinctions: Royal vs. Commoner Attire in Korean History." Seoul blend, August 19, 2024. <https://seoulblend.com/k-blends/k-style/hanbok-class-distinctions>

⁴⁰ Jeong, Sarah H. "Hanbok, Korean Traditional Dress: A Selected Annotated Bibliography." BYU ScholarsArchive, 2006.

⁴¹ "Gyeongguk Daejeon" (1485). Grand Code for State Administration, Chosŏn Dynasty, National Archives of Korea.

spirit of the Nation and the essence of traditions to be revealed.⁴² Consequently to these regulations, this period saw the *chōgori* worn by women growing longer, reaching the hips and paired with a relatively slim *ch'ima* that fell in soft, straight lines, concealing the body; these structures, pretty similar to each other as in previous periods, gave a vibe of decorum that highlighted the Neo-Confucian values of modesty, femininity, chastity and familial duty.⁴³ On the other hand, men's attire still presented loose-fitting garments with long sleeves and wide trousers, building a practical design that conveys a dignified appearance aligned with Confucian ideals of restraint and intellectual cultivation, especially to scholars and officials, that eventually paired it with the *gat*, a traditional Korean hat made of bamboo and horsehair, which was an essential accessory symbolizing social rank and scholarly status of the wearer;⁴⁴ in the meantime, these increasingly gendered expressions of *hanbok* helped shaping individual and collective identities, instilling a strong cultural adherence to Confucian ethics. Again, while natural materials were still employed in commoners' *hanbok*, upper classes adorned themselves in silk garments, this time with minimal, yet elegant, ornamental features, as embroidered decorative patterns, along with their symbolical meanings, were rather restricted to ceremonial clothing; in addition to this, colors were still used as markers of social status, with bright, bold colors reserved for the elite and specific ceremonial contexts, while commoners wore undyed or muted tones. With the progression of the dynasty, ceremonial *hanbok* grew more elaborate and dynamic, as it started to merge traditional values, evolving aesthetic and practical considerations resulting in the introduction of local adaptations that increasingly set it apart from other styles.

Hanbok of late Chosŏn (18th–19th Century) have been influenced by the arrival of new fabrics and textures, that became increasingly more popular, especially among scholars and government officials. At this time, the domestic production of fine fabrics grew as well thanks to advancements in weaving techniques, giving birth to new variations in patterns that, while underlining fine Korean craftsmanship, also led to the creation of different regional styles. While aristocratic families living in the main cities

⁴² Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392 – 1865).

⁴³ Hanbok Heroes. “Joseon Dynasty.” Hanbok Heroes, March 5, 2020.
<https://herohanbok.wordpress.com/history/joseon-dynasty/>.

⁴⁴ Asia Society. “All about Korean Traditional Hats.” Asia Society, January 19, 2021.
<https://asiasociety.org/korea/all-about-korean-traditional-hats>.



Figure 5. "Secretly Going Out at Night". Painting by Shin Yun-Bok featuring the use of hierarchical perspective. 1858. (Korea Data Agency)

focused on the aesthetic of the garment, favoring luxurious textiles and elaborate embroidery that could represent their high-social status, local variations in the outskirts and countryside began conveying important adjustments, mainly driven by the need for practicality and adaptation to climate, season, resources and local customs, depending on the region; thanks to its versatility, *hanbok* could endure all variations while still sticking its core to

Confucian aesthetics; as a consequence, *hanbok* designs featured undyed, thicker and warmer fabrics, like wool or padded cotton, in colder northern regions, while in warmer southern areas it was rather made out of lighter and breathable materials like hemp and ramie. Finally, coastal zones needed the incorporation of simpler, functional designs that could suit fishing communities.⁴⁵

Along with regional variations, more innovations are showcased in the silhouette of women's *hanbok* in late Chosŏn, as the *chŏgori* significantly shortened, ending just below the bust, and tied with a wide ribbon called *tongjŏng*, that created a visual discrepancy between the upper and lower garments, also emphasized by the *ch'ima*'s bell-like silhouette, that was made even more voluminous thanks to the underskirt, while the high waistline was highlighted by a belt, or *hŏrit'i*.⁴⁶ At the same time, men's attire became more tailored and fitted, with slightly narrower sleeves and trousers showing a subtle shift toward practicality; these increasingly gendered distinctions highlighted the Confucian widespread ideology mandating that women stay



Figure 6. "A Spring Outing of the Young". Painting by Shin Yun-Bok displaying gender differences in garments. 1858. (Korea Data Agency)

⁴⁵ Tani's Story. "Hanbok by Season." 키키네 기록사, June 7, 2023.

⁴⁶ Cho, Hyo-sook. "Hanbok, the Timeless Carrier of Korean Aesthetics." KOREAN HERITAGE. Accessed April 9, 2025.

indoors and tend to house affairs, while men had the freedom to go outdoors and receive education.⁴⁷ Additionally, the choice of colors and fabrics in *hanbok* continued to be strictly tied to social roles and Confucian principles of order and hierarchy during late Chosŏn: while royalty and high-ranking officials continued to showcase their wealth and elevated status by wearing costly materials, naturally dyed in vibrant colors, commoners' *hanbok* was made of more affordable fabrics, restricted to undyed white or muted shades; emphasizing their functionality, these garments continued to lack any kind of patterns and decorations, making them suitable for labor-intensive lifestyles. However, commoners were officially allowed to celebrate events and ceremonies wearing more extravagant designs, including intricately decorated garments modelled after court dress, often made of precious silk.⁴⁸

The consequent rise of Nationalism and the adoption of a stricter isolationist policy against China at first, and Western imperialism later, cause the *hanbok* to begin serving as a vehicle for maintaining cultural continuity: despite the increase in trades, cultural exchanges, regional transformations and design innovations occurred over five centuries of ruling, the traditional version of the attire has always remained dominant, resisting all trends and social pressures, while fostering the collective conception of the attire as a visual manifestation of Korea's deeply rooted cultural and philosophical identity, whose enduring legacy represented both the timeless beauty and historical significance of Korean tradition. Considered by rulers a representation of the soul of Korean people, the abandonment of *hanbok* would have meant a loss of identity⁴⁹ and consequently warned the dynasty against an erosion of national identity if adopting foreign clothing, seeing it as a precursor to cultural colonization. In this regard, it is not an exaggeration to consider Chosŏn period the one that settled the foundation of *hanbok* as a marker of Korean nationalism, symbolizing a distinct cultural independence, and latter resilience.

⁴⁷ Hanbok Heroes. "Joseon Dynasty." Hanbok Heroes, March 5, 2020.

⁴⁸ Kim, Jenny (Jon Young). "Hanbok – Traditional Korean Dress." Victoria and Albert Museum, September 2023. https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/hanbok-traditional-korean-dress?srsId=AfmBOood7rZt1dSe8HVV2-QcDOzs7O9PT5p36hHD9PFEygcxy5_dzuLj.

⁴⁹ Excerpt from a Chosŏn royal decree, 1895.

Sticking to its own ideals, philosophy and self-reliance, the so-called “Hermit Kingdom” of Chosŏn strongly resisted foreign influences, even when they occurred in the form of naval attacks from France and the U.S.. Ultimately, the neo-Confucian preference for the austere led most Koreans to wear simple white *hanbok* without decoration, reinforcing the name Koreans had long called themselves: the “white-clothed people”.⁵⁰

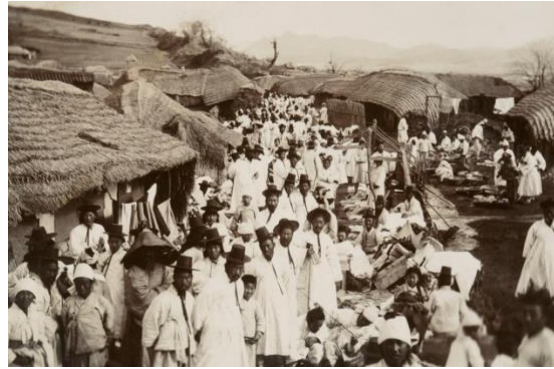


Figure 7. Koreans wearing white *hanbok* during a market day in a countryside town. 1906-1907. (National Folk Museum of Korea)

However, things started to deteriorate during the second half of 19th century, when Japan forced Korea to open ports to foreign trade missions, by signing the one-sided Ganghwa Treaty in 1876, under military threat. It is during these critical years that nationalist historiography to the Korean independence movement significantly emerged and widespread among all social classes.

Shortly after, despite the newly established Korean Empire’s trial to rebuild a strong and independent nation through the implementation of domestic reforms, the pro-Japanese government grew stronger inside the peninsula and, with the unilateral promulgation of the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty in 1905 and latter Annexation Treaty in 1910, the Japanese colonial government (1910–1945) started to gain prominence, as it began to ban and soon violently suppress all organizations or associations of Korean activists that were embarking on movements for independence; Japanese economic policies got gradually implemented, primarily for the benefit of the colonization, as they were based on resources extraction and labor exploitation. The National cultural identity was also subjected to systematic repression under the colonial rule, as the Japanese government fostered several cultural assimilation and restriction

⁵⁰ Kim, Jenny (Jon Young). “*Hanbok – Traditional Korean Dress.*” Victoria and Albert Museum, September 2023.



Figure 8. Korean men wearing white hanbok alongside uniformed guards. 1904. (Library of Congress)

policies on language, education and traditional costumes, aimed to suppress and marginalize the use of Korean key elements, including traditional attire: since early colonial period (1910s–1920s), Japan’s push for modernization played a crucial role in the popularization of Western-style clothing among urban elites,

intellectuals and younger generations, that embraced it as a status symbol; emphasizing Western attire as “innovative” and “civilized”, these policies were strategically tailored for overtly discouraging the “outdated” traditional Korean dress, along with the practices involving it, and more generally all the means associated with Korean identity the Japanese sought to erase. It is at this time that the term “*hanbok*”, simply meaning “Korean clothes” was introduced, to help differentiate Korean everyday dress from the influx of western-style clothing.⁵¹ However, to the time this term was coined, the garment has already undergone some hybridization from Chinese and Western influences.⁵² Such rhetoric got reflected in colonial institutions, workplaces and government offices of the time, as students and workers were forced to adopt Western-style uniforms.⁵³ The urban elite, often educated in Japanese schools or abroad, were the first to adopt such innovations as status symbol: sougning to portray themselves as modern and sophisticated, these groups easily got along with Japan’s emphasis on modernization and progress, that even propagated through media tools; consequently, in the urban context, *hanbok* soon came to be associated with rural life, tradition, and backwardness, reinforcing the colonial narrative that Korean culture was inferior to the Japanese one.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Kim, Jenny (Jon Young). “*Hanbok – Traditional Korean Dress*.” Victoria and Albert Museum, September 2023.

⁵² Birchwood, V. “500 Years of Korean Fashion Ft. Dr. Minjee Kim.” YouTube, December 15, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzPvbraB_G8

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Lynn, Hyung Gu. “Fashioning Modernity: Changing Meanings of Clothing in Colonial Korea.” *Journal of International and Area Studies* 11 (2004): 75–93. <https://doi.org/http://www.jstor.org/stable/43107104>.



Figure 9. Japanese banner for promoting non-white clothing during colonization rule. n.d. (The National Women's History Exhibition Hall)

Moreover, the 1930s saw Japan increasingly prioritizing industrial development in Korea for its own imperial goals; exploiting natural resources, agricultural products and labor, the colonial administration quickly extended its control over Korea's industries, applying further subtle economic pressures that undermined the production and use of traditional Korean textiles. Consequently, luxurious and traditional fabrics got increasingly inaccessible due to heavy taxation or redirection for imperial use, while Japanese textile industries began flooding Korean markets with cheaper fabrics;⁵⁵ left in a state of poverty, many Koreans found themselves economically coerced into purchasing Japanese clothing or adapting *hanbok* to these new synthetic fabrics. However, while providing an affordable alternative, such feature subtly damaged the visual distinctiveness of the garment, contributing to its perception as outdated and less desirable compared to Japanese or western attire. Other than materials, economic hardships also caused the design to change: since the population tended to prioritize durability and affordability over luxury and aesthetic, this period saw simpler styles with less ornamental features; while occurring under financial necessity, these adaptations also highlight the resilience of Korean culture, as *hanbok* persisted despite everything, even in its altered form, as a reminder of a stable and unmovable Korea's heritage. Eventually, the escalation of cultural repression cumulated with the "Ordinance on Names and Clothing" (창씨개명령, Sōshi-kaimei Policy) in 1939, that forced Koreans to adopt Japanese-style names and participate in rituals that reinforced loyalty to the Japanese empire; this process of De-Koreanization spread further as it also banned white clothing, ostensibly for sanitary reason (but actually to suppress Korean cultural identity and promote assimilation), and strictly controlled Korean cultural celebrations where *hanbok* would have played a central role, creating further social pressure to discourage its wearing, claimed to signify backwardness and a lack of loyalty to Japan. As anti-colonial sentiment grew strong in the face of intensified Japanese

⁵⁵ Kimura, Mitsuhiro. "Colonial Development of Modern Industry in Korea, 1910-1939/40." *Japan Review* 2 (2018).

colonial oppression, Koreans started looking for ways to assert their identity and resist cultural erasure, beginning to turn to symbols of their cultural heritage to assert their national pride and preserve their traditions. This is when *hanbok* emerged as a potent symbol of national pride, cultural resistance, and collective identity, serving as a visual reminder of the nation's independence and enduring cultural identity: during the 1940s, organized nationalist movements within Korea and abroad started adopting cultural symbols, including *hanbok*, in propaganda to support independence, highlighting Korean distinctiveness as a nation in contrast to Japanese imperialism;⁵⁶ the garment went beyond its role as traditional clothing and officially transformed into a unifying symbol of Korean identity, nationalism, resilience, and cultural pride that transcended all social classes, as both the rural poor and urban elite saw the garment primarily as a link to their shared cultural roots, rather than a display of a certain social status. Hence, the action of wearing the traditional garment amidst growing colonial pressures constituted an act of determination, resistance and resilience aimed to ensure the protection and survival of traditional symbols amidst what have been the darker chapter of Korean history. In this context, the white *hanbok* evolved into a visible assertion of Korean identity, turning into a silent, yet potent, emblem of defiance against Japanese efforts to suppress and erase Korean culture, despite Japanese authorities' efforts to diminish its presence with public campaigns.⁵⁷

Of course, wearing *hanbok* became more politically charged in urban areas where many Koreans adopting Japanese attire in order to avoid persecution or to fit in, contrasted with the ones that deliberately started to choose *hanbok* to demonstrate their nationalism and attachment to the heritage; at the same time, *hanbok* have been preserved more naturally in rural areas, where the weaker influences of colonial policies allowed the creation of a cultural reservoir. As the colonial period ended in 1945, with the declaration of Korea's liberation, *hanbok* retained Korean cultural identity, serving as a tangible reminder and emblem of the Nation's cultural endurance and survival through decades of occupation and oppression. Particularly, post-colonial celebrations saw many Koreans wearing *hanbok* to honor their heritage and to visually mark the end of Japanese rule by

⁵⁶ Minjung, Lee, and Kim Minja. "Dress and Ideology during the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries Korea, 1876–1945." *International Journal of Costume and Fashion* 11 (2011): 15–33. <https://doi.org/G704-SER000009452.2011.11.1.001>.

⁵⁷ Lee, Yeseung. "The White-Clad People: The White Hanbok and Korean Nationalism." Sage Journals, August 4, 2022. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/09213740221117811>

wearing the only attire that would have made them feel as close, proud and bounded to their roots as possible;⁵⁸ therefore, the post-colonial era displays a renewed interest in *hanbok* as a symbol of national identity and pride, rather than just a fashion item, with efforts made to restore, preserve and modernize its prominence in cultural and national celebrations.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER II: Commercialization of *Hanbok* - Opportunities and Risks

2.1 Commercialization of *hanbok*: Process and Evolution

Analyzing the process of commercialization of Korean culture, we can observe it's been a dynamic, multi-faceted process mirroring Korea's transformation from a war-torn nation to a global cultural leader. Becoming a globalized country, efforts to reconnect with traditional culture led to a *hanbok* revival movement that caused the shift of the garment's role in modern Korea from resistance to heritage preservation and reinvention, as its integration into pop culture, film, and global fashion made it accessible beyond nationalist discourse. In fact, from the preservation of traditions during post-war recovery of the mid-20th century, to the global phenomenon of *Hallyu* that turned the country into a cultural powerhouse in the 21st century, Korea has successfully leveraged its cultural assets to capture the world's attention and imagination, redefining its national identity. As it continues to evolve, supported by new cultural export strategies, this wave serves as both a celebration of Korean heritage and a testament to the universal appeal of its creativity and innovation.

Following colonialism, *hanbok*'s post-liberation revival displays the garment's reclaimed identity, re-emerging as a symbol of national rebirth breaking from Japanese control, as President Syngman Rhee (1948–1960) and other government leaders deliberately wore it in diplomatic events.⁵⁹ Unlike its earlier function as a tool of defiance or indicator of social stratification, this revival has positioned *hanbok* as a powerful emblem of Korea's national identity, focusing on heritage preservation and global recognition; paradoxically, such image and perception of the garment as a symbol of cultural survival was reinforced during the Korean War (1950–1953), which left South Korea demographically and economically devastated, creating widespread poverty and

⁵⁹ Lynn, Hyung Gu. "Fashioning Modernity: Changing Meanings of Clothing in Colonial Korea." *Journal of International and Area Studies* 11 (2004): 75–93.

social and infrastructure disarray:⁶⁰ the desperate situation alimanted a sense of loss and separation within Korean population, that worsened with the subsequent division of Korea into North and South, along the 38th parallel, as families and communities were forced to spread apart.⁶¹ These physical and psychological scars also concerned the preservation of Korea's cultural heritage, as historical landmarks and artifacts were destroyed and abandoned during the conflict, while traditional culture and practices, including *hanbok*, were introspectively preserved and kept away from global outreach in favor of survival and rebuilding of a nation left in ruins.⁶² Hence, the post-war period played a crucial role in shaping and reinventing the Korean national identity and cultural pride, under the influence of a rediscovered nationalism.

During the "First Republic" period, under President Syngman Rhee, Korea faced a massive push for economic recovery from the war through the financial aid provided by the U.S. under the Marshall Plan; prioritizing industrialization and modernization over cultural preservation, the plan mainly focused on urban centers as the core of the restoration program. Consequently, rural populations began migrating to the promising main cities, seeking for a new life and opportunities. This phenomena consequently accelerated the adoption of westernized lifestyles and clothing introduced by the U.S. military presence, causing a shift that contributed to further fragment cultural identity and marginalize the use of traditional *hanbok*, considered uncomfortable and incompatible for daily and modern life;⁶³ celebrating personal expression and distinction in its form and structure, western clothing deeply contrasted with *hanbok*, designed in close connection with the surroundings in order to be worn in everyday seated life.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Shin, Eui Hang. "Effects of the Korean War on Social Structures of the Republic of Korea." International Journal of Korean Studies, 2001.

https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/ijoks/v5i1/f_0013339_10835.pdf

⁶¹ Lee, Yeseung. "The White-Clad People: The White Hanbok and Korean Nationalism." Sage Journals, August 4, 2022.

⁶² Hee, Oh Jae. "The History of Hanbok: A Journey through Korean Dynasty Fashions." Seoul Blend, August 18, 2024. <https://seoulblend.com/k-blends/k-style/history-of-hanbok-evolution#:~:text=Preservation%20Efforts:%20Safeguarding%20Hanbok's%20Legacy,festivals%20keeping%20the%20tradition%20alive>

⁶³ DeLong, Marilyn Revell, and Sook Geum Key. "Korean Dress and Adornment." Encyclopedia.com, May 5, 2025.

⁶⁴ Infokorea 2023. "The Development of Korea's Traditional Clothing Culture - 1 Changes in Traditional Korean Dress over Time." CEFIA Newsletter Vol. 235, February 2024.

With the advent of the succeeding Park Chung-hee administration (1961–1979), South Korea entered an era of rapid industrialization and economic success, known as the “Miracle on the Han River”, which became a source of national pride that provided the means to invest in cultural industries.⁶⁵ However, modernization efforts led to a decline in *hanbok* use, as western suits, associated with progress and economic development, became dominant in business and education fields; hence, while modernization succeeded as an economic and manufacturing goal, it failed as the basis on which to create a new national identity.⁶⁶ No longer used as a daily item, *hanbok* remained relegated to traditional ceremonies, and eventually found new life and a way of survival in state-sponsored cultural initiatives and national celebrations aimed to heritage preservation. In fact, the president acknowledged the major importance of cultural heritage and its potential as a powerful and influential political tool; hence, given the potential impact of heritage-related discourse, a series of reforms and methods were employed in order to take control of the meaning and management of national heritage, culture and arts, charging the Office of Cultural Properties.⁶⁷ Therefore, the government began organizing or reviving cultural festivals that showcased traditional music, dance and art, fostering a sense of reconnection with national history, leading to a restoration and solidification of national pride and cultural identity, as emphasized by the nationalist narrative of the time. Additionally, reinforcing the idea of *hanbok* as an active symbol of Korea’s enduring cultural identity, it got recognized by the government as an intangible cultural heritage with the 1962 Cultural Heritage Protection Act,⁶⁸ followed by the establishment of production standards. Park’s government have also launched further initiatives to restore historical sites and preserve traditional crafts under the, building folk villages aimed to educate the public and tourists about Korea’s heritage. On the other hand, the authoritarian government controlled and suppressed media, arts and cultural production

⁶⁵ Korean Cultural Center. “*The Korean Economy – The Miracle on the Hangang River.*” KCCUK, 2020. <https://kccuk.org.uk/en/about-korea/economy/the-korean-economy-the-miracle-on-the-hangang-river/>

⁶⁶ DeLong, Marilyn Revell, and Sook Geum Key. “*Korean Dress and Adornment.*” Encyclopedia.com, May 5, 2025.

⁶⁷ Codruța, Sîntionea. “*HERITAGE PRACTICES DURING THE PARK CHUNG HEE ERA.*” cloudfront.net, September 26, 2013. <https://d3bxy9euw4e147.cloudfront.net/oscms-prodcms/media/documents/PrinciplesofManagement-OP.pdf>.

⁶⁸ WIPO Lex. “*Cultural Heritage Protection Act (Act No. 961 of January 10, 1962, as Amended up to Act No. 10000 of February 4, 2010), Republic of Korea.*” WIPO Lex, February 2010. <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/legislation/details/12943>.

through heavy censorship, limiting a free expression of creativity and commercialization; consequently, the Office of Cultural Properties institutionalized also assumed the role of omnipotent authority that was legitimized to decide what is Korean culture and tradition, what is worth preserving, how to interpret heritage and what to convey through it, using heritage to transmit the ideals of patriotism, self-sacrifice and independence.⁶⁹

With the end of Park Chung-hee administration, democratization movements and uprisings began to spread during the post-industrial era (1980s), culminating in the end of authoritarian rule and censorship in 1987. The subsequent political reforms created an environment of freedom of expression in cultural experimentation and revival that allowed artists, designers and musicians to reinterpret traditional culture for modern audiences, while considering its exportation outside the peninsula.⁷⁰ This period saw an intensification of efforts to preserve the traditional garment, that was surviving within society as a cultural relic, losing its popularity for everyday wear due to its impracticality; hence, designers began experimenting with modernized versions for formal and ceremonial use, proposing more tailored, lighter and simpler versions in order to suit and appeal to modern lifestyles and sensibilities. At this stage, *hanbok* influence was still highly localized and remained relatively unknown to global audiences, as it hadn't entered mass-market commercial fashion yet. However, these revival efforts have been further boosted by the advent of color television in 1980, while the subsequent visibility given to *hanbok* during the Olympics marked a first reinvention of the traditional garment as a fashion statement, fostering a renewed interest in traditional Korean culture, extended to a wider audience.

⁶⁹ Codruța, Sîntionea. "*HERITAGE PRACTICES DURING THE PARK CHUNG HEE ERA.*" cloudfront.net, September 26, 2013.

⁷⁰ Park, Seunh-Hyun. "*Film Censorship and Political Legitimation in South Korea, 1987-1992.*" jstor.org, 2002. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1225545?seq=1>



Figure 10. A Korean wearing the traditional hanbok holds a flag in a ceremony at the Seoul 1988 Olympics. 17 September 1988. (National Archives at College Park)

The 1988 Seoul Olympics served as a cultural milestone that marketed South Korea's opportunity to showcase its culture and national pride on the global stage, presenting itself as a modern, prosperous and culturally rich nation for the first time, after decades of political instability, authoritarian governance, and rapid industrialization.⁷¹ By introducing traditional performances and national attire, the country began to shape its own international image and to share its heritage with the world, through a global display; between all the symbols featured, *hanbok* played a pivotal role in showcasing Korean culture to global audiences: its incorporation into ceremonies and performances, featuring different styles and designs, successfully emphasized

Korea's efforts to balance its rich history and its aspirations for modernization, as a true global-oriented reality that still recognizes and sticks to its own cultural identity.⁷² This strategic display did not only instilled national pride, but also paved the way for *hanbok* to become a recognizable symbol of Korean identity in the years to come, providing a first and unprecedented opportunity to introduce *hanbok* worldwide as a visual emblem of Korea's heritage.

The 1990s marked a turning point in Korea's cultural development as the first phase in the process of globalization and commercial adaptation of *hanbok*: it is at this time that the garment started its transition from a traditional, ceremonial garment into an internationally recognized symbol of Korean culture. Still recovering from the authoritarian rule of the 1980s, the subsequent Asian financial crisis of 1997 further highlighted the need of economic diversification through a transition from a

⁷¹ International Olympic Committee. "Seoul 1988: South Korea Opens up to the World." International Olympic Committee, June 25, 2020. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/seoul-1988-south-korea-opens-up-to-the-world>.

⁷² Li, Helen. "The Seoul Olympics: A Study in Difference." Fulbright Korea Infusion, April 1, 2013. <https://infusion.fulbright.or.kr/the-seoul-olympics-a-study-in-difference/#:~:text=During%20Seoul's%20bid%20for%20the,display%20Korea's%20true%20image%5B13>

manufacturing-based economy to a cultural powerhouse. Hence, recognizing the potential of cultural industries and exports, the South Korean government started to actively invest in them as part of its broader economic development strategy: new investments and fundings for cultural exports began to be funneled into cultural production, firstly putting a specific emphasis on modern media formats, creating initiatives and infrastructures for cultural industries to flourish and establish Korea's reputation as a cultural exporter; this multi-phased process, taking the name of "Korean Wave" or "*Hallyu*", caused a progressive shift of the focus from a modern, western-oriented approach to an increasingly deeper embrace of traditional Korean heritage, that will eventually transform it into an internationally distinguishable symbol of cultural heritage and national identity in the face of global commercialization.⁷³



Figure 11. Traditional hanbok featured in the K-Drama "*Jewel in the Palace*" (*tae janggŭm*). 2003. (imdb.com)

Korean television dramas, also known as "K-Dramas" lead the charge during early *Hallyu*; the first productions, featuring modern themes and relatable characters, introduced foreign audiences to Korea's family-oriented storytelling and urban lifestyles, rather than traditional narratives. Nevertheless, while solidifying Korea's reputation as a producer of high-quality television, productions started to lay the groundwork for the global promotion of Korean cultural symbols, as elements such as traditional food, etiquette and attire began to be subtly incorporated into the plots; particularly, historical K-dramas served as true cultural ambassadors showcasing the traditional garment to overseas audiences for the first time, putting them in their original historical and social context and generating an increasing curiosity about Korean traditional clothing.⁷⁴ Korea's film industry emerged, just like K-Dramas, as it began shifting from the heavily censored and traditional storytelling toward more experimental

⁷³ Victoria and Albert Museum. "*The Hallyu Origin Story*." Victoria and Albert Museum, September 24, 2022. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-hallyu-origin-story#:~:text=Beginning%20in%20the%20late%201990s,social%20media%20and%20the%20birth>

⁷⁴ Emami, Solaleh. "*The Impact of Korean Dramas on the Global Fan Community*." Honorary Reporters, December 6, 2024. https://honoraryreporters.korea.net/board/detail.do?articlecate=1&board_no=25199&tpln=1

and modern narratives that targeted a younger and urban audience with plots taking deep influences from Hollywood action films, showcasing the country's creativity and storytelling ability.⁷⁵

Lastly, the late 1990s also saw the early stages of K-pop to begin developing, marking a gradual revolution of Korean music, introducing a new style influenced by Western genres like hip-hop, rap and techno, while addressing the lyrics to social issues resonating with younger audiences;⁷⁶ emerging groups' catchy tunes and upbeat songs, accompanied with synchronized choreographies, modern aesthetic and flashy outfits appealed to domestic and later Asian audiences, setting the standard for the industry of modern K-pop while becoming a vehicle for the promotion of Korean culture with the incorporation of traditional Korean elements in music videos and performances. This period also saw the first significant efforts to introduce *hanbok* to global markets, mainly through cultural diplomacy, tourism industry, and early entrepreneurial ventures. Although the garment was still considered as a domestic artifact, the 1990s' shift and the government-backed economic strategies and initiatives caused international awareness of Korean culture to begin to grow and gain symbolic foreign exposure.

Hanbok's introduction into international fashion circles and global markets fostered the first instances of its adaptation, as Korean designers began to reinterpret it for western audiences: the first South Korean designer to propose the Korean attire in a major fashion event was Lee Young-hee



Figure 12. Lee Young-hee's hanbok designs "Clothes of the Wind". Photo by Kim Jung-Man, 2018. (korea.net)

(이영희, 1936-2018), who debuted her *hanbok*-inspired collection "Clothing of the Wind" at Paris Fashion Week, in 1993;⁷⁷ after her, other designers began showcasing

⁷⁵ Debaser Magazine "100 Years of Korean Cinema: Part Three - The Korean New Wave." Debaser Magazine, January 14, 2025. <https://debasermagazine.com/onscreen/korean-cinema-history-part-3>

⁷⁶ Colón, Suzan. "K-Pop." Encyclopædia Britannica, May 30, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/art/K-pop>

⁷⁷ Hurt, Michael. "Clothing of the Wind." Medium, November 11, 2022. <https://medium.com/seoulacious-magazine/clothing-of-the-wind-e49c41915222>

fusion *hanbok* styles that incorporated traditional elements with modern silhouettes and western cuts, successfully gaining international attention.

Although commercialization remained limited to high fashion and niche markets, these early efforts established *hanbok* as a marketable fashion item, rather than just heritage costume, setting an early stage for future commercialization. Additionally, these years also saw the first attempts at selling the attire outside Korea, marking the emergence of *hanbok* exports and market presence in East Asia;⁷⁸ eventually, the market of the attire outside Korea did not only targeted wealthy locals, but also the Korean diaspora that incorporated it into cultural festivals, traditional ceremonies and weddings, recognizing it as a key identity marker for their cultural pride and a priceless tool for reinforcing a sense of belonging and reconnection with their ancestral roots. Even nowadays, Korean communities, adoptees and multicultural families around the world embrace *hanbok* as a mean of reconnection with their ancestral roots, demonstrating its continued role in identity formation and connection to their heritage, ensuring that their cultural identity remains untouched across generations.⁷⁹

By the 2000s, the global popularity of South Korean cultural content started to gain momentum and meet an increasing international recognition and interest thanks to the rise of digital technology allowing an easier expansion. Particularly, the advent of the first streaming and digital platforms made Korean dramas, movies and music increasingly more accessible among global audiences, marking their entrance into Western markets; however, while communities started to gather around Korean entertainment, fostering a fan-driven mechanism of cultural dissemination, traditional culture was still overshadowed. Nevertheless, even if *hanbok* had not yet fully entered commercial globalization, it started to represent Korean heritage to international audiences at least through media and tourism, as the increased foreign exposure to *hanbok* made it one of the first traditional East Asian garments to be reintroduced into global fashion

⁷⁸ Bok-rae, Kim. “Past, Present and Future of Hallyu (Korean Wave).” *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 5 (October 2015).

⁷⁹ Laurence, Nina. “Korean Canadians Use Hanbok to Connect with Motherland.” Korea.net, July 12, 2023. <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/HonoraryReporters/view?articleId=235184>

conversations.⁸⁰ Additionally, the increased number of foreigners visiting South Korea marked the expansion of the nation's tourism industry in the 1990s, pushing the Korean government, together with the Korean Tourism Organization (KTO), to promote early *hanbok*-related cultural experiences targeting both local and international visitors in historical sites: Seoul's traditional districts saw the emergence of *hanbok* rental businesses, primarily catering Japanese and Chinese tourists.⁸¹ Such approach marked one of the first clear signs of the costume being commodified as a commercial product in tourism and cultural consumption, rather than just a traditional garment, setting the groundwork for its transformation into a globalized fashion item in the following years.

The transition from *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) to *Hallyu-Hwa* (Korean Wave Fever) have been fostered by a strategic evolution in South Korea's approach to nation branding and cultural export that, unlike industrial exports, not only generated revenue, also had the unique ability to shape global perceptions of Korea as an innovative and culturally rich player; this realization occurred in the mid 2000s and marked the beginning of a state-led approach to cultural globalization, transitioning from the organic growth of *Hallyu*, to a progressive incorporation of deeper connections to Korea's historical and cultural heritage, leading to the more institutionalized model of *Hallyu-Hwa*, that expanded its scope to include what was initially extrinsic to *Hallyu*, that is to say, fields and objects bearing no direct relevance to media-based popular cultures, for example tourism, cosmetics, local traditional artifacts (including *hanbok*), medical services and educational programs. As "hwa" is equivalent to "-ize" in English, denotative of "to cause to be" or "to become"⁸², *Hallyu-Hwa* fostered a structured and strategical reincorporation of heritage-based symbols into contemporary cultural exports through entertainment and tourism campaigns, as well as governmental initiatives and strategic collaborations with the private, entertainment and tourism sector that aimed to turn Korea's cultural products into powerful tools of cultural diplomacy, economic growth and soft power influence worldwide, crafting a recognizable and positive identity that marked a crucial turning

⁸⁰ Jung Yun, So, Ju Yeun Jang, and Ha Hyung Lee. "A Study on the Current Status of Hanbok Education in the Era of Fashion Hanbok." *Journal of the Korean Society of Clothing and Textiles* 46 (2022): 687–703. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5850/JKSCT.2022.46.4.687>.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Choi, JungBong. "Hallyu vs Hallyu-Hwa." Academia.edu, January 21, 2013. https://www.academia.edu/2440100/Hallyu_vs_Hallyu_hwa

point for Korea's global visibility, while creating new economic opportunities in the fields of tourism, luxury fashion and cosmetics industries.⁸³

*"Hallyu is a godsend to realize the nation's intense desire to break away from the wretched trajectories of modern history. Hallyu is taken, deep in the national psyche of Korea, as a holy vehicle to exit the long, dark tunnel of postcolonial and Cold War adversities fraught with war, underdevelopment, tyranny, corruption, international obscurity, and indignity; a vehicle motored by the nation's determination to sprint to the stage of wealth, autonomy, and pride."*⁸⁴

Historical narratives start to be presented as adaptable and globally relevant, rather than rigid and outdated, contributing to broadening Korea's cultural impact while allowing the country to distinguish itself from other cultural exporters, reinforcing its uniqueness while maintaining global appeal. Among the traditional symbols involved, *hanbok* has been at the forefront of *Hallyu-Hwa* that, fostering a revitalization of the garment, caused it to successfully transcend its local status, evolving from a heritage artifact to a versatile fashion statement as it entered the global cultural consciousness, turning into a symbol of Korea's soft power worldwide; following the global demand, its process of commercialization unfolded across multiple sectors aiming to sustain its cultural relevance in tourism, events and daily life, while expanding its global reach.

In addition to this, the recent push towards heritage promotion shifted to a urgent need to preserve *hanbok* as a crucial component of Korean national identity, particularly when China's *hanfu* movement, promoting a natural bond between the national attire and Chinese identity, began claiming similarities with Korean traditional garment; crossing country border, the movement's patriotic discourse met its Korean counterpart, which follows the same logic and aim to show their national pride. The collision the two nationalist discourses, exaggerated by the media where both parties had access to incomplete information due to language barriers and platforms limitations,⁸⁵ led net users

⁸³ Lee, Yunah. "Fashioning Tradition in Contemporary Korean Fashion." *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 4 (2017): 241–61. https://doi.org/10.1386/inf.4.2.241_1.

⁸⁴ Lee, Sangjoon, and Markus Nornes. "Hallyu vs. Hallyu-Hwa." Essay. In *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, 50. University of Michigan Press, 2015

⁸⁵ Kehan, Li. "Constructing Modern Ethnic Myth: A Cultural Analysis of the Hanfu Movement." Thesis, Lund University, 2021.

to both claim that their own ethnic clothing was copied by the other country. As others' denial of the ownership was being regarded as the threat of national identity, both narratives also claimed a cultural item could not be shared. Amid appropriation concerns instilled by China's controversial claims over *hanbok*'s origin, the culture ministry started seeking ways to push ahead with projects that could introduce the traditional clothing to everyday life, implementing various governmental and cultural policies to both protect *hanbok*'s historical significance, while integrating it into modern fashion and tourism industries. In particular, with The First Basic Plan for Traditional Culture Industry Promotion, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism outlined strategic tasks for the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural assets, aimed at creating a modernized ecosystem for the traditional culture industry and cultivating the nation's heritage as a representative brand of K-Culture through further initiatives to increase public awareness and consumption of the traditional attire.⁸⁶

Along with the garment itself, the government recognizes and preserve *hanbok* craftsmanship's significance in embodying Korean identity and values, solidifying its status as "uniquely Korean". Such initiative, encompassing not only the act of wearing *hanbok*, but also the culture practices associated with its creation, ensures the government's allocation of financial resources, research efforts and educational programs to recognize, preserve and pass down traditional *hanbok* products and craftsmanship to future generations,⁸⁷ in order not to lose them to mass production and synthetic materials.⁸⁸ In this regard, in order to further preserve the authenticity of traditional craftsmanship, making it a sustainable industry in the modern economy, the government has implemented an economic model open to *hanbok*-related industries, featuring financial incentives, business grants, and tax policies; the promotion funds established by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MCST) introduced financial aid programs

⁸⁶ Baek, Yoon-mi. "Korea Designates 'Hanbok Day' to Boost Cultural Attire Adoption." CHOSUNBIZ, December 26, 2024. <https://biz.chosun.com/en/en-society/2024/12/26/JJZRIUXAWZATJK3RLK6REW7W2Y/>

⁸⁷ Gee Sun, Hahn. "Korean Museums, Intangible Heritage, and the Formation of National Identity." University of Leicester, October 6, 2023. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25392/leicester.data.24261217.v1>.

⁸⁸ Purnawibawa, Ahmad, and Jessica Rossi. "Traditional Craftsmanship, between Bias and Recognition as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), Case Study of Buleleng (Bali, Indonesia) and South Korea." *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Law, Social Sciences and Education, ICLSSE 2024, 17 October 2024, Singaraja, Bali, Indonesia*, October 2024. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.17-10-2024.2353681>.

and technical resources to *hanbok*-related small and medium-sized enterprises of independent artisans, manufacturers and designers who aim to create innovative *hanbok* styles, while preserving authentic Korean designs and fabric techniques into their brand identity, in order to sustain their business as they adapt to contemporary fashion trends, allowing them to compete with fast fashion imports and mass-produced synthetic materials and consequently ensuring the survival of locally made, sustainable and high-quality *hanbok*, which were disappearing due to high production costs.⁸⁹ Another financial measure aimed at the strengthening of domestic production is the lowering of price of loans the Value-Added Tax rate for *hanbok* manufacturers, underlining once again the policymaker's will to make the garment more affordable for consumers, encouraging their selling over imported synthetic alternatives.⁹⁰

In this regard, the private sector has been involved and incentivized by modern *hanbok* competitions held by government-backed cultural institutions, encouraging the spread of innovation and modern aesthetics into traditional design; such initiatives led to the rise and consequent global expansion of popular *hanbok*-inspired brands, promoting exhibitions and competitions that present a blend of traditional and modern elements making the garment practical for daily wear and more appealing to younger generations and tourists.

Seeking to normalize its use in daily wear, the Korean government has financially supported the implementation of the garment as school uniform in several institutes⁹¹ and as workwear in fields where employees frequently interact with



Figure 13. Modern hanbok uniforms to be adopted in Korean schools. 2020. (Hanbok Advancement Center)

⁸⁹ Gunawan, Iwan. "Korean Cultural Diplomacy: Uniting Society Through Soft Power." *Jurnal Info Sains : Informatika Dan Sains* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1079–86.
<https://doi.org/https://ejournal.seaninstitute.or.id/index.php/InfoSains/article/view/4262>.

⁹⁰ Dirir, Kadir Aden. "Japan and South Korea's Implication of Soft Power: Cultural Aspects, Education, and Foreign Aid Diplomacy." *Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2022, 10, no. 4 (August 29, 2022).
<https://doi.org/doi: 10.11648/j.hss.20221004.20>.

⁹¹ Han-sol, Park. "Hanbok Culture Week Kicks Off - The Korea Times." *koreatimes.co.kr*, April 10, 2021.
<https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/lifestyle/trends/20210409/hanbok-culture-week-kicks-off>.

visitors or the public, such as museums, art galleries, overseas Korean cultural centers and public institutions.⁹²

While principals state that wearing *hanbok* in school is a way of teaching students through experiencing tradition, rather than through theory or formality, the students interviewed echoed this sentiment, claiming to be very comfortable wearing *hanbok*, while its ability to embody “Koreanness” boosted their national pride.⁹³

While the government has already elected *hanbok* as official dress code of national holidays and commemorative days, involving the population to active participate in culture and heritage preservation by encouraging them to wear the garment as a way of connecting with



Figure 14. Banner of Hanbok Culture Week “Beautiful Hanbok, Ambassador of Korean Wave”. 2024. (onehada.co.kr)

their cultural roots⁹⁴ the ministry has also officially designated the last Wednesday of every month as the “Hanbok Day” (한복날, *hanbok nal*),⁹⁵ encouraging public officials and institutions to wear the attire. Eventually, in 2018, the festival has evolved into “Hanbok Culture Week” (한복문화주간, *hanbok munhwa jugan*), transforming the previous one-day festival, which used to be held in Seoul, into a week-long event to be held throughout the nation every year.⁹⁶ Revitalizing interest in traditional clothing and its daily use, this initiative led to a significant expansion of the *hanbok* promotion, as it provides a wider amount of citizens with opportunities to engage with the garment

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Finch, John, and Seung-kyung Kim. “Thinking Locally, Acting Globally: Redefining Traditions at the Korean Minjok Leadership Academy.” *Korean Studies* 33, no. 1 (2009): 124–49. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.0.0028>.

⁹⁴ Jun-hee, Park. “Seoul Designates Last Wednesday of Every Month as ‘Wear Hanbok Day.’” *The Korea Herald*, December 26, 2024. https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10031302?kakao_from=mainnews.

⁹⁵ Doh, Jae-kee. “Wearing Hanbok, a Cultural Icon.” *코리아나 - Focus*, 2022. <https://www.koreana.or.kr/koreana/na/ntt/selectNttInfo.do?nttSn=115206&bbsId=1113>.

⁹⁶ Lee, Tyodi Hyojin. “EVERYDAY AS HANBOK, HANBOK AS EVERYDAY HANBOK CULTURE WEEK.” *Cargo*, August 2024. <https://cargocollective.com/tyodi/HANBOK-CULTURE-WEEKHanbok-Advanced-Center>.

through fashion shows, interactive workshops, exhibitions and educational seminars featuring discussions with *hanbok* experts and videos illustrating the clothing's making process, as well as reenactments of traditional ceremonies accompanied by explanations of the event and the clothing's history.⁹⁷ Thanks to the engagement of residents and tourists with traditions, these government-led festivals successfully favored a sense of cultural pride, while also increasing public interest in the attire, making it more appealing to contemporary audiences and younger generations thanks to strategic partnerships with local fashion brands, designers, digital influencers and K-Pop groups taking part into the exhibitions;⁹⁸ while setting brand goals these initiatives allowed the garment to break from its previous out-of-date image, promoting the creation of a dynamic culture,⁹⁹ especially since *Hanbok Culture Week* expanded to 36 cities worldwide since 2022. In order to further improve and promote the international visibility of Korean cultural heritage, government-backed cultural organizations, such as Korean Cultural Centers (KCC)¹⁰⁰ have collaborated with international institutions, embassies and museums abroad to stage joint exhibitions, workshops and cultural lectures. Finally, tying cultural promotion to diplomatic goals, globalization strategies also used the role of cultural products to enhance Korea's global image; this approach was exemplified by the so-called "*hanbok* diplomacy", where Korean political figures, ambassadors, and cultural representatives proudly wear the traditional attire during diplomatic events, international summits and ceremonies, bounding culture and identity to statecraft on the global stage. Such proactive approach in hosting and promoting culture-centered festivals through diplomatic, cultural, and entertainment-driven initiatives abroad allowed Korean heritage to be showcased beyond domestic borders as accessible and unique, contributing to the rising of global interest and appreciation; in the meantime, competitive markets, risk of cultural misappropriation and an increasing necessity to promote its beauty and significance to the global market, Korea's leading *hanbok* experts have come together to launch the "*Hanbok Globalization Foundation*": after designating it as National

⁹⁷ Adouin, Charles "300 Venues Nationwide to Celebrate Hanbok Culture Week." Korea.net, October 11, 2024. <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=259776>.

⁹⁸ Han-sol, Park. "*Hanbok Culture Week Kicks Off* - The Korea Times." koreatimes.co.kr, April 10, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Adouin, Charles. "Year-Round KCC Events to Further Promote Hallyu to World." Korea.net, April 10, 2025. <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=269564>

Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2022,¹⁰¹ the administration is now pushing for new policies including *hanbok*'s culture recognition as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity,¹⁰² as an effort to institutionalize the preservation of the garment as a national treasure, reinforcing its bond with national identity. Additionally, Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE) is playing a pivotal role in *hanbok*'s expansion on the global market, as it started extending its promotion on international platforms by organizing exhibitions at major cultural institutions, as well as global fashion weeks, where international designers showcase their own reinterpretations of *hanbok* for modern audiences. While increasing its visibility on a global scale, contributing to its recognition as a significant cultural artifact, fashion exhibitions have led to a proportional increase in the export interest, especially from Europe, China, and the U.S.

As Korea's global influence continues to strengthen, *hanbok*'s timeless beauty began attracting increasing curiosity and admiration from locals and visitors, firmly establishing itself as a cornerstone of the Korean Wave phenomenon;¹⁰³ in this regard, government and private businesses trying to capitalize *hanbok*'s potential within the growing tourism industry, government and private businesses have actively promoted new policies and strategies that promote cultural tourism through initiatives that encourage visitors to experience traditional Korea firsthand. Particularly, the government provided financial incentives that allowed the *hanbok* retail and rental businesses, strategically located near historical landmarks and popular tourism hotspots, to flourish. *Hanbok* experiences started to be officially promoted by the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO), extending to international visitors the vision of traditional garment as a "must-try" activity for travelers, that can wear the attire while exploring palaces, museums, and villages. Offering a blending between cultural immersion and a memorable, photo-worthy moment, the rise of "*hanbok* experience tours" has emphasized the costume's accessibility and consideration as a cultural icon, encouraging both foreigners and locals

¹⁰¹ Doh, Jae-kee. "*Wearing Hanbok, a Cultural Icon.*" 코리아나 - Focus , 2022.

¹⁰² Han, Da-Eun. "*Korea Steps up Push to List 'hanbok' Culture as UNESCO Heritage.*" Arirang News, April 15, 2025. <https://www.arirang.com/news/view?id=282544&lang=en>.

¹⁰³ Kim, Soyeon. "*Cover Story 3 - Symbol of Korean Identity.*" Korea, March 2025. <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=256937>.

to experience and appreciate the traditional culture. Furthermore, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST), in collaboration with other organizations, verifies the authenticity of the products involved in rental business, accordingly to the standard criteria of *hanbok* designs and the principles of promotion of the proper traditional craftsmanship. While actively promoting and funding *hanbok* rental business, the government has introduced a policy allowing free entry to major historical sites, museums and palaces for visitors wearing *hanbok*.¹⁰⁴ Incentivizing its wearing, this initiative led to a dramatic increase in *hanbok* rentals and purchases, particularly among tourists, fostering a rise in the public engagement in preserving and popularizing of the attire, as well as the rise of numerous new rental services. Nowadays, it is easy to spot young people and foreign tourists roaming the streets of Insadong, or the traditional village of Bukchon, dressed up in traditional clothes, usually from one of the many *hanbok* rental shops.¹⁰⁵

Turning into a profitable sector in tourism economy, many tour operators began offering literal “cultural immersion packages” that, along with *hanbok* rental, include professional photography sessions specialized in traditional Korean aesthetics, as well as guided tours of historical sites and



Figure 15: Renting hanbok in Jeonju Hanok Village. n.d. (veronikasadventure.com)

workshops available in multiple languages, where visitors can learn about the nation and the garment’s history and the significance. Lastly, other than rental business, governmental tourism-targeted initiatives also fostered traditional garment retail promotion, supporting *hanbok* brands’ expansion into global markets by funding e-commerce platforms and duty-free shops at Incheon Airport; these facilitations allowed high-quality, handmade costumes to be more accessible to overseas consumers and foreign travelers, boosting international sales.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Korea Heritage Service. “Free Admission Guidelines for Hanbok Wearers.” Royal palaces and Tombs Center. Accessed March 11, 2025. <https://royal.cha.go.kr/ENG/contents/E701000000.do>

¹⁰⁵ Han, Byung Jin (Richard). “HANOKS OF BUKCHON: A CASE OF DURABLE MONUMENTS.” *Urban Journal* 4 (2018): 42–51.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Another successful promotional strategy that allowed the historical attire to gain widespread international recognition has been its integration into pop culture, media and international cultural festivals: relying on the increasing global fever over *Hallyu* industry, both government and private companies began taking advantage of the entertainment field to promote the inclusion of *hanbok* in K-Dramas, K-Movies and K-Pop music videos and international performances, raising global awareness and modernizing it as part of Korea's contemporary cultural identity. Consequently, strategically selected *Hallyu* artists become cultural ambassadors promoting the beauty of Korea's traditional *hanbok* worldwide. Thanks to the collaborations established between government-backed cultural export programs and entertainment companies, the strategy successfully contributed to boost the global appeal and curiosity of Korean culture, positioning it under spotlights as a source of national pride and soft power; this fostered a reintroduction of *hanbok* status not only as a national symbol, but also as a globally recognized fashion statement that blends tradition and modern aesthetics together, resulting in a living art form. Additionally, Korean staples extended to a wider and more diversified audience thanks to the decision of private companies to leverage new digital platforms, social media, and global collaborations to expand its reach and connect people across the globe; consequently, this business model heavily relies on fan culture, as the creation of a participatory environment around *Hallyu* and *Hallyu-Hwa* has been crucial for a further significant boost in the promotion of Korean cultural products and tourism industry.¹⁰⁷

One of the earliest and most impactful vehicles for *hanbok*'s global resurgence was Korean historical dramas, which prominently familiarized international audiences with Korea's traditional fashion, opening it up to the phenomena of commercialization: in particular, state-funded historical dramas have played a significant role in increasing global curiosity and admiration for *hanbok*, that eventually began to be featured in productions, offering a window into Korea's rich cultural heritage, and consequently sparking a newfound curiosity in traditional Korean clothing among global viewers. Consequently, the demand for *hanbok* rentals and replicas significantly increased, with tourists sougning to experience the "Korean royal look" displayed in the media, marking one of the first clear connections between *hanbok*'s cultural representation and its

¹⁰⁷ Lee, Walter. "THE CULTURE WAVE." Arirang News, April 16, 2025.
<https://www.arirang.com/news/video/33855?lang=en>.

commercial potential. Korean cultural elements continued to be featured in modern dramas' storytelling, that kept their focus on the country's rich history and traditional values, while also introducing global audiences to redesigned and modern *hanbok* styles. Similarly, the influence of *Hallyu-Hwa* has also been reflected in Korean Films production, that began promoting a blending of local and global features, siding Korea's history and traditions by innovative storytelling techniques.¹⁰⁸



Figure 16. LEESLE X KARD Hanbok Collaboration. 2020. (Hanbok Advancement Center)

While *hanbok* has been showcased in historical K-Movies and K-Dramas, its presence in K-pop definitely added a new dimension to its globalization and commercialization; since its rise as a global phenomenon in the early 2010s, groups and celebrities achieving an unprecedented global popularity got encouraged to incorporate Korean traditional elements, including *hanbok*-inspired motifs, patterns and modernized designs, in music videos, concerts, international performances and promotional events.¹⁰⁹ Serving as cultural ambassadors into western markets, these collaborations successfully bridged Korean heritage with modern pop culture; while helping to introduce the attire to wider global audiences, this strategy significantly contributed to the rise of international *hanbok* orders,¹¹⁰ reframing its perception as a fashion-forward, stylish and globally relevant statement piece.

As *hanbok* propelled into global fashion consciousness, during the late 2010s, an increasing number of K-pop artists began incorporating traditional elements in their music and visuals, as part of a deliberate effort to celebrate Korean heritage with a sense of pride and “return to cultural roots”; particularly, along with the classic versions, new and innovative modern *hanbok* designs began to be integrated into pop culture through

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Doh, Jae-kee. “Wearing Hanbok, a Cultural Icon.” *코리아나 - Focus*, 2022.

¹¹⁰ Smith, Katharine V. “Transformations of Hanbok in the Age of Hallyu: Fashion, Cultural Hybridization, and the Construction of Vernacular Korean Nationalism.” *Transformations of Hanbok in the Age of Hallyu: Fashion, Cultural Hybridization, and the Construction of Vernacular Korean Nationalism*. Thesis, University of Central Florida, 2022.

performances, music videos and high-profile events, elevating the garment's status as a national symbol of pride; this strategy allowed *hanbok* to spark global interest, particularly among K-pop fans, highlighting Korea's ability to blend heritage with modernity, through the reinvention of the garment in private sectors, establishing the entrance of such innovative, emerging designers into mainstream fashion.¹¹¹

Along with the aforementioned government policies, cultural institutions and entertainment industry, the commercialization of *hanbok* under *Hallyu-Hwa* has driven significant innovations of the private sector: since its first commercial breakthroughs in global markets, the garment's encounter with globalization led to its transformation into a marketable and accessible product, letting the stage for subsequent commercial adaptations of a meaningful and sustainable approach involving modern fashion and textile designs, that ensured its continued relevance and dissemination in contemporary contexts, saving it from the risk of progressive fade and erosion.¹¹²

In fact, in recent years, Koreans and younger generations have moved away from wearing traditional *hanbok* in its original form and now enjoy its culture by creatively mixing and matching traditional elements with modern clothing or layering *hanbok* items over everyday clothes,¹¹³ expressing their individuality and tastes.¹¹⁴ In this context, the private sector has been instrumental in reimagining the costume for contemporary audiences: *hanbok* brands such as Morinori, Liv Damyeon, Studio Hyeon, Tchae Kim, Danha Seoul, and LEESLE played a significant role in turning the traditional garment into a global fashion statement in many different ways, marking its entrance into mainstream fashion and repositioning its role from a ceremonial costume into a wearable, adaptable fashion choice catering to everyday wear, special occasions and even weddings.

These innovative hybrid styles have been created combining traditional elements with global fashion trends, reflecting Korea's desire to assert its cultural identity while

¹¹¹ Sung, Ji Yeon. "Wearing Korea." Webzine Korea March 2025, Cover Story 2, March 2025.
<https://www.kocis.go.kr/eng/webzine/202503/sub02.html#:~:text=Hanbok%20has%20long%20been%20a,music%20videos%20and%20album%20covers>

¹¹² Park, Jihye. "Development of a Cultural Design Framework for Fashion and Textiles: The Application of Korean Folk Painting, Minhwa." Thesis, University of Leeds, 2021.

¹¹³ Kim, Soyeon. "Cover Story 3 - Symbol of Korean Identity." Korea, March 2025.

¹¹⁴ Doh, Jae-kee. "Wearing Hanbok, a Cultural Icon." 코리아나 - Focus, 2022.

keeping a certain international relevance. Hence, while retaining its cultural roots and preserving symbolic features, unique silhouettes and structural elements, design innovations incorporate some reinvented features that often include shorter *chōgori*, versatile and casual cuts, slimmer silhouettes and lighter synthetic fabrics enhancing comfort and affordability; the contemporary aesthetic, characterized by minimalistic patterns and subdued colors, aligns the modern design with global fashion trends, becoming more appealing and fashionable to younger and international consumers, while *hanbok*'s accessibility to local and international customers has been facilitated by the introduction of private e-commerce platforms.¹¹⁵

In this regard, the interview with the designer Kim Young-jin of *Tchai Kim* (차이킴) further highlight the missions, purposes and goals of *hanbok* hybrid innovators: while experimenting with the silhouette through new lines and proportions, incorporating modern accessories or embracing innovative and eco-friendly materials and technologies, the designer reminds us maintaining tradition is important; hence, while inspiration can come from different sources, when it comes to innovate cultural staples, designers also need to study and observe traditional elements and material's properties extensively to understand them fully, in order to efficiently harness their potential and elevate their beauty and functionality, making the difference in the final product.

Lastly, in order to foster a wider international promotion of the garment, private companies have also collaborated with international fashion brands; this way, the incorporation of *hanbok* motifs into luxury fashion houses' runway designs for fashion shows marked its integration as symbol of cultural pride into global haute couture and luxury markets, solidifying its status as global cultural asset. Such exposure generated an unprecedented and widespread media attention and subsequent growing interest in Korean fashion, as it also began to be increasingly incorporated and shared on social media platforms, that significantly contributed to further popularizing the garment as a fashion statement.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Kočovská, Monika "How has the women's traditional Korean garment "hanbok" been modernized in terms of design in recent years?". Palacký University Olomouc, Faculty of Arts. 2024.

¹¹⁶ Lee, Jungsoon, Ha Kyung Lee. "Exploring Direct and Indirect Cultural Experiences: A Study of Global Consumers' Hanbok Experience and Engagement Mediated via YouTube - Fashion and Textiles." SpringerLink, May 21, 2024. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40691-024-00385-9>

Analyzing the evolution of the traditional garment in this period of transition, we can notice that *Hallyu-Hwa* has thus fostered a double-ended strategy in the commercialization of Korean traditions, that boosts economic growth while simultaneously strengthening national identity; this blend of contemporary innovation and historical pride, redirected to both modern and traditional tastes, has allowed traditional culture to resonate with diverse audiences locally and globally, making the process of commercialization a testament to Korea's ability to honor its traditions while embracing modernization, through media, entertainment, tourism, and modern design, ensuring a cultural legacy that remains relevant and celebrated.

2.2 Positive Impacts of *Hanbok*'s Commercialization

Through structured efforts expanding beyond domestic field, international promotion amid *Hallyu-Hwa* has extended *hanbok*'s cultural reach and international recognition, reinforcing South Korea's soft power while contributing to its economy, and branding the nation as both innovative and deeply traditional. In particular, the process of *hanbok*'s commercialization and institutionalization put the heritage artifacts into a thriving global industry, that consequently required a balance between commercial viability and cultural preservation, in order to ensure the recognition of a unique national identity. Supported by government initiatives and private sector innovations, with the boost of tourism and entertainment-driven exposure, *hanbok* has become a key tool contributing to Korea's cultural diplomacy, economic growth and national branding that led to a local renewed appreciation for Korean culture, as well as an increasing global interest towards Korea's unique heritage, that finally got displayed, shown and spread after years of identity deprivation. Recognizing the efforts made to commercialize *hanbok* for Korean contemporary society and global audiences, the research will now highlight the positive outcomes of the process, based on articles and documents, as well as surveys conducted and field observations that confirm the traditional garment as a key component in the contribution of a renewed soft power and emblem of Korean national identity in the era of globalization.¹¹⁷

2.2.1. Revival of Public Interest and Cultural Pride

The historical resilience of the costume in the face of modernization exemplifies how the coexistence between tradition and innovation can guarantee the preservation of a vibrant and relevant symbol of cultural heritage, even in a rapidly changing world;¹¹⁸ hence, the aim of *hanbok*, both in its traditional and modern version, is mainly the one to represent

¹¹⁷ Yoo, Jung-Ja, and Soo-Ae Kweon. "A Study on the Clothing Easiness of Movement for Casual Hanbok as School Summer Uniform." *Journal of the Korean Society of Clothing and Textiles*, 2008, 212–22. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5850/JKSCT.2008.32.2.212>.

¹¹⁸ Han, Min Jae, and Younhee Lee. "Research Trend of Korean Costume Design - Focusing on Journal of the Korean Society of Costume and Journal of Korean Traditional Costume." *The Research Journal of the Costume Culture*, 2020, 677–91. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.29049/rjcc.2020.28.5.677>.

Korea's history, values and identity in modern times. Fostering a policy of cultural preservation of *hanbok* traditions and accessibility, commercialization played a crucial role in establishing the revival of public interest and cultural pride, shifting the identity of the historical garment into a dynamic symbol recognized locally, as well as beyond Korea's borders.¹¹⁹ Exhibitions, fashion shows, interactive experiences and government-backed initiatives served as platforms for showcasing traditional and modern designs internationally: thanks to the implementation of a wider range of designs, materials and sizes, *hanbok* began attracting people regardless of nationality, age or gender, reinforcing the expansion of its global presence, as well as its role as living tradition, revitalizing local culture with a sense of pride and interest towards all kinds of the costume,¹²⁰ while foreigners firstly discovering modern versions are often prone to explore its historical roots, as well, fostering a deeper cultural understanding of the heritage.

Along with cultural storytelling, the soft power strategy of *hanbok*'s integration in cultural diplomacy and high-profile settings concretized its presence at official state events, international exhibitions, and embassy receptions, reinforcing its status as a diplomatic tool that conveys Korea's rich heritage and unique identity in the realm of international relations, extending it to global audiences and fostering cross-cultural exchanges that strengthens national branding. Despite its transformations, *hanbok* remains deeply rooted in Korea's cultural history and its role as a cultural identifier: following carefully developed design frameworks including the strategic incorporation of popular paintings (*minhwa*) and other traditional motifs, designers' consideration for *hanbok* preservation established a positive and deep impact on domestic audience. Koreans now view the garment not only as an historical attire, but also as a modern emblem of pride and reinvention, as well as a medium to express a certain cultural continuity in modern life and global context that can be worn on a daily basis as a fashionable, everyday option. As a consequence, such process grew a more active and stronger embracement of Korean heritage and national pride in response to cultural appropriation concerns, while strengthening the garment's role as a shared cultural symbol, bounding together different generations with a sense of national identity and

¹¹⁹ Lee, Jung Taek. "*The Birth of Modern Fashion in Korea: Sartorial Transition between Hanbok and Yangbok, and Colonial Modernity of Dress Culture.*" Thesis, SOAS University of London, 2017.

¹²⁰ Mohamed, Israa. "*Hanbok Expo Shows Touch of Individuality in Traditional Beauty.*" Korea.net, August 19, 2024. <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=256937>.

common past that also expanded outside Korean borders, where *hanbok* holds growing recognition among Korean diaspora communities as part of mainstream fashion: modern designs are often worn during cultural festivals and events, helping maintain connections across borders and reflecting the immigrant experience of seeking a sense of identity and belonging.¹²¹

2.2.2 Economic Growth and Tourism Expansion

The past decades have underlined some economic challenges faced by the *hanbok* industry, as data from the Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS) reflected a sharp decline in the number of *hanbok* manufacturing and retail businesses since the late 1990s, largely due to the garment's diminishing role in everyday life; in fact, the shift toward Western clothing and the high costs associated with custom-made *hanbok* significantly reduced consumer demand and caused traditional workshops and textile mills to close; this led to a disconnection of Korean society from the use of traditional costume, except for a few expensive pieces made for special occasions.¹²² However, as shown by economic analyses of the commercialization of *hanbok*, the renewed interest both among Koreans seeking to reconnect with their heritage and international buyers fascinated by the elegance of its design, caused a significant expansion of the markets of traditional and modern craftsmanship, reinvigorating Korea's fashion and textile industries and offering new economic opportunities for artisans, designers, and manufacturers.¹²³ One of the most significant developments in sustaining the *hanbok* industry has been the rise of small-scale manufacturers and support initiatives aimed at preserving traditional craftsmanship, already benefiting from the growing domestic and international demand; in particular, the establishment of the "*Small Manufacturer Specialized Support Center of Hanbok*" in Gwangju represents a key effort to ensure that local artisans receive both financial and technical support to maintain their businesses;

¹²¹ Laurence, Nina. "Korean Canadians Use Hanbok to Connect with Motherland." Korea.net, July 12, 2023.

¹²² Han, Jeong Won, and Woo Hyun Cho. "Recent Changes in Women's Jeogori Pattern - Focused on the Jeogori's in the Seoul Gwangjang Market and Busan Jin Market -." *Journal of the Korean Society of Costume* 66, no. 3 (April 30, 2016): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.7233/jksc.2016.66.3.001>.

¹²³ Jhon, Alessia. "The Revival of Hanbok in South Korea's Street Fashion." INSCMagazine, June 18, 2024. <https://theinscribermag.com/the-revival-of-hanbok-in-south-koreas-street-fashion/>.

this initiative not only helps preserving traditional techniques and local activities, but also provides new employment opportunities, attracting younger generations to the field of *hanbok*-making, which was previously in danger of disappearing due to a lack of apprenticeships and demand.¹²⁴

The boost to the appeal of Korean culture fostered by initiatives and programs played a crucial role in the reintegration of *hanbok* into Korea's cultural tourism sector, taking advantage of the significant tourism growth to South Korea with an increasing number of local and international visitors seeking out immersive *hanbok* experiences as part of their cultural exploration. Since the attire has been traditionally considered a luxury item to be worn only on special occasions, *hanbok* prices —especially the ones featuring high-quality fabrics and intricate embroidery— have been a barrier for many consumers; in this case, the rental business model has made the garment more financially accessible to the public, offering tourists the unique possibility to experience the lifestyle of traditional Korea —while avoiding the burden of ownership— by wearing the garment when exploring historical sites and interest hotspots, or taking part in cultural festivals and traditional practices.¹²⁵ Additionally, many Koreans argue that wearing *hanbok* can serve as an educational opportunity allowing people to raise a greater cultural appreciation and awareness of Korean heritage, while physically engaging with it.¹²⁶ Consequently, the rental of *hanbok* by tourists is perceived as a form of cultural pride and sharing, when done respectfully. Also, the popularity of *hanbok* rentals can be seen as part of the globalization of Korean culture, which has become increasingly prominent through the global influence of K-pop and K-dramas; in this sense, *hanbok* is seen as a symbol of modern Korean identity, and its increasing exposure is viewed as a positive development for cultural exchange that keeps its heritage visible and relevant in an era where many traditional garments around the world are becoming obsolete. *Hanbok*-related tourism contribution has also ensured the country a new economic activity for

¹²⁴ Heo, Seung-Yeun, and Myung-Sook An. “Characteristics and Recent Changes of the Hanbok Industrial Cluster in Gwangju, Korea.” *Journal of the Korea Fashion and Costume Design Association*, 2019. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.30751/kfcd.21.3.161>.

¹²⁵ Shin, Min-Hee. “How Hanbok’s Rising Popularity Is Fusing Tradition with Modern Fashion Trends.” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, September 12, 2024. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-09-13/culture/koreanHeritage/How-Hanboks-rising-popularity-is-fusing-tradition-with-modern-fashion-trends/2132479>

¹²⁶ Hanbok Heroes. “Contemporary South Korea.” Hanbok Heroes, March 5, 2020. <https://herohanbok.wordpress.com/history/contemporary-south-korea/>

local businesses, as well as steady employment for artisans and textile producers involved in *hanbok*'s production and maintenance,¹²⁷ that receive steady orders for garments that must be well-crafted and frequently replaced due to high usage. Lastly, *hanbok* experiences are beginning to be offered internationally by Korean cultural centers, promoting a new cultural understanding and exchange between foreign audiences and Korean traditions.

In fact, social media in the era of globalization have further amplified such visibility; while people wearing *hanbok* are often encouraged to share their experiences online, many attendees themselves treat *hanbok* as a visual storytelling tool, capturing images in historic locations and sharing them online, contributing to the costume's digital circulation by making it a recognizable Korean cultural symbol even among those who have never visited Korea and become indirect participants of the experience; hence, while enhancing personal experiences, the act of wearing *hanbok* in these settings transforms it into an active medium of cultural communication that strengthens Korea's national identity abroad, positioning it as a country with a rich and evolving heritage.¹²⁸

2.2.3 Hanbok in Global Fashion and Pop Culture

Along with the traditional version, the rising demand for modernized styles has revitalized local businesses, once threatened by western fast fashion, encouraging both traditional artisans and contemporary designers to collaborate in the creation of innovative reinterpretations of the garment, that, blending traditional aesthetics with modern practicality, maintain cultural essence while expanding global appeal.¹²⁹ Hence, *hanbok* elegant design has become a stylistic reference for the development of new visual identities that preserve its original features while also embracing comfort and modernity, allowing wearers to proudly express appreciation for Korea's unique cultural heritage and identity, without compromising on contemporary needs. This innovative approach started

¹²⁷ Kočovská, Monika. "How has the women's traditional Korean garment 'hanbok' been modernized in terms of design in recent years?". Palacký University Olomouc, Faculty of Arts. 2024.

¹²⁸ Pacheco, Mariana. "Hanbok Pop: The Traditional Culture and the Fabulation of Hallyu in Brazil." Essay. In *Korean Journal of Communication* 1, 1:249–63. University of Texas Press, 2024.

¹²⁹ Cho, Sunhyung. "Reinterpretation of Hanbok." Thesis, International Textile and Apparel Association Annual Conference Proceedings, 2018.

with the *New Hanbok Movement* (*nyuhanbok*, 뉴한복, 2000s–present): a design initiative that has emerged as a cultural phenomenon targeting younger demographics and aimed at reintroducing *hanbok* into everyday wear and contemporary fashion;¹³⁰ innovations include *daily hanbok* (*ilban hanbok*, 일반한복), with simplified designs for casual wear, *fusion hanbok* (*hyöndae hanbok*, 현대한복), blending western tailoring with traditional elements, and *hanbok streetwear*, a rising trend among younger generations, that merges the garment with contemporary fashion and global sustainability movements.¹³¹ These contemporary transformation of *hanbok* extended to the global stage, sparking interest in Korean fashion that created new opportunities for cultural export and further commercial innovation.¹³²

Hanbok's popularity pushed local textile businesses to adopt new technological advancements that enhance production efficiency while lowering the costs; for example, the use of non-traditional materials and digital printing allowed small-scale artisans and independent designers to experiment the introduction of classic motifs and detailed patterns into modern *hanbok*, without the high production costs of hand-embroidered garments and high-quality textiles.¹³³ Additionally, the mass production fostered by these advancements has successfully democratized aesthetically authentic *hanbok*, making it more accessible to a wider spectrum of consumers. Also, while people in the past had to consider social position, gender, and age when choosing the colors and patterns to be worn, the democratization of production and design has eliminated these constraints, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to wear whatever design they like, ensuring its continued presence in Korean daily life, even as Western styles gained popularity;¹³⁴ furthermore, *hanbok*'s revival also aligns with rising consumer interest in eco-conscious fashion, that encouraged many brands to explore and incorporate environmentally friendly production methods, including the use of organic dyes,

¹³⁰ Shin, Min-Hee. "How Hanbok's Rising Popularity Is Fusing Tradition with Modern Fashion Trends." Korea JoongAng Daily, September 12, 2024.

¹³¹ Kočovská, Monika "How has the women's traditional Korean garment "hanbok" been modernized in terms of design in recent years?". Palacký University Olomouc, Faculty of Arts. 2024.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Lee, Jung Taek. "The Birth of Modern Fashion in Korea : Sartorial Transition between Hanbok and Yangbok, and Colonial Modernity of Dress Culture." Thesis, SOAS University of London, 2017.

repurposed fabrics and the recycling practices of older garments.¹³⁵ This aspect can be seen as a return to hanbok's origin: sustainable production, in fact, was already deeply embedded in historical Korean practices, as documented in historical texts such as the *Annals of King Gojong* (*Kojongshillok*, 고종실록 1863-1907) and the *Encyclopedia of Women's Lives* (*Gyuhap Chongseo*, 규합총서, 1809), which described the reuse of textiles not only as economic need, but also as cultural norm, reflecting a collective respect for craftsmanship and material conservation; this practice is being actively revived in contemporary times as a response to growing environmental concerns, with second-hand *hanbok* markets and reform initiatives getting integrated into sustainability efforts that ensure circulation and affordability,¹³⁶ while making *hanbok* an appealing choice for environmentally conscious consumers, further enhancing its global appeal.

Due to its increasing presence on international fashion runways and red carpets, *hanbok* has significantly expanded its visibility and appeal to millions of people worldwide, elevating it beyond heritage and transforming it into a recognizable icon of Korean culture and a stylish, contemporary fashion statement;¹³⁷ in this regard, we can assume globalization opened new markets for fashion houses and independent designers that, capitalizing on the growing demand, embrace the attire as a unique and sophisticated reference and source of inspiration, resulting in the launch of *hanbok*-inspired pieces that, reflecting the garment's adaptation to suit to global tastes, integrate traditional elements with contemporary designs to create hybrid styles appealing to both local and international consumers,¹³⁸ bridging the past with the present. This approach ensures traditional *hanbok*'s essence and craftsmanship to continuously evolve rather than stagnate, bringing it into the global spotlight.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Lee, In Hwa, and Mi Young Son. "A Study on the Activation of Used Market of Hanbok and Hanbok Reform Market." *Family and Environment Research* 59, no. 1 (February 19, 2021): 59–69. <https://doi.org/10.6115/fer.2021.005>.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Shin, Min-Hee. "How Hanbok's Rising Popularity Is Fusing Tradition with Modern Fashion Trends." *Korea JoongAng Daily*, September 12, 2024.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Pacheco, Mariana. "Hanbok Pop: The Traditional Culture and the Fabulation of Hallyu in Brazil." Essay. In *Korean Journal of Communication* 1, 1:249–63. University of Texas Press, 2024.

These progressive innovations into modern *hanbok* are beginning to subtly redefine Korean beauty standards as well: moving away from rigid gendered and body-size restrictions traditionally associated with ceremonial *hanbok*, contemporary fashion designers have begun challenging these norms by



Figure 17. LEESLE Unisex hanbok chŏgori. n.d. (kooding.com)

reinterpreting *hanbok* with gender-neutral elements, amid changes in gender norms and the increasing fluidity of fashion: reinterpretations embrace diverse silhouettes, non-binary aesthetics, and inclusive designs that blurs the sharp distinctions between men's and women's attire: some designers have introduced androgynous *hanbok*, featuring unisex *chŏgori* with extended lengths, pants that resemble both *baji* and *ch'ima*, and monochrome colors that defy the traditional male-female color codes; challenging the narrow definitions of beauty, this shift encourages a broader acceptance of individuality



Figure 18. Tchae Kim's adaptation of Chosŏn-era men's ch'ŏllik into a dress. n.d. (tchaikim.co.kr)

and expressivity of non-binary identities within Korean fashion,¹⁴⁰ and successfully extended to pop culture, with K-pop idols and actors contributing to breaking traditional gender stereotypes by wearing cross-gender *hanbok* styles, sparking discussions about inclusivity in Korean fashion. These modern adaptations indicate that *hanbok*, just like Korean society itself, continues to evolve in response to shifting cultural perspectives on gender identity; however, traditional *hanbok* design remains largely gendered, particularly in ceremonial and formal settings.

Through strategic branding, cultural diplomacy, modern reinterpretations and international collaborations, Korea has successfully positioned *hanbok* as a testament to Korea's ability to adapt tradition to modernity while maintaining a strong and distinctive cultural identity; considering globalization as an inevitable phenomenon, modernization has been essential for *hanbok*'s survival, while the garment's adaptability is precisely what ensured its enduring relevance for centuries; hence, its transformation should be seen as a natural progression rather than a departure

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

from tradition¹⁴¹ even if challenges persist in balancing it with cultural integrity, as critics worrying about misrepresentation argue that market-driven changes risk diluting *hanbok*'s cultural authenticity.¹⁴²

2.3 Negative Impacts of *Hanbok* Commercialization

After having given credit to what have been the positive outcomes of the process of commercialization of the traditional costume in Korea, the thesis will now evolve to the core its research, taking into consideration the negative effects of the process, that stand at the basis of critics and controversies. As underlined by many sources, globalization has reinforced tradition, rather than replacing it, offering a model where economic sustainability and cultural heritage can technically coexist; this proved the potential of the traditional garment as a tool aligning cultural identity with global engagement, fostering the economic revitalization of the *hanbok* industry under a growing demand that ensures that both artisans and local industries, that might have disappeared otherwise, continue to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. Paradoxically, as we will further analyze in this section, the process and consequences of commercialization are more complex than it may seem, as the commercial success has proven to be a double-edged sword, especially when applied to the traditional cultural staples involved in the *Hallyu-Hwa*, including *hanbok*, that no longer belong to modern entertainment, but places its roots back in history and carry a deep cultural significance strictly bounded to national identity, and consequently cannot undergone the risk of erosion.

2.3.1 Impact on the *Hanbok*

The emergence of a more practical and frenetic lifestyle, aligned with globalization implications, has led consumers to prefer simpler versions of the traditional attire. This

¹⁴¹ Han, Min Jae, and Younhee Lee. "Research Trend of Korean Costume Design - Focusing on Journal of the Korean Society of Costume and Journal of Korean Traditional Costume." *The Research Journal of the Costume Culture*, 2020, 677–91.

¹⁴² Oh, Seung Won, and Jae Won Lee. "Modernized Hanbok Meets Tradition: The Debate over Korea's Iconic Garments." *The Hanyang Journal*, September 4, 2024.
<http://www.hanyangian.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=20379>.

preference has had a direct impact on *hanbok*'s design and production, prompting businesses to redesign *hanbok* in order to align with consumers' needs, desires, and market trends, reducing or eliminating elements of the original design while introducing new styles catering to a younger and evolving market. However, while commercialization and industrialization have surely made the garment more accessible to a wider range of people, it has also compromised *hanbok*'s value as a traditional symbol, affecting its cultural significance and authenticity.¹⁴³ In fact, the simplification of the traditional garment can dangerously weaken its bounds with Korean history and traditions, especially considering people might increasingly wear the traditional attire in a superficial way, treating it as part of an aesthetic phenomenon,¹⁴⁴ while they may not feel compelled to understand the cultural context or criteria behind the selection of a specific style. Additionally, despite many creative designers attempt to update the *hanbok* for contemporary tastes, modern reinterpretations sometimes risk falling into overly commercial aesthetics, leaving little room for bold ideas that preserve the cultural richness and unicity of the original piece.

Nevertheless, while commodified changes can sometimes feel too far from the original design, the increasing request for versatility and comfort has led to a kind of homogenization in the *hanbok* design, colors and fabrics. Once clear indicators of social class and status, such features and variety have been gradually lost in modern versions, that now tend to resemble one another. This tendency stems largely from the use of pre-made templates in the production of contemporary *hanbok* that, while drawing inspiration from traditional elements, tend to simplify or disregard the wide range of styles and details, diminishing the symbolic and material value of the garment, while allowing for a quick and inexpensive mass-production that limits creative experimentation with styles and details. This vision particularly aligns with older generations and cultural traditionalists; considering this trend as a threat to national identity, they often consider the simplification of the garment's design and casual use as a form of dilution, eroding *hanbok* of its true essence. Nevertheless, their point of view strongly contrasts with

¹⁴³ Pacheco, Mariana. "*Hanbok Pop: The Traditional Culture and the Fabulation of Hallyu in Brazil.*" Essay. In *Korean Journal of Communication* 1, 1:249–63. University of Texas Press, 2024.

¹⁴⁴ Peedikayil, Sruthi Edakkal. "Noted Hanbok Designer Explains Design for Actor's Outfit." Korea.net, December 29, 2023.
<https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/HonoraryReporters/view?articleId=244502&pageIndex=1#:~:text=In%20my%20opinion%2C%20most%20people,msjeon22@korea.kr>

younger Koreans', who generally appreciate the modernized versions for being more accessible and better suited to everyday life, enabling heritage to be kept alive amid global influences.

2.3.2 Economic and Industrial Consequences

As highlighted in the previous sections, *hanbok* is traditionally made from natural materials selected not only for their aesthetics, but —most importantly— for their connection to specific seasons, social status, and cultural symbolism. The process of creating high-quality traditional *hanbok* requires exceptional artisanal skills, featuring traditional sewing and dyeing techniques passed down through generations that involve hours of meticulous and complex work, as well as deep knowledge of all the symbolism and meanings connected to the various features. Also, these garments are traditionally tailored, adjusted and personalized to fit the individual wearer's body shape and preferences. Consequently, high-quality *hanbok* is understandably more expensive than modern, mass-produced versions made with synthetic fabrics and simplified designs.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, despite the art of *hanbok*-making is still considered an important aspect of cultural heritage, we have to consider its exclusivity might alienate people who may feel the garment is financially out of reach, leading to a progressive cultural detachment from tradition, towards a preference of mass-produced, cheaper versions, particularly appealing to younger and international audiences or tourists who are looking for a quick and affordable option.

Therefore, the successful process of commercialization of *hanbok* has made the garment more accessible, boosting sales and popularity: this condition built a highly competitive and saturated market, where artisanal producers face significant challenges from large-scale manufacturers that, having the ability to standardize designs and streamline production, can sell *hanbok* at a fraction of the price. Considering the traditional garment is no longer worn daily, the fierce competition drove profit margins down, making it difficult for small artisans to survive in a market dominated by mass-

¹⁴⁵Edwin Vonholy. "Modern Takes on Hanbok: How Designers Are Reimagining the Classic Style." Edwin Vonholy: Designer Womens & Menswear Clothing Shop, 2025.
<https://edwinvonholy.com/2025/04/15/the-craftsmanship-of-hanbok-the-art-and-technique-behind-the-traditional-dress/>.

produced items, despite the economic benefits fostered by government initiatives. Additionally, the difficulty in identifying clear trends in *hanbok* design, due to the lack of a centralized industry model, further complicates efforts to scale up production and reach broader markets.¹⁴⁶ Hence, high-quality *hanbok* market remains more niche and limited, making the product less competitive, especially for consumers who prioritize price over authenticity.¹⁴⁷

The decline of demand for high-quality artisanal *hanbok* poses a significant threat to the preservation of traditional techniques and cultural knowledge, further eroding the legacy of *hanbok* craftsmanship; facing this situation many artisans had no choice but adapt or compromise on artistic integrity, focusing on easy-to-produce versions, thus risking sacrificing the iconic traditional traits and individual artistic vision in order to stay competitive and survive. On the other hand, such emphasis and economic and commercial pressure to produce *hanbok* cheaply, quickly, and in larger volumes, led to notable decline in material quality, craftsmanship, and attention to detail, overshadowing awareness to the skills required to make it, while tending towards more uniform and generic designs.

However, the erosion of traditional craftsmanship is not just an aesthetic loss, but also a cultural one: this condition might cause people approaching to the country to lose, or not show any, appreciation for the cultural heritage and the process involved in the creation of the traditional garment, contributing to the loss of heritage and the extinction of specific traditional skills that were historically integral to *hanbok*. In addition to this, just like many other fashion industries in the world, Korea's rapid mass-production is also characterized by a lack of sustainability: the surge in demand for modern *hanbok* has led to industrial practices that don't always meet environmental standards, as they increasingly shift toward automated bulk production, sometimes using synthetic dyes and cheap materials that, while being affordable and more readily available, are not biodegradable, and thus pose a major challenge to waste management.¹⁴⁸ This trend

¹⁴⁶ Lee, Joo Hyeon. "Implications of Wearing 'Hanbok' in Korea: Comparative Study of Asian Ethnic Dresses (Part III)." *The Korean Society of Clothing and Textiles* 25, no. 1 (2001): 37–49.

¹⁴⁷ Osuorah, Eric. "Afoma Marketplace Blog: Artisan Stories, Tips & E-Commerce Insights." AFOMA marketplace, September 2, 2023. <https://afomamarketplace.com/blogs/handmade-vs-mass-produced-impact-smes-online-marketplaces>

¹⁴⁸ "The Price of Convenience: Synthetic Fibers Exposed: Tocco." *tocco.earth*, November 8, 2023. <https://tocco.earth/article/synthetic-fibers-debunk/>

towards affordable and less durable *hanbok* has led to a culture of disposability, where once a garment is worn, it may be easily discarded, increasing the demand for new garments; this condition alimENTS a cycle of higher production rates, that easily lead to overconsumption and textile waste over time that, along with its significant environmental impact, contributes to the fast fashion crisis.¹⁴⁹

2.3.3 Social and Cultural Consequences

Sustainability issues do not only refer to the environment but also involve ethical and social considerations regarding labor practices, worker conditions, and the preservation of cultural heritage. In this regard, shifting this concept into the topic of the research, it is noteworthy to mention that *hanbok* mass-production often takes place in a global supply chain, where labor conditions can be difficult to trace; still, the cheap production costs associated with synthetic fabrics and mass production are often the result of low-wage work in countries with fewer labor protections, that create ethical concerns about worker exploitation and unfair wages.¹⁵⁰

Other discussions and controversies sparked around the practice of *hanbok* rental, emerging as a significant topic of debate with multiple cultural, social and ethical concerns catering commercialization, appropriation and preservation of tradition.¹⁵¹ Along with the controversial nature of mass produced rental *hanbok* mentioned before, the commercialization of the garment as a mere rental product could dangerously contribute to the trend of “kitsch culture”, where the garment is reduced to a novelty item or just another commercial product for entertainment purposes, completely disconnected from its historical and cultural roots.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Lee, Sarah. “The Cultural Significance of Fast Fashion.” Number Analytics, May 28, 2025. <https://www.numberanalytics.com/blog/the-cultural-significance-of-fast-fashion#:~:text=Fast%20fashion%20reflects%20our%20cultural,are%20quickly%20adopted%20and%20discarded>

¹⁵⁰ “Why Is Fair Fashion More Expensive?” The Slow Label, April 14, 2021. <https://www.theslowlabel.com/blogs/stories/why-is-fair-fashion-more-expensive>.

¹⁵¹ Asia Society. “Hanbok Part 2: Hanbok in Modern Days.” Asia Society, July 23, 2021. <https://asiasociety.org/korea/hanbok-part-2-hanbok-modern-days>.

¹⁵² Niesche, Jonny. “Kitsch.” Avant Arte. n.d. <https://avantarte.com/glossary/kitsch>

Consequently, tourists and Koreans alike tend to rent *hanbok* to take photographs at historical sites and photo-friendly spots, often wearing it outside of its traditional cultural context and purely for its visual appeal, without any clear acknowledgement of its deep significance. Hence, the act of renting the attire casually or for fashion purposes could be seen as diminishing its cultural weight, as the focus on trendy, photo-worthy *hanbok* takes away from the ceremonial and spiritual roles that the garment once played in Korean life, fostering what by some is perceived as a disrespectful or superficial use of an important cultural staple, leading to a dilution—and subsequent loss—of symbolic importance. In particular, this issue concerns those who may not have had much direct experience with *hanbok* due to its decreased presence in daily life, paired with the rise of commercialization through rental businesses, that often promote an understanding of *hanbok* as simply a fashion item or touristic dress. This kind of promotion could lead to a disconnection from the garment's deeper meanings and its role in Korean history, as well as a distortion of the country's cultural identity, to which *hanbok* is tightly related. More recently, rental businesses have also incorporated modern or Western-style adaptations into the garments, in order to further raise its global appeal; however, these new variations of *hanbok* featuring cheaper fabrics, looser cuts, or bright neon colors, might further dilute the traditional aesthetic and purpose of the garment.

Unfortunately, these conditions can be discussed to stay at the basis of cultural appropriation concerns on the practice of *hanbok* rental; cultural appropriation refers to the adoption, use, or representation of elements of one culture by individuals from another culture, especially when the element is used outside of its original context; this practice can be problematic when it leads to misrepresentation, commodification, or exploitation of the original culture, reducing it to a trendy item.¹⁵³ In the case of *hanbok* rental, this is a complex and nuanced issue that intersects with concerns about cultural preservation, identity, and the impact of globalization on traditional practices mentioned before. The practice often provides an interactive, yet superficial, way to engage with Korean culture, that sells the garment as a tourist experience for cultural tours and fashion shows, rather than a traditional artifact. Concerns seem to worsen when it comes to rental market strategies addressed to non-Koreans, as for those unfamiliar with the garment's

¹⁵³ The Oxford Review. "Cultural Appropriation - Definition and Explanation." The Oxford Review DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) Dictionary, January 5, 2024. <https://oxford-review.com/the-oxford-review-dei-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-dictionary/cultural-appropriation-definition-and-explanation/>

significance, the act of wearing *hanbok* often carries a totally different cultural weight, that might lead to potential issues of misuse or disrespect that disconnect from its real significance, making it more prone to being viewed as appropriated culture, rather than celebrated heritage. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the way Koreans view the commercialization of *hanbok* by non-Koreans or tourists varies widely, as well as foreigners' approach to the garment: several reactions have emerged, reflecting different views on cultural preservation, tourism, and globalization, that will be analyzed in the next section.

2.4 Field observations and Survey Highlights

In order to provide a better evaluation of the ways in which *hanbok* is proposed to local and global audiences, consequently affecting their perception of the garment, the current section aims to highlight these ideas through the analysis of personal field observations first, followed by two surveys specifically crafted for this aim. The questions addressed will help underline the way in which *hanbok* is being proposed in its dual versions to modern societies and on how demographics have been perceiving it, leading to the collection of interest insights underlining the current outcomes of *hanbok* promotion and useful evaluations regarding the evolution of the phenomena and the future of the garment.

2.4.1 Field Observations



Figure 19. Venezia Comics K-Village promotional banner. 2025. (veneziacomics.com)

To start, I would like to mention the observations I have personally carried out during my past years spent between Italy and South Korea. “Venezia Comics” is a yearly festival taking place in Venice about comics and pop culture; the festival recently incorporated Korean culture-related proposals into the programs; during its 12th edition, I operated in the K-Village: one of the novelties of 2025, born from the collaboration for the promotion of mutual heritage between the Seoul-based company *K-tiful* and the Venetian *Wavents*, giving the possibility to visitors to dive into Korean traditional and contemporary culture, enriching their knowledge about its heritage while being in Italy, accompanied with games, samples, gifts, workshops and music. The immersive space, defined as the “South Korea’s core at Venezia Comics 2025”¹⁵⁴ was divided into four booths crossing the themes of K-food,



Figure 20. T'alch'um masks exposed at the booth of Venezia Comics K-Village, Italy. May 2025 (facebook.com)

¹⁵⁴ Guaragna, Andrea. “Venezia Comics 2025: Korean Village.” Venezia Comics, May 1, 2025. <https://veneziacomics.com/news/2025/venezia-comics-2025-korean-village/>

K-beauty, creative contents and tradition. Displaying Korea's living heritage, the space focusing on the promotion of Korean traditional craftsmanship relied mainly on *hanbok* and artisanal objects; people were offered the unique possibility to try on the garment for free or rent it for one hour, choosing between a good assortment of designs and colors. While getting the costumes ready for the activities, I have noticed that, compared to the ones available in South Korea, the versions proposed to foreign audiences seemed to be slightly different, tending towards the appeal of western audience, featuring more natural and delicate colors compared to the bolder tones of traditional versions. While this might be viewed as a form of authenticity dilution, I think it has been a good compromise that enhanced foreigners' interest towards the attire, while keeping a very good quality in the textiles, also incorporating some embroideries, that intrigued visitors even more. Despite people's choice of *hanbok* still relied mainly on colors and designs, through a "mix and



Figure 21. T'alch'um performance at Campo Santo Stefano in Venice, Italy. October 2022. (K-Tiful)

match" selection of the top and bottom parts, the whole experience was paired with an exhaustive and detailed overview of the historical development and symbolical significance of the garment and its features, which is something I have never spotted when visiting rental shops in South Korea.

During the event, the garment has been given further display, this time immersed in a more historical and culturally accurate context: live performances of *t'alch'um* (탈춤), a traditional Korean mask dance drama originating from Andong, and particularly the *Hahoe pyölsin'gutt'allori*, (하회 별신굿탈놀이), have been carried out by professional dancers on the main stage of the event; being *hanbok* a very important part of it, visitors could witness its historical employment and versatility not only as everyday garment, but also as stage costume.

However, that was not the first time for me to see *t'alch'um*, as it has been performed every year in San Marco square in Venice during carnival, engaging a wider variety of visitors coming from a lot of different cultural



Figure 22: T'alch'um performance at Hahoe Folk Village in Andong, South Korea. October 2023. (Photo by the author)



Figure 23. *Puch'aech'um* performed at the Korean Folk Village in Yongin, South Korea. October 2023. (Photo by the author)

the performance in Korea as well, when visiting Andong Hahoe folk village, I noticed the practice and performances to be identical, to the point that I have asked one of the man performing *t'alch'um* in Venice whether the cast and the costumes were actually the same; his positive response confirmed once again the efforts and care put by Korean organizations to provide a promotion of Korean culture that totally aligns with its true essence.

In Korea traditional *hanbok* can also be found inside folk villages' *hanok*, worn by mannequins, that reconstructs everyday-life sceneries. Additionally, *hanbok*-related performances go beyond traditional dances: the Korean folk village I visited in Yongin (한국민속촌) was almost like a blend between an amusement park, featuring many interesting activities and shows, and an open-air museum, being the whole area built upon a reconstructed traditional folk village; there, different versions of *hanbok*, spacing from traditional to more modern designs were presented during live performances based on traditional folktales, adding not only *t'alch'um*, but also *puch'aech'um* (부채춤) and *p'ansori* (판소리). There, *hanbok* were enriched with lights, special effects and more unconventional features that grasped the attention of the public, including me.

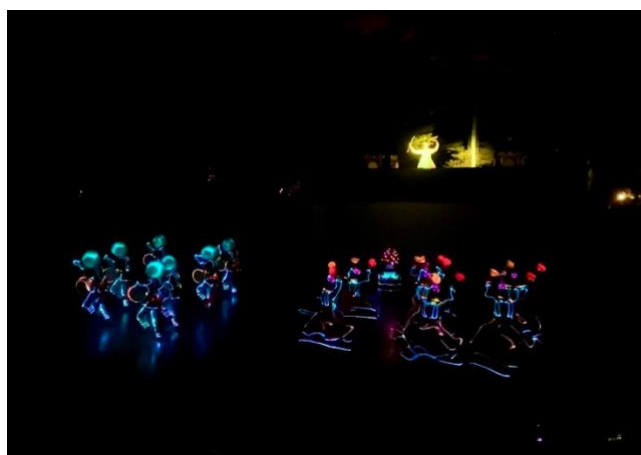


Figure 24. *T'alch'um* and *p'ansori* merged in a unique performance, with *hanbok* featuring lights and special effects October 2023. (Photo by the author)



Figure 25: Daehan Hanbok rental shop showing newly arrived “queen’s jackets”. May 2025. (instagram.com)

Coming now to my field observations on *hanbok* rental in South Korea, despite I have never actually worn one from shops when visiting an historical landmark, I couldn’t avoid the evident success of such practice, especially while crossing touristy sites particularly frequented by locals and visitors. On these occasions, I have visited some rental shops, while also consulting their websites and social media pages, analyzing their way of promotion of the garment, as well as their actual offers; while consumers overwhelmingly prioritize modern and diverse designs that reflect contemporary fashion trends, seeing *hanbok* as a versatile piece of clothing rather than a vessel of cultural storytelling, retailers and rental businesses are responding by offering innovative and trend-driven designs, which, while attractive, may dilute the garment’s historical essence. In fact, during my inspections, I have been overwhelmed by the huge number of garments proposed, featuring all colors and sizes imaginable —showing businesses’ regard toward inclusivity expanding towards foreigners’ demands and necessities—: being customers surely spoiled for choice, I don’t think it would have been possible for someone not to find their dream *hanbok* between all that assortment. In this environment, salesperson’s influence surely plays a role, as personalized recommendation from knowledgeable staff or acquaintances significantly impacts consumer choices, indicating that trust and interpersonal connection remain important factors. However, even in these interactions, the emphasis often revolves around aesthetics, leaving the cultural narrative of *hanbok* largely unexplored; this condition emphasizes the perception of the attire as an artistic statement rather than a historical artifact. Consequently, the traditional attire finds itself subject to shifting perceptions and priorities in an increasingly globalized world, that might lead to a diminishing appreciation for its historical and cultural significance.

While visiting cultural heritage sites, featuring free entrance for *hanbok* wearers, I’ve also spotted some rules and limitations enforced by the government for what concern the terms and conditions standing behind the free access; in fact, the models of *hanbok* eligible to this initiative are the ones of late Chosŏn Dynasty which, despite being the most popular, are not the only ones. Hence, the support and promotion in this field

seemed to be limited to a certain branch of *hanbok*, declassifying other versions, belonging to a different periodization.¹⁵⁵ Specific selections and criteria also target gender fluidity and freedom of the individuals, as men wearing female *hanbok*, and the other way around, cannot have free access, even if the actual design worn fully aligns with the eligible one.



Figure 26. Koreans and foreigners wearing hanbok. Image by Jirka Matousek, n.d. (knowingkorea.org)

Speaking about the global promotion of *hanbok*, a big contribute needs to be attributed to foreigner's engagement: the sight of non-Koreans wearing *hanbok* has become a powerful symbol of cultural exchange and appreciation on-site, as well as in social media, where influencers and

content creators showcase themselves in the garment. However, despite their enthusiasm and engagement in displaying the attire as an internationally marketable product, they are often unaware or uneducated about what, why and how they are actually wearing. A concrete example that I have witnessed concerned influencers invited to wear *hanbok* during the opening of a folk village; foreigner approaching the attire for the first time couldn't see they did not reflect the traditional quality and arrangement, while the garments provided also featured wrong sizes and inadequate way of wearing. In light of these findings, I could assume foreigners hadn't been provided any guidelines by the organization, as they have been mobilized and involved just for the sake of putting in touch different aesthetics, without relying on an accurate cultural outline.

¹⁵⁵ Korea Heritage Service. "Free Admission Guidelines for Hanbok Wearers." Royal Palaces and Tombs Center. Accessed February 2025.

Nevertheless, during my study trip in Korea, I had the chance to wear the *hanbok* several times, choosing from a variety of styles. I remember I put it on once I was visiting *Yangnyŏngsi Oriental Medicine Museum* in Taegu, with my Polish friends who were also studying in the same university as mine; at first, I didn't expect to find *hanbok* in such a museum that, while still dealing with traditional staples, was visited mostly by locals —also considering its location in Taegu, which doesn't have the same international environment and tourist affluence as Seoul— ; still, the structure hosted a small hall where visitors could try on the garment and have pictures taken while posing on a stage crafted in order to resemble the interior of a *hanok*. I really enjoyed the experience itself, as well as the quality of the attires available, however nobody gave us any information about the garment and its history, nor even tried to help us wearing it, that we know is not an easy task, especially for those who are not familiar with the attire.



Figure 27. Wearing *hanbok* at *Yangnyŏngsi Oriental Medicine Museum* in Taegu, South Korea. December 2024. (Photo by the author)



Figure 28. Wearing *hanbok* at the *Korean Traditional Culture Hall* in Taegu, South Korea. October 2023. (Photo by the author)

Comparing this sweet and sour memory with a similar one, occurred in the previous months, I can really tell the difference cultural education makes in enhancing *hanbok* experiences; when my hosting university arranged a tea ceremony event at the *Korean Traditional Culture Hall* in Taegu for us international students, my expectations haven't been disappointed: other than introducing us to a true and complete tea ceremony, featuring locally-produced matcha powder and handmade *yakkwa*, the experience also included *hanbok* wearing, paired with accessories and personalized hair styling. While having been let free to choose the garment accordingly to our tastes, this time the designs proposed were tightly related to the traditional ones. In addition to this, along with being introduced and helped to the correct way to wear and style the attire, they even educated each one of us with the specific information regarding the garment

chosen, including its social and historical meaning, specifically indicating how each design, color and material change accordingly to the personal, professional and social features of the wearer.

To conclude this first part related to my personal field observations, I would like to take into account all the professors operating in the field of Korean studies during my academic path in Ca' Foscari; between all the memories I dearly carry in my mind, I will never forget the time students were invited to wear *hanbok* in the university hall, signing “*Arirang*”: an iconic Korean folk song, often considered an unofficial national anthem. The attire, worn with deep pride in a sense of connection with Korean heritage, made me think there’s probably no deeper expression of cultural appreciation than the one of an aware individual embracing a different culture’s symbol with respect and full knowledge of it; the way it has been done and the smiles on the face of the Korean professors seemed to mirror the willingness of Korea to spread its priceless cultural heritage to the world, sharing it with people who are willing to embrace it as a whole.

2.4.2 Survey to Foreigners on *Hanbok* Commercialization

In order to give a deeper and multifaceted overview of the impact of *hanbok* commercialization on the global market, I have decided to enhance my research and personal experiences with a specifically designed survey, catering foreigners, and promoted it through social media and online platforms in order to get as many answers as possible from foreigners that directly or indirectly got to know the attire from diverse sources and in many ways; the insights provided can be very interesting for analyzing how different ways of promotion and assimilation of Korean heritage have shaped perceptions and ideas of the garment, its heritage and its future. It is important to consider that, due to the ways adopted for spreading the survey, many answerers were Europeans (95,6 %) in their 20s (84,4 %). With that being said, despite such data might stand for limitations in the results, I believe it can still provide functional insights about how younger generations, that usually have more immediate access to online platforms and international media, have been actively engaged in the promotion of the garment. Most participants are university students or people approaching to a professional career; also, a considerable part of them is graduating, or have graduated, in Korean studies, which allows us to register other distinctive thoughts from people having a deeper knowledge

of Korean culture and history; still, all results and opinions have been taken into consideration as crucial for the successful outcome of the survey. The majority of survey takers (68,89%) have visited —or lived— in Korea at least once, most of them (53,3%) for several months to one year. As confirmed by the last question aimed at collecting general information, this time referred to study exchange (81,3%), tourism (34,4%) and work (15,6%) purposes and, in a little part, also for cultural exploration (6,3%).

The first section of the survey focused on participants' experience and impressions of traditional *hanbok*, including when, how and why they got in touch with it, physically or virtually, and through which means, helping us understand how traditional attire is still used, perceived and practiced in everyday life by people approaching to Korean culture from outside. The survey highlighted that most participants first learned about *hanbok* from K-pop and K-dramas (57,8%) and social media (33,3%), which underlines the successful outcome of the strategical efforts undertaken by both the government and the private sector, incorporating the traditional garment into entertainment industry and social media, promoting the costume to global audiences, as well; a smaller, but still significant, ratio firstly approached the garment from travel contents (15,6%), academic context (6,6%), family and friends (11,1%), *manhwa* (2,2%) or even directly when visiting Korea (11,1%) (Appendix A, Figure 1). Such positive result does not simply refer to the promotion of the *hanbok* as visual element, but also of its significance: 92,3% of participants consider *hanbok* as a symbol of Korean long-lasting culture, history, tradition and identity, that still resonate in modern times and in specific contexts and ceremonial occasions. *Hanbok* stands also as a concrete reflection of a very skilled traditional craftsmanship, that symbolize the true essence of Korean sense of beauty and elegance reflected in fashion. Only a reduced part of interviewers connected the process to a marketing operation to sell Korean culture and traditions (5,1%), while others wrongly associated it to the costume from *Mulan* (2,5%); these last insights indicate that, despite the successful promotion, there are still some issues regarding both information-givers and receivers.

While 44,4% of contributors affirmed to have never worn traditional *hanbok*, those who answered positively (55,6%) affirmed to have done it while visiting photo-worthy temples, palaces and *hanok* (75%), particularly indicating *hanbok* rental shops near Gyeongbokgung palace (*Gyŏngbŏkkung*, 경복궁) and Bukchon Hanok Village

(*Pukch'onhanongmaül*, 북촌 한옥마을), tourists could enter for free because of wearing the garment (Appendix A, Figure 2); this activity has been particularly dear for some students that were looking for an immersive experience into the Korean culture, showing a deep and strong appreciation for it. However, several respondents revealed such initiative might have some of the aforementioned limitations: since the garment, at least in its traditional form, is still pretty much gendered, people get free entrance only if it's men and women wearing respectively male and female versions of the garment; additionally, it only refers to *hanbok* belonging to Chosŏn era, which are the most standard and widely commercialized, while other versions still remain quite unknown. Nevertheless, *hanbok* rental seems to be the preferred way by most foreigners to approach *hanbok* for cultural experiences while being in Korea, particularly thanks to its financial affordability and immediate availability. At the same time, survey takers have also experienced wearing the traditional attire during *hanbok*-related fashion shows, festivals and traditional events in Korea (12,5%) and abroad (16,6%), hinting at Germany and Italy (also including the aforementioned "Venezia Comics").

Most of interviewers that have worn *hanbok* in these occasions affirmed to have felt comfortable while doing it: despite some suggested it might be slightly too hot to be worn during summer, all of them strongly appreciated the garment's comfort, being very roomy and easy to carry, thanks to its loose fit structure and its fabrics. People also touched upon their initial worry about the risk of cultural appropriation, that could have triggered locals; however, they underlined how Koreans generally actually displayed their excitement and pride in seeing foreigners experiencing Korean culture while wearing the traditional garment. Also, the popularity of the practice played an important role in making foreigners feeling at ease while wearing the attire.

"Physically - yes. Psychologically, at first, I was a bit afraid of being disrespectful by wearing it wrong and I wasn't sure if it was 'cultural appropriation'; however, Koreans' reactions when seeing me wearing it made me realize they were genuinely happy to share a piece of their tradition."

"At first, I wasn't sure to wear it, I felt it could be seen as culturally inappropriate for me as a woman coming from a different country and culture. But I thought about it and realized that I would have worn it respectfully either way, since I

admire and love Korean culture. So, I wore it and felt like a princess. It was a wonderful day that I spent with my friend and still cherish inside.”.

The following section regards participants’ interest and participation to *hanbok*-related cultural events or festivals, both in Korea and abroad; in this case, 77,8% of them affirmed to have never taken part into such events, showing how the practice of wearing *hanbok* might be more strictly related to rental businesses, when it comes to global audiences (Appendix A, Figure 3). Nevertheless, people taking part into such initiatives stated that these events helped them getting in closer relationship with the traditional features of the attire in its historical context, recreating suggestive experiences in successful events and dance performances organized by universities, as confirmed by attendants.

“They broaden my horizons when it came to Korean culture.”.

“I was able to learn more about the history and making of hanbok. I now appreciate the tradition behind it a lot more.”.

“(…) I have seen some dance performances both in Italy and Korea, and the dancers would wear traditional clothing pieces. These events allowed me to fall in love with Korean culture even more.”

Coming now to the part dealing with the experience of *hanbok* rental, to which 57,8% of respondents have taken part into at least once (Appendix A, Figure 4), people have been asked whether, during the practice, they have been given any explanation about the garment’s history, symbolism or meaning; surprisingly, 63,2% of them selected “*not at all*”, while 31,6% stated to only have received a very brief introduction; however, no one affirmed to have received an exhaustive overview of the garment’s significance (Appendix A, Figure 5). This might also have influenced the next data collected, when respondents have been requested to indicate which factors affected their choice of *hanbok*, when renting one: just like the Korean counterpart, most foreigners seemed to be captivated by color (78,9%), style (73,7%) and fit (36,8%) before everything else. While the price factor is still considered, as well as photogenic appeal and trendiness, it doesn’t seem to have a determinant impact on decision-making, suggesting that consumers are still willing to invest in *hanbok* as a premium product, provided it meets their aesthetic expectations. Also, a 26,3% also takes into consideration the traditional meaning: despite being not a high insight, it still underlines foreigners’ efforts to display a certain interest

towards heritage during the practice of *hanbok* rental, even though no cultural education is provided (Appendix A, Figure 6).

With 82,2% of participants thinking positively about the contribution of foreigners wearing *hanbok* to highlight Korean cultural visibility —very similarly to Koreans' thoughts—, 15,6% of them weren't sure about it, while only one person had a negative impression (Appendix A, Figure 7). Although the portrayal of the historical garment might be less accurate, positive thoughts were related to the significant contribution such promotion provided in the spreading of Korean culture globally, playing a crucial role in educating and engaging a wider range of people by giving traditional clothes a space of representation on international media; while visitors are given an easy and practical chance to firsthand experience Korean heritage, they also become cultural mediators exposing it to other people who have never engaged with Korean culture or have never been to Korea, significantly spreading its visibility worldwide and extending its soft power toward other means.

“(...) It is great that Korea is not only treated as the land of K-pop; this way when K-pop wave will end, Korea will have other soft powers to leverage their tourism.”

“Wearing other cultures' clothes and costumes makes people understand the true nature of the culture itself, the lifestyle.”

Still, survey takers did not skip on underlining some concerns and controversies that came along with such widespread promotion and global interaction, sparking debates over cultural appropriation, dilution and exploitation that risks damaging the image and heritage of the garment; this can be due to either wrong way of promoting, or of receiving and perceiving the offers: these insights highlight that, while having surely contributed in making *hanbok* more visible, the risks of it loose significance seem to be proportionally rising.

“It's becoming a trend and losing its meaning.”

“(...) It is also true that nowadays hanbok worn by tourists is not the same as the original one from Chosŏn dynasty, so we can say that it is truly related to the authentic Korean history?”

“To do an analogy, it the same when our parents were cosplaying Cowboys.”.

Conditions such as right contextualization, faithfulness and accuracy —both visual and technical— of the representations, as well as whether it is worn correctly and respectfully, play a pivotal role in determining the success or the failure of the practice, shaping receivers’ perceptions toward such a culturally-rich mean.

“If there was more information about the cultural significance, I feel like it would contribute more.”.

“(…) However, if worn disrespectfully, it becomes just something you do for pictures on social media, and the real value is lower.”.

“I think that sometimes foreigners are very shallow about the meanings and importance of hanbok, and this may contribute negatively, as it makes people perceive the hanbok as an exotic thing which is seen as weird and different; this may influence negatively how the whole Korean culture is perceived abroad, too.”.

“While I think foreigners being interested in Korean culture is a great thing for Korea, I hope they can honor Korean tradition and culture with respect and care. I'd rather foreigners wear the hanbok because of this kind of reasons rather than because it's trendy.”.

While almost all participants recognize the strong role of *hanbok* in the representation of both Korean cultural and national identity, they also pointed out that, just like many “tourist attractions” marketed to a large group of people, the main attention is shifted to profit, which may be a reason why “*many hanbok rental placed don’t bother to explain the culture behind hanbok and how it represents Korean identity and culture*”. Hence, despite its great value, a considerable part of the respondents signaled a lack of communication of such layered significance; this might not be seen as a concern from a Korean perspective, where *hanbok* is accepted and identified as an intangible heritage, strongly bounded to tradition. However, when it comes to foreigners, such “*connection might not always be clear unless they are familiar with Korea*” or have visited the country; The lack of awareness and explanation around its history might dangerously lead foreigners —especially those who have no knowledge about Korean culture— to treat it

just as *“a must-do trend to try and show on social media”* as they *“don’t realize the importance of the hanbok”*. Someone added that *“a lot of times they just know it’s Korea’s traditional dress and nothing else. While that may be true, I think a bit more explanation could be useful”*, useful for understanding that it is not *“just the same as kimonos or other Asian outfits.”*.

“I think it does represent Korean cultural identity because it tells their history and also represents different Korean philosophies. As for now, I don’t think it is communicated well to foreigners in general since it focuses more on the aesthetics, and only people who are interested or study Korean history and philosophies can understand the deeper meaning of these traditional clothes.”.

Coherently to the data collected, while 51,1% of the respondents don’t see any risk of cultural appropriation when non-Koreans wear *hanbok*, a significant 44,4% of them stated that it depends. Some other participants directly declined the existence of such concept in a globalized, rapidly changing reality (Appendix A, Figure 8):

“Cultural appropriation as a concept is incorrect and should not exist. There is no such thing as a fixated culture and cultures have hybridized for centuries, always.”.

Foreigners *“do not want to be considered Korean because (we) wear their national clothes, just want to have an experience”*: they are not willing to appropriate Korean culture. Still, multiple reasons have emerged behind the concern of cultural appropriation, and most focus on the same points; that is to say, issues might rise depending on how non-Koreans act and behave while wearing *hanbok*, for example in case the garment is being worn with disrespect, out of context, *“without regard”* or *“just to follow trends or social media without awareness of a minimum of its history and meaning”*, since it is important to remember that *hanbok* *“is not a carnival costume”*. At the same time, it really depends on the intentions and attitude, which are usually influenced by cultural acknowledgement and understanding:

“I think that if a person wears hanbok with respect it isn’t cultural appropriation, and with respect i mean being sufficiently educated on its history and its importance, and on how to wear it the right way.”.

Perfectly summarizing everything that has been said regarding the controversy over cultural appropriation, the following assumption clearly underlines how curiosity, information and awareness can be crucial in saving *hanbok* promotion from these risks:

“Cultural appropriation happens when people show no respect to the culture they are portraying or “using” (e.g. wearing hanbok). I think the problem is not in wearing the hanbok while being disrespectful to the culture you are visiting, but the disrespect itself. In my opinion it doesn’t matter what you wear or what language you are using but it matters whether you act respectfully and are open to learn about the culture you are experiencing. Nobody knows everything and it is completely normal for people to stereotype certain things. That often doesn’t come from a place of ill meaning, but simply limited information or misinformation. In my opinion, as long as you are open to new information and conversation about the culture, you are not appropriating anything.”

For the second part of the survey, participants have been asked to shift the focus on to modern *hanbok* and everyday wear, exploring their perceptions and interactions with more recent reinterpretations of the garment, designed for daily life and contemporary use; the resultative insights helped underlining the evolving cultural and aesthetic role of the attire in the global scene.

Firstly, 71,1% of the respondents stated to be familiar with modern *hanbok*, having worn or seen it in person (Appendix B, Figure 1,2); specifically, most of them have seen it more often from social media or fashion contents (64,4%), Korean entertainment broadcasts and celebrities (51,1%), on Korean streets and shops —physical and online— (35,6%) and cultural exhibitions (13,3%) (Appendix B, Figure 3). All respondents underlined how such *“easy and comfortable way to incorporate one’s cultural background in everyday wear”* was also impressively cool, unique and *“well made in any details”*, to the point that some of them have even bought one.

Even if not all respondents could clearly spot differences from its traditional counterpart, others noticed an evolution in the fit and design, being *“less colorful and elaborate”*, *“simpler, lighter, more comfortable and practical”* that eventually make it also *“more wearable and customizable to modern trends”*, while still tight to its historical roots and beauty.

“I think that modern hanbok is more fitted for Korea's current lifestyle, with their fast-paced culture. While the traditional hanbok I see it as a much more formal and event-worthy clothing.”.

“More stylish, but definitely you can notice where it comes from.”.

“The new ones are just made to show off instead of keeping their cultural tradition.”.

After having been demanded whether they think the process of modernization of the attire helps it making more relevant globally, most respondents weren't sure about it (57,8%), while other answers positively (33,3%); a small portion only though about it in a negative way (8,9%) (Appendix B, Figure 4). Going more into detail, while 33,3% of the participants stated not to be sure whether modern *hanbok* strengthens or weakens the garment's traditional meaning, a consistent 26,6% affirmed that it could be good to make it more modern and appealing to consumers, if it stays true to certain design principles, since keeping a standard would determine modern *hanbok*'s link to its traditional meaning (Appendix B, Figure 5).

People have expressed it as a complex matter and a double-edged sword, pointing out some concerns and further risks, such as modern versions sometimes being “*very distant from the traditional garment characteristics*”, taking away “*the magic of tradition and the historical meaning*” and, again, “*becoming a thing for foreigners to do in Korea*”. At the same time, while evolving into more contemporary versions, *hanbok* adaptations still remind people of its existence, while transforming into a more versatile style; hence, it is not replacing the use of the traditional garment, but only “*diversifying the amount of occasions it can be worn, opening up a conversation that allows for a continuation of its legacy*”.

“In a way it strengthens it as it makes it more accessible for people in the 21st century, while maintaining certain aspects of the traditional one, but it also weakens it as the original hanbok, and its characteristics get "diluted" into a more modern style. I think it's a double-edged sword.”.

Lastly, some foreigners sustain it not to affect the traditional meaning at all (22,2%), as they viewed the two versions as two different ways of addressing the garment to parallel contexts and purposes that do not come across each other (Appendix B, Figure 5).

“Times change and garments do too, and I believe that’s normal, therefore I don’t think the spread of modernized hanbok can weaken the role of the traditional one. Modernized hanbok is more suitable for every day, whereas the traditional one is suitable for ceremonies, important occasions, etc. So, I believe that the modernized Hanbok doesn’t substitute the traditional one and if it wasn’t for the modernized Hanbok, the Hanbok in general would be less worn.”.

Survey takers have shown particular interest and commitment towards a conscious and respectful use and shop of the garment: despite 37,8% of them have never thought about it, 53,3% of the respondents answered they have already been attentive about the matter (Appendix B, Figure 6). Despite adaptations are appreciated for their modern lines and more casual and versatile design, their employ is still considered relegated to the Korean soil: as demonstrated, 60% of the participants affirmed they would not consider wearing modern *hanbok* in their hometowns, while some might take it into consideration, and others are more indecisive about it (Appendix B, Figure 7). The reasons here seem to recollect more to what is considerate “acceptable” in a foreign society; many respondents stated they would *“love to wear it to a proper occasion in Korea if given the chance”*, but in their own country they don’t feel such need anymore: when carrying the attire outside of the context of Korea, *“it would feel strange”* and *“out of place”*: they might be labelled as *“koreaboo”*, or *“be frowned upon and interpreted as appropriation”* as if they’re not allowed to do it. In any case they perceive it like a thing that is still strongly related to Korean society and culture, demonstrating that the Korean attire is still viewed as strongly bounded to its cultural significance by foreigners, to the point that they cannot see it being displaced outside Korean borders or Korea-related occasions.

“It would be too different to what people wear and wouldn’t be worth the amount of questions I would receive.”.

“Because it is not a thing here and I would feel weird wearing another country’s traditional clothing if I don’t have ties to it.”.

Still, 26,7% of them affirmed they would wear it, particularly because of its pretty and unique design, that yet is not too far away from contemporary fashion. Hence, while being nice to wear in a simple, everyday outfit, modern *hanbok* can remind the wearer of Korea, recalling memories and cultural appreciation.

“I like to wear pieces of clothes that are somehow related with things I’m passionate about and that aren’t that common.”.

The last part of the survey collected perceptions of the future of *hanbok* — including concerns, hopes and ideas for sustainable and culturally respectful promotion—, providing significative insights useful for a broader understanding of how *hanbok* can continue to evolve without losing its cultural meaning. Most respondents feel quite optimistic about the future of the attire and have no concerns regarding it to continue to positively affect the fashion industry, keeping its relevance over time. Considering the amount of representation of *hanbok* in movies, dramas and social media, the bright future ahead will continue fostering an increased appreciation and demand from both national and international consumers, which may also lead to the creation of new designs and more *hanbok*-related events; just like modern versions, the traditional attire as well will still play a role in future Korea, as locals nowadays keep on wearing it during specific holidays, *“unlike some traditional clothing in other countries”*. Nevertheless, positive thoughts have often been paired with a slight worry about loss of authenticity and lack of cultural knowledge, typically occurring when such staples face global market and raising popularity.

“I believe it could represent a positive mean through which Korean culture is shared, however I believe the mass rental of hanbok should be accompanied by an explanation on the value and the need for respect of the hanbok.”.

This dual vision has been shared by several participants, that also underlined the fear of *hanbok* to become *“something of the past”*, which is another damaging impact, very typical of trendy items that get very popular, and sometimes “viral”, for a specific time. People taking into consideration this probability, underlined the necessity of Korea to *“work harder to remind Korean people and foreigners on the traditional meaning of the clothing (as it could risk just becoming a gimmick to earn money)”*, while also caring about the historical accuracy of the garments involved. Another thought analyzed *hanbok*

to “possibly remain as a niche interest to people who are very interested in Korea beforehand”, if the fashion trend will ever slow down its pace, or in case the garment will lose its widespread global appeal.

A last, very interesting supposition is the one seeing traditional and modern versions of the attire undergoing two different evolution paths, with consequently two distinct levels of costume and significance attributed to it: while the traditional side will remain the same, supported by purists doing everything in order to preserve the absolute tradition and cultural heritage of the garment, there will also be innovative stylists and designers that will continue working on their own versions for commercial purposes, following upcoming trends and global demands; while continuing promoting *hanbok*’s global relevance; however, in the future, the overlapping of different trends might bring modern designs more and more away from its original form and, consequently, its historical roots. Such ideas have been confirmed by the following quest, as insight show the majority of participants (62,2%) to think current commercialization efforts to both help and harm *hanbok*’s cultural value, while a significant 31,1% pointed out the positive outcomes to be more relevant than the negative ones (Appendix C, Figure 1). Explaining the reasons behind their thoughts, participants pointed out the importance of these efforts in making *hanbok* “*more visible in the public eye, preventing it from disappearing from the culture and traditional practices*”. In particular, the practice of *hanbok* rental has significantly contributed to make it more accessible and known internationally, consequently encouraging more people to learn more about Korean history and culture by diving into it —particularly those who “*would probably never come in contact with it*” otherwise—. Concretely, it is a matter of fact that people might have never heard about *hanbok*, if it wasn’t for its commercial expansion.

“I don’t think hanbok would have the same popularity if it wasn’t as promoted.”.

At the same time, it is important to mention that such popularity has not come without downsides: requiring a certain leveling of the cultural product towards characteristics and requests of a diversified audience and markets, commercialization implications also change the meaning, sacrificing *hanbok*’s authenticity and symbolism. Transforming into a “*cultural ,gimmick’, hanbok isn’t worn traditionally anymore, and artisans risk losing income because people increasingly tend towards rental practice, often without knowing*

its cultural value, nor thinking about what it represents". Considering that *"many rental shops offer clothes of very poor quality, more akin to a carnival costume than the actual traditional garment"*, for those who don't educate themselves, it is just a pretty dress to wear once during a trip; still, it has been noticed that *"this doesn't mean that the real cultural value disappears, as it is easy to educate yourself about it and there are still people who teach the culture behind it"*, opening the discussion up to ideas for a sustainable and durable promotion of the attire.

Different insights have been highlighted by the following questions, stating whether foreigners show any concern regarding *hanbok* to become just a fashion trend, rather than a cultural symbol; in this case, 48,9% of respondents completely declined such concern, considering the attire to still constitute a great part of Korean culture *"whatever shape it might take"*. At the same time, its unique design *"will make it not end fast as new generation trends"*, especially *"as long as both Koreans and true admirers of the culture respect and cherish it"*. As *"people of other ethnicities don't wear it solely because of a fashion trend"*, being often put into the context of Korean touristic spots will increasingly foster its connection to its cultural meaning.

"Hanbok will always be related to Korea, there is no Italian hanbok or French hanbok. a kimono is always a Japanese garment even though other international brands take inspiration from it."

Still, 31,1% of them highlighted some discriminants that might influence the development of such issues: consciousness and acknowledgement of the cultural meaning of the garment, appropriate presentation and context, as well as the area in which *hanbok* is promoted as a trend:

"It is getting trendier and trendier each day, and it might just become a fashion trend. But I think that that would only happen internationally, not really in Korea."

Also, this time a visible 20% affirmed to be concretely seeing such risk, indicating *"this kind of traditional cloths become just a trend in a globalized world"*, as it is *"a risk for widely known things. Especially on the internet, where many people just see a pretty dress and don't think about where it comes from or what kind of culture stands behind it"* (Appendix C, Figure 2).

“The traditional hanbok feels for me, already like a nice thing to try and show and social media. This modern one feels like riding on this wave of popularity that Korea has nowadays”.

These insights open the conversation to an evaluation of what can be done to promote *hanbok* in a more sustainable and respectful way, in order to foster its survival as a cultural staple while also saving it from becoming a mere fashion statement. Respondents here evaluated a lot of distinct and interesting hints that are worth sharing, redirecting to various actors, mostly rental businesses, governmental institutions and *hanbok* designers, that owns the biggest responsibility in this process. Some participants shown quite radical thoughts, suggesting to keep the garment *“for temples and various events, but not everywhere every time”* or making them *“quite more expensive (and stop renting them just to take some photos)”*; others even suggested to put laws directly, as when *“there is money to make, companies don’t care about the opinions of people that aren’t potential clients”*.

However, it is important to consider the rental program itself as quite a sustainable and respectful way to get engaged with the costume, and also the easiest way for tourists to access it. However, as many participants noticed, *“the mass rental industry doesn’t lend itself to any explanation”*; recognizing its popularity and potentiality for a significant contribution, a considerable part of survey takers expressed they would appreciate it if rental shops and websites could help foreigners understand better what they are wearing, by *“giving out information about the cultural significance and history of hanbok, how it is created and when and why people still wear it”*, *“maybe at least a brochure”* or a *“little, short explanation on how to wear it”*, fostering a deeper and more genuine respect towards the garment.

Other than cultural education, ethical production and meaningful modernization also stranded as crucial parts for the sustainability of *hanbok* promotion in the long term: redirecting to designers and fashion brands, participants suggested *“the use of more sustainable materials and the preservation of the garment’s importance”* throughout its natural evolution over time are something that can be done to still respect and honor its traditional roots. Underlining the huge role covered by the involvement of governments, brands and media in the preservation of *hanbok*'s cultural meaning, insights indicated them to be the main actors in determining it not to become a trend, and hence the ones to

which adjustments can be suggested and applied, such as rules for cultural preservation, as well as more advertisement to be done involving international brands and big corporations: *hanbok* could be implemented as a formal attire during relevant ceremonies, giving the garment an increased visibility.

“Despite the government encourages hanbok rental to get in palaces for free, once inside, there was very little info about the structure and no info about hanbok. I feel like they should put more effort into educating at these places, for example by doing some workshops or performances where hanbok is explained...”

Survey takers highlighted the importance of promoting respectful and informed representation of *hanbok* in fashion and entertainment, in a way that preserves its significance, through events and exhibitions in historical places often visited by tourists that contextually connect with the garment —such as palaces, *hanok* villages— as well as public places, museums and other attractions. As for social media, one answerer proposed a very interesting hint, mentioning the Chinese influencer mochihanfu, positively presenting modernized versions of Chinese traditional attire while always including the original name of the garment or the era it comes from, fostering both a fashionable and educational way of showcasing cultural clothes that have been modernized.

Considering that tourist *hanbok* are not always historically accurate, participants underlined their willingness for brands to keep the traditional meaning and unique features intact. Tourists should understand that *hanbok*, just like all traditional clothes, are *“not just piece of clothing, nor costumes made for them to wear, but are actually a living part of Korea's history and heritage, and therefore they should be approached with respect, an open mind and no entitlement”*.

“I hope it contributes to the spread of a culture and a way of living and dressing different from ours and thus allows us to also enhance our culture and our clothing, which starts from very different positions.”

2.4.3 Survey to Koreans on *Hanbok* Commercialization

With this significant amount of sources and data coming from foreigners' ideas and perceptions, I have thought about implementing an additional, yet smaller, survey redirected to native Korean audience, in order to evaluate possible different perceptions and ideas towards *hanbok* evolution and perception in modern times; similarly, the survey has been taken by young generations, with an age ranging from 20 to 30 years old and mostly implied in academic and early work career, just like the previous one. Understandably, all of them have worn traditional *hanbok* at least once, especially during traditional holidays such as *Ch'usŏk* and *Sŏllal*, but also for rental practices.

Talking about what traditional *hanbok* signified to them, most of the answer collected underlined the costume as a beautiful and unique cultural staple of the past that is still worn in specific occasions nowadays; however some people also perceive it as a tradition that is slowly disappearing and getting forgotten, as its use in its very own cultural context nowadays seems to be getting more and more rare. Considering high costs of buying one, most part of the survey takers affirmed to have rented an *hanbok* at least once; in this occasion, coming to what have been criteria used in the choice of the attire, their answers confirmed the ones collected by the survey of Park Sanghee and MiYoung Hee, regarding Korean college students' *hanbok* rental behaviors and affecting factors, as participants seems to have been influenced mostly by both the color and the design of the garment, leaving out any other option.¹⁵⁶ In contrast, the biggest part of participants affirmed to have never taken part in government-sponsored events related to *hanbok*, while their thoughts about the recent increase in *hanbok* rental services has been rather positive:

“개인적으로 보기엔 좋다고 생각함 솔직히 한국인들도 이제 자주 입을 일도 없고 가끔 특별한 어린 시절이나 입었던 기억을 상기시켜 주기도 하고 외국인들이 체험하고 즐거워 한다면 좋다고 생각함 어떤 나라는 전통 복장이 남아있지 않기도 하니까..”

¹⁵⁶ Park, Sanghee, and MiYoung Lee. *College Students' Hanbok Rental Behaviors and Factors Affecting Their Hanbok Rental Intention* 23, no. 1 (February 28, 2019): 74–88.
<https://doi.org/doi:10.12940/JFB.2019.23.1.74> .

“I personally think it is good. To be honest, Koreans do not wear it often anymore, and sometimes it reminds them of special childhood memories or memories of wearing it. I think it is good if foreigners experience it and enjoy it. Some countries do not have traditional clothing left..”

This answer perfectly recollects the collective thoughts about an issue that does not seem to affect Korean younger demographics at all: while giving tourists the possibility to experience and learn about their country’s culture, letting it get more widely known through social media, *hanbok* rental also fosters a revitalization in the use of the attire by natives, that can wear it occasionally, while avoiding the financial burden of ownership. Still, interviewers weren’t very sure whether the garments involved in rental practices were fully faithful to their traditional counterparts, admitting design and color to have evolved from the ones of the past, tending to a style that tries to be more appealing to Westerners as well. Despite the changes, they still clearly identify it as *hanbok*, and they truly appreciate this practice’s contribution in keeping it and its heritage alive nowadays. Moving on to their perceptions and feelings about foreigners wearing *hanbok* and posting pictures online, the feedback has been quite positive again, proudly claiming it as a successful outcome of the country’s development.

“한국이 이렇게 발전했구나 !! 많은 외국인들이 우리 문화를 체험하고 있구나 !!”

“Korea has developed this much!! Many foreigners are experiencing our culture!!”

However, there are still some visible concerns regarding which kind of *hanbok* is getting displayed:

“가끔은 서양식으로 화려한 한복 말고 진짜 전통 한복을 입은 모습을 마케팅 하는게 더 좋을 것 같다거 생각이 들었음.”

“Sometimes I think it would be better to market people wearing real traditional hanbok instead of fancy western style hanbok.”

Additionally, insights also shown how, while Koreans do not seem to disapprove foreigners wearing *hanbok* in anyway, such practice might have involuntarily contributed

in shifting their perception of the garment as “*more of a tourist thing*”; hence, they wouldn’t personally rent one. For the last part of the first section of the survey, participants were invited to think about the role of traditional *hanbok* in national identity nowadays; their answers highlighted a heartfelt connection between the garment and Korea’s culture and tradition that has been maintained also thanks to the practice, that has helped reintroducing it in modern times.

The second part of the survey focused on the commercialization of modern *hanbok* as everyday wear, shifting the focus on new variations of the attire aiming at its reintroduction in more casual and frequent contexts. Of course this is a topic all participants have already heard about, mainly from social media and entertainment artists’ collaboration with *hanbok* brands; some of them also saw it in real life, mainly worn in everyday spaces and popular events by older people and teachers. Surprisingly, most part of them have never tried it on, while still accepting it because of its more practical and versatile styles. This might be related to the fact that modern alternatives do not have any obligation of employ compared to their conventional versions, whose presence in traditional ceremonies and festivals is still considered rather mandatory. In the case of modern *hanbok*, it is more of an individual choice whether to buy it or not; hence, their bound with national history and identity might be less felt. Additionally, opinions have been contrasting when it came to define the role of modern *hanbok* in making Korean culture more visible and accessible, as about half of the participants responded positively, while others affirmed to haven’t seen them that often, and hence would like it to be more exposed in the media and everyday life.

Similarly, participants thoughts differed also when they have been asked whether the modern interpretations of *hanbok* can risk weakening the meaning of tradition: half of respondents stated not to see such issue, as *hanbok* has already underwent several changes throughout time.

"전통의 의미는 크게 중요하지 않은게 시대에 따라, 계급에 따라, 재력에 따라 한복은 다양한 소재와 디자인이 있었으며 이러한 모든것들은 시대에 따라 끊임없이 재해석되어와 지금에 이르렀기 때문이다".

“The meaning of tradition is not that important because depending on the era, class, and wealth, hanbok had various materials and designs, and all of these have been constantly reinterpreted according to the era to reach the present.”

Hence, the global demand and modern lifestyles that have led to these changes, are just part of a never-ending evolution and progression that keep on being mirrored by the garment. However, a considerable part of the survey takers stated that they “*don’t know*” and “*it depends*”, as in some cases, these changes might dilute the essential and unique elements of the attire.

“여성 치마길이의 경우 현대식 한복이 많이 짧아지기도 하는데, 그럴 때는 한복 고유의 멋이 없어지는 것 같아 아쉬움.”

“In the case of women's skirt lengths, modern hanbok is often shortened, but when that happens, it seems that the unique charm of hanbok is lost, which is a shame.”

Still, no one expressed a full disagreement on the practice, nor criticized modern reinterpretations to have weakened the meaning of traditional clothing. Still, the promotion of *hanbok*’s revitalization by government and brands is approved by Koreans only as long as cultural respect is a prerequisite, which underlines native’s care about the preservation of the attire, as well as its deep bounds with Korea’s heritage, which comes first any possible financial advantage. Ideal promotions proposed concern modern adaptations exposed to the media, government initiatives, dramas and movies centered on both a Korean and foreign audience, mixing traditional elements while avoiding too westernized versions.

Finally, the third and last part of the interview conducted with Korean audience regarded the future of *hanbok* and the issue of cultural sustainability. Regarding the future of the attire, while most participants seemed to be quite comfortable and satisfied with how it has been improved and used in various ways, opening it up to new positive directions that allow to continue fostering the perpetuation of its heritage, others expressed their worries regarding the decline in the use of the attire outside special life events. As stated by the majority of answerers, the current commercialization of *hanbok* —involving rental shops, mass production, SNS-centered consumption etc.— is mostly helping spreading the cultural value of *hanbok* internationally, and they consequently did

not saw any risk that it will become a mere ‘fashion item’ or trend in the future; also, some of them even stated that they wouldn’t be disappointed, if that happened. Having been asked suggestions for the promotion of *hanbok* in a more sustainable and culturally respectful way, participants proposed new reinterpretations of the garment in collaboration with famous clothing brands that can allow it to be wearable on a daily basis. At the same time, Koreans also took into account the success of the Korean entertainment industry as a good way to take into account for further *hanbok* promotion strategies; however, the effective potentials of these sources need to be revised, as they appear to be limited and particularly effective on middle-aged and older women, that watch historical dramas in which *hanbok* is featured the most. Finally, the last question of the survey asked participants which role government, media and brands should play in preserving the meaning and cultural value of the *hanbok*: in response, some of them pointed out that wearing the costume in everyday life is still a common practice in other Asian and African countries, and they don’t get why Koreans are insisting on wearing Western suits most of the time; some of them also stated that they would like promotion strategies to be redirected to a wider spectrum of people, instead of specific consumer groups, for example by being worn by government officials during news, videos or announcements.

Insights provided by both Korean and non-Korean audiences, implemented in the field observations included in the research, allowed for the evaluation of a layered and multifaceted way of perceiving and approaching the garment, amid the recent process of promotion and modernization. Hence, these data and proposal have been crucial for the evaluations highlighted in the following chapter, that will deal with the proposal of solution for a sustainable and durable promotion of *hanbok*, followed by a prevision of the evolution and development of the attire in the near future.

CHAPTER III: Addressing the Risks — Finding Balance

3.1 Potential Solutions for Balancing Tradition and Commercialization

Before going on to the defining potential solutions for a sustainable and valuable way to enhance *hanbok* promotion, I would like to highlight the significant *hanbok*-related cultural knowledge demonstrated by survey takers. I have noticed that those who know about *hanbok* —and consequently took part into the survey— are people of a noticeable cultural background; in this regard, *hanbok* acts as a living staple, spreading out on a cultural level between people who already owns a certain predisposition and willingness to embrace different cultures. Their noticeably informed background fostered the research unique contributions, that I consider crucial in the development of the subsequent chapter. The answers given and the opinions provided, surely highlighted the research to has been remarkably improved in a matter of context and contents, giving more layered and consistent hints for the following proposals, outlining how ideas are in constant development and are subject to generational and individual differences.

After having proved *hanbok* to be strictly tight to Korea's historical development, cultural heritage and national identity, it goes without saying that the approach adopted by the government and private sectors in the global promotion and commercialization of strong cultural symbols as *hanbok*, cannot follow the same promotional system adopted when advertising Korean entertainment industry in the 1990s. It is undeniable that, for the sake of economic development, a compromise must be found between respect for the heritage and the increasing requests of consumers belonging to an expanding market; hence, for the successful and durable result of this strategy, a solid and stable national identity is required, while special care must be taken to ensure that *hanbok*'s historical and symbolic roots are not overshadowed by market-driven adaptations.

Through a comprehensive and strategic approach, South Korean government and private institutions have already taken successful steps to promote and revitalize *hanbok* as both a cultural heritage asset and an economic commodity. By integrating financial

incentives, cultural promotion, and global branding efforts, policymakers and government-backed initiatives have ensured that *hanbok* remains not only a cherished tradition, but also a thriving industry; moreover, the government has also recognized the importance of modernized *hanbok* in keeping the tradition relevant, as the introduction of *hanbok*-inspired school uniforms and business casual collections demonstrate a commitment to integrate *hanbok* into everyday life, preserving the cultural significance of the attire, while also ensuring its continued relevance in a rapidly changing society.¹⁵⁷

As South Korea continues to expand its cultural influence globally, *hanbok* will undoubtedly remain a powerful symbol of national identity, pride, and heritage, bridging the past with the present and shaping its future in an ever-evolving cultural landscape. However, as underlined by the survey, challenges remain, as now *hanbok*'s widespread adoption is being limited by its common consideration as ceremonial or touristic attire, rather than everyday wear. Threatening the preservation of the traditional attire, the decline of *hanbok* in daily life, underlines how changing consumer habits remains a significant hurdle, while further struggles involve maintaining authenticity amid modernization and protecting the attire from cultural appropriation, during its progressive integration it into daily fashion trends. To address these challenges, the potential solutions proposed space between four main branches, redirected to diverse actors and contributors of the process, supporting traditional artisans while promoting *hanbok* as a symbol of national pride, that enables for a deeper understanding of the attire's cultural significance.

3.1.1 Ethical Production

The proposal of solutions is based on the belief of *hanbok*'s intangible richness and unicity to be deeply eradicated into its history and craftsmanship, which happens to be even more complex than the *hanbok* itself. Hence, the proposals aiming to a correct and long-lasting balance between tradition and commercialization should firstly listen to *hanbok* artisans' need to preserve and maintain the garment's authenticity. Of course, it's undeniable that the rise of mass-production in response to the increasing global demand

¹⁵⁷ Kim, Hwaya. "More School Uniforms This Year to Sport Hanbok Designs." Korea.net, January 17, 2020.
<https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=181751&searchKey=all&searchValue=hanbok&pageIndex=1>

has been threatening craftsmanship; in this regard, despite governments and organizations have already leveraged some financial support, crafters are calling out for further aids, as they still struggle against large-manufacturers; based on this consideration, future cultural preservation policies should include certifications for authentic designs, that can help protect handmade *hanbok* industries and craftsmanship—as well as the garment’s cultural integrity—from being overshadowed by mass production. Additionally, the recent growth of cultural appropriation disputes (e.g., the China’s claims over hanbok as *hanfu*), amid the attire’s raising popularity, highlight the strong need for policy responses strengthening cultural ownership and branding as uniquely Korean; in this case, future strategies can include trademark *hanbok* designs to be promoted internationally and a deeper diplomatic promotion, paired with the demand for an increased involvement from UNESCO in protecting Korean heritage.

3.1.2 Meaningful Modernization

Hanbok is historically considered a reflection of Korea’s social structures, philosophical ideals, and artistic sensibilities, as each element carries layers of meaning. However, these intricate details risk being overshadowed when *hanbok* is modernized or reimagined without regard to its roots: the growing demand for easy-to-wear versions has led to a process of standardization that risks undermining the creativity and symbolic richness of its traditional design; hence, considering *hanbok*’s authentic representations vital for the preservation of its cultural significance, one of the main challenges faced by the Korean fashion industry is finding ways to innovate while honoring tradition.

On this point, I’d suggest designers and international fashion brands who draw inspiration from the *hanbok* to collaborate with artisans and cultural experts, in order to ensure authenticity and cultural integrity, also when creating hybrid collections that celebrate the attire’s symbolic elements; feature and details’ meanings should be addressed and showcased in marketing campaigns, along with a visual display of the artistry behind creating a *hanbok*. This attitude will offer a unique opportunity to preserve traditional craftsmanship and elevate the historical version of the attire, while also conducting global audiences toward a deeper interest and respect for the garment and its significance. Giving a concrete example, contemporary fashion designer Kim Young-jin of Tchae Kim have pioneered efforts to reinterpret the *hanbok* by infusing modern

aesthetics with traditional craftsmanship, by working closely with artisans. Her collections highlight the *hanbok*'s adaptability while preserving its essence, perfectly bridging the past and present, in a way that ensures each garment to retain its cultural integrity.

In addition, in order to strengthen competitiveness and sustainable evolution of the attire, *hanbok* fashion houses should invest on design diversification, expanding the narrative of the garment by considering the shifting tendencies of contemporary lifestyles and diversities. Examples can be the introduction of eco-friendly materials and ethical production methods, that might catch the eye of environmentally conscious consumers', expanding *hanbok*'s reach on the global market, while reconnecting it to its roots. Innovations should also follow the increasing demand for inclusivity and more gender-neutral designs; despite this might require the garment to break away from the rigid historical class or gender distinctions, new narratives will surely help *hanbok* spreading towards a more diversified audience, in both local and international markets.

3.1.3 Considerate Promotion and Moral Consumption

When it comes to striking ways to foster a considerate promotion and consumption of the traditional attire, the issues deriving from *hanbok* commercialization require a multifaceted approach featuring the engagement of multiple stakeholders. In this regard, the research considers consumers' responsibilities crucial for restoring *hanbok*'s depth, since cultural appropriation may not occur if people embracing a culture are motivated by stable cultural knowledge and true interest towards the staples embraced. Integrating cultural narratives into fashion is essential for preserving the *hanbok*'s legacy, especially when engaging with modern audiences. Hence, collaborations and approaches need to be boosted by strategic marketing campaigns and high-profile events, in order to ensure *hanbok* transcends being a mere fashion trend and remain a powerful cultural symbol.

As previously analyzed, the controversy over *hanbok* rental is a multifaceted issue that need to be addressed; while making the garment more accessible and economically viable, this practice also raises concerns about environmental impact, cultural appropriation, dilution of traditional craftsmanship and symbolic meaning. In this regard, following the Korea Heritage Service's establishment of standards for traditional

pairings, several rental businesses are already trying to address concerns by offering authentic *hanbok* that, while serving as an important educational tool to customers, also helps the revitalization of the original craftsmanship.

While strongly recommending such efforts to spread out and engage more businesses, I'd also suggest them to offer visitors more support by professional sales personnel: in fact, since the research highlighted consumers to be generally attracted by aesthetic designs and trendy colors when purchasing or renting *hanbok*, there is also an opportunity—and perhaps a responsibility—to reintroduce the cultural narrative of the *hanbok*; in this regard, professional sales staff, who already hold significant influence over consumers, could be trained to explain historical anecdotes related to the attire's cultural significance into their recommendations. In addition to this, consumer's experience could potentially be enriched even more with the promotion of more immersive activities in historical settings, giving the possibility for tourists to learn about Korean traditions and *hanbok* significance firsthand, through specialized guided tours.

The previous chapter also highlighted how the rise of *Hallyu* has successfully brought *hanbok* into global consciousness, sometimes at the cost of diluting the attire's significance, reducing it to a trivial aesthetic symbol; hence, the entertainment industry's significant influence should be used as a narrative tool, making sure it promotes understanding, rather than just admiration.

On this point, detailed and accurate depictions of traditional clothing not only educates audiences, but also foster a deeper appreciation for the garment as a symbol of Korea's cultural heritage; hence, I advise filmmakers and costume designers operating in the entertainment industry to work closely with historians, artisans and cultural experts to ensure that the attires portrayed in their productions keep an essential balance between contemporary aesthetics and cultural authenticity.

Efforts for a sustainable and balanced promotion of the traditional garment can be reinforced by partnerships between fashion houses, designers and historians' partnerships that, leveraging media platforms, produce *hanbok*-related documentaries, or series explaining the attire's history and symbolism; this project would introduce global audiences to the cultural narratives embedded within the *hanbok*, fostering a deeper connection with Korean heritage that goes beyond its aesthetic appeal alone.

At the core of a moral consumption stands the importance of cultural education, addressing the new generational tendency to view traditional practices as outdated or irrelevant. Hence a revitalization of cultural education can be considered a long-term investment in cultural heritage promotion and preservation: involving the attire into educational frameworks can allow future generations to gain a deeper appreciation of its cultural significance, fostering a reconnection of *hanbok* to its roots. In this regard, there have been evaluated several proposals through which education can be implemented, raising domestic and international awareness in order to create an informed and mindful consumption of the garment, as well as an increasing demand for heritage-based products.

The revitalization of culture through domestic education is a critical strategy for addressing the erosion of historical and cultural awareness in modern societies and, in the case of *hanbok*, it can offer powerful means to build future generations in their cultural heritage, reconnecting individuals with their origins, meanings, and traditions. One of the first steps in this process is integrating cultural education into school curricula: educational institutions must actively counter *hanbok* narrative, framing the attire as a vibrant part of Korea's living heritage, as this perspective encourages students to take pride in their cultural identity while recognizing the garment's relevance in the contemporary world. In addition to this, the gap between theoretical knowledge and lived cultural practices can be bridged by interactive learning methods—such as workshops of traditional sewing techniques, or experiments with dyeing fabrics using natural pigments—and field trips to *hanbok*-related exhibitions that, fostering direct connections to the heritage, make the learning process even more engaging and memorable, moving beyond mechanical memorization. Lastly, family involvement also plays a significant role in the field of cultural education: serving as the primary transmitters of cultural values, parents can reinforce what children learn in school by incorporating cultural practices into daily life, explaining its significance and how it connects them to their ancestors¹⁵⁸. Pairing the academic institutions efforts mentioned, modern technologies can also foster new ways for the revitalization of cultural education; digital platforms can share more *hanbok*-related contents, such as virtual *hanbok* design tools, videos on its historical significance or interviews with artisans, while educational apps and games can

¹⁵⁸ Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS). “*Hanbok-Style School Uniforms Preserve Spirit of Traditional Attire.*” Korea.net, March 16, 2021.
<https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=195945#:~:text=Kim%20Min%2Dkyun,g%2C%20director%20of,life%20and%20preserve%20Korean%20tradition.%22>.

make learning about the attire enjoyable and accessible, transcending geographical and socioeconomic boundaries.

This approach can be extended on a wider scale: revitalizing cultural education through global awareness becomes an essential strategy ensuring the attire's legacy transcends borders and resonates with audiences worldwide: such global perspective ensures that *hanbok* remains an admired symbol of identity and heritage, celebrated not just within Korea but on the world stage, contributing to a richer and more inclusive global appreciation of cultural diversity that ensures traditions to be preserved and cherished for generations to come. In this regard, international campaigns, museum exhibitions and cultural festivals overseas can provide in-depth events showcasing *hanbok*'s heritage, craftsmanship and role as a cultural symbol, counteracting the risk of being commodified as a mere fashion item, or stripped of its deeper meanings by popular culture and mass media. Addressing global awareness, critical thinking needs to be encouraged against stereotypes and misconceptions fostered by globalization;¹⁵⁹ in this regard, the creation of online educational resources highlighting the cultural significance of *hanbok*, —such as documentaries, online courses, and interactive websites— could introduce international audiences to its history and evolution across centuries; allowing spectators to move beyond surface-level assumptions, towards a deeper appreciation of the garment's cultural richness, instilling a sense of responsibility in preserving cultural diversity. Finally, rather than merely showcasing its visual appeal, international marketing campaigns should embrace an educational role as well, encouraging global audience to explore *hanbok*'s history by highlighting the stories behind the designs, transforming the garment into a way to connect with a rich cultural tradition that goes beyond the simple purchase of the attire; concretizing this thought, online marketplaces could follow the same path as rental shops in Korea, offering ethically produced *hanbok* garments, paired with educational materials that allow global consumers an exhaustive understanding of the value and history embedded in their purchase.

¹⁵⁹ Mohamed Ali, Ghada. “[Interview] Hwang Yi-Seul’s Modern Hanbok Designs Shine at the K-Culture Festival 2024 in Dubai.” Honorary reporters, 2024.
https://honoraryreporters.korea.net/board/detail.do?articlecate=1&board_no=18455&tpln=1.

3.2 The Future of Hanbok in a Globalized World

Highlighting the importance of collective efforts in balancing *hanbok*'s global appeal with a deep understanding of its roots, collected data outlined what could be the future prospects of the garment, as it faces new challenges and opportunities within an increasingly globalized world. It goes without saying that globalization is inevitable and in constant evolution and, when it comes to cultural staples —facing this process directly or indirectly—, future outlooks seem to be either black or white, as adaptation and evolution can be the only ways possible to guarantee their survival within modern realities and international demand.

In the case of *hanbok*, Korea has successfully found a balance between tradition and innovation that ensured the garment to remain a cherished emblem of Korean culture for generations to come: as it approached globalization and modernization influences, initiatives and promotions took advantage of the development of fashion, media and entertainment industries, while focusing on honoring the symbolic and historical roots of the garment, sharing its cultural story to the world. Hence, rather than labelling this process as “modern adaptation”, we can also perceive it as an “modern evolution” of the garment, which not necessarily seek to adapt to modern tastes, but strives to find a way to remain relevant on the global stage, while keeping alive traditional elements that reconnect to its roots. Hence, in accordance with what has been foreseen by survey takers and academic sources, the future of *hanbok* amidst a globalization is bright: strategic approaches revived *hanbok* as both a cultural heritage asset and an economic commodity, expanding its global influence as a thriving industry. In this regard, organizations are now looking for new ways to foster further promotional content that could expand international interest, while allowing for a deeper acknowledgement of its historical significance.

As underlined by Kim Min-Yung —the director of Hanbok Advancement Center— *“at a time when Korean culture is gaining global recognition, promoting our representative traditional culture is a tremendous honor. Moving forward, we are committed to devising and implementing various strategies for hanbok’s globalization. The institute will continue to pursue diverse projects and collaborations to uphold hanbok culture’s legacy, enhance its industrialization, and further its globalization, including partnerships with international cultural institutions, while aiming to elevate global*

awareness of hanbok's cultural significance and leading the development of hanbok industry."¹⁶⁰

In this regard, this section will analyze what are likely to be the future challenges of the garment and how industries might react to them, taking into consideration Korea's willingness to maintain its historical symbols intact, while implementing them into the global market. Thanks to the growth of cultural content industry in the global sphere, the Korean sense of beauty is now getting globally recognized as a universal standard; contributing to fostering such modern sensibility, *hanbok* is no longer that expensive formal wear reserved for special occasions, but is becoming practical and sensible fashion to be worn in everyday life. In order to restore the garment's traditional conception as a practical and versatile fashion choice for every-day use, designers and brands have been prompted to develop its infinite potential,¹⁶¹ offering innovative and modernized versions of the traditional attire that feature lightweight fabrics, casual fits and simplified designs. Recalling the bright prospect of *hanbok*'s successful evolution during an interview on *Arirang TV*, Hang Yi-Seul —representative and designer of the modern *hanbok* brand *Leesle*¹⁶²— praises the attire's unique features and extremely wide spectrum of designs to surpass any western style, allowing for countless ways of reinterpretation and adaptation; adding that "*the biggest advantage of this attire is that it looks as beautiful as the traditional hanbok, yet it's comfortable for everyday wear as it's not too extravagant*",¹⁶³ she observes modernized variations' great potential in bridging tradition and innovation, allowing for a continuous development of the attire that also increases global awareness of its dynamic evolution. As she dreams about seeing *hanbok* replacing western fashion, Hang represents the determination of many artisans to shift the global vision of *hanbok* towards a daily fashion item, revitalizing its original use through modern

¹⁶⁰ Info@arirangculture.news, Editorial Board. "Korea Hanbok Promotion Institute(한국한복진흥원), *Leading the Globalization of Traditional Hanbok Culture.*" 아리랑컬처커넥트, July 13, 2024. <https://arirangculture.news/ViewM.aspx?No=3299580>.

¹⁶¹ Infokorea 2023. "The Development of Korea's Traditional Clothing Culture - 1 Changes in Traditional Korean Dress over Time." CEFIA Newsletter Vol. 235, February 2024.

¹⁶² Choi, Min-Joo, Se-Bin Eom, and Ha-Yeon Yun. "Traditional Korean Clothes Meet the Metaverse." Korea JoongAng Daily, April 6, 2022. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/04/06/englishStudy/journalism%20internship/Journalism-Internship-Traditional-Korean-clothes-meet-the-metaverse/20220406111550461.html>.

¹⁶³ Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS). "Ours Ep7 - Hanbok, Dreaming of Going Global." Korea.net, December 2016. <https://www.korea.net/Resources/Multimedia/Video/view?articleId=7560>.

adaptations. Another example is the one fostered by modern *hanbok* brand Tchae Kim, that has recently developed new *hanbok* versions for traveling, featuring wrinkle-resistant materials so that they can be unpacked and unfolded for immediate wear.

So far, these approaches seem to have been rather successful, gathering an increasing global recognition and appreciation towards *hanbok*'s cultural significance and appeal, compared to the past: confronting interviews addressed to foreign audiences attending Leesle's fashion shows, these modern variations provided an innovative revitalization of the *hanbok*'s role of in every-day life.

*"When I first came here, the hanbok you could wear was just traditional hanbok. There was nothing that people wore on a daily basis".*¹⁶⁴

Additionally, taking into consideration the insights provided by Danha —another sustainable fashion brand based on Korean tradition—,¹⁶⁵ modern *hanbok* has successfully caught the attention of marketplaces, as *"about 70% of our customers buy hanboks for their daily use, while about 30% buy hanboks for special occasions"*, registering a high increase of foreign customers —mainly from the US and then Europe, Southeast Asia—; additionally, the expansion towards new markets seems to be increasingly reaching further boarder, and will not stop in the near future; as highlighted by Danha, *hanbok* brands are now targeting even those regions that don't register many sales, such as the Middle East; for this purpose, projects require the garment to incorporate new features and functions in order to suit local market's necessities:¹⁶⁶ a challenge that doesn't seem difficult to be accomplished, considering the extreme versatility of the attire.

As the future of *hanbok* highly relies on how much is invested in preserving and maintaining its history and design, we might also consider the next phase of *Hallyu-Hwa* to involve a deeper incorporation of traditional elements into everyday life, further solidifying Korea's cultural identity on the global stage; in this consideration, the future

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ "About: 단하." danhaseoul.org, 2025. <https://danhaseoul.com/about>.

¹⁶⁶ Samir, Nehal. "Modern Hanbok: South Korean Heritage in Eyes of New Generations, Foreign Cultures." Dailynewsegypt, August 4, 2022. <https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2022/08/04/modern-hanbok-south-korean-heritage-in-eyes-of-new-generations-foreign-cultures/#:~:text=>

of *hanbok* will lie in expanding its role beyond cultural festivals and media, continuing to evolve and transform throughout the years for the sake of an increasingly seamless integration into everyday wear, in order to ensure its relevance across all age groups and contexts; amid this widespread success, and considering the attire's nature as "living" and "mutating" heritage, future prospects see new *hanbok*-related businesses and brands emerging to cater to both domestic and international markets.

Embracing new trends and technology advances, this vision requires the *hanbok* of the future not to be the same *hanbok* that was worn in the past.¹⁶⁷ Moving towards designs that can be easily altered for individual tastes, future implementations might see more customization and personalization in *hanbok*. Additionally, wearers' might want to transform their attire accordingly to different occasions and, consequently, further innovations will foster more modular pieces that can be mixed and matched, increasingly blurring the line dividing *hanbok* and western fashion.¹⁶⁸

Other diversifications are likely to occur considering the growing global interest in K-sports, as we might see *hanbok* elements getting incorporated into athletic wear, ranging from subtle hints in the design of sports uniforms to full-fledged *hanbok*-inspired activewear lines¹⁶⁹; in this regard, after the controversy sparked by China appropriating the Korean attire during the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, future proposals might include garment's adaptations as sport uniform for Korean athletes competing both nationally and internationally, addressing cultural appropriation issues mentioned in the previous chapters. With the garment evolving in the global stage, Korean designer will also foster increasingly collaborations with major international fashion houses, creating *hanbok*-inspired haute couture collections boosting the visibility of Korea's living heritage even more, while bridging the gap between heritage and modernity¹⁷⁰; collections and fashion lines featuring the traditional garment could also be

¹⁶⁷ Webb, Luigina. "Hanbok: The Future of Korean Traditional Dress." 10 Magazine Korea, August 16, 2019. <https://10mag.com/fashion-style-hanbok-korean-traditional-dress/>.

¹⁶⁸ Hee, Oh Jae. "Hanbok Fashion's International Surge: Powered by K-Pop." <https://seoulblend.com>, August 9, 2024. Accessed February 2025. <https://seoulblend.com/k-blends/k-style/hanbok-fashion-kpop-influence>.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS). "Ours Ep7 - Hanbok, Dreaming of Going Global." Korea.net, December 2016.

launched and more widely promoted by Korean idols and actors: recognizing their impact on an international scale, brands are very likely to launch new *hanbok* collections, inspired by idols known for their love for traditional Korean culture that would undoubtedly raise international interest.¹⁷¹

In the realm of future prospects we cannot ignore the contribution of science and technology, as they will be increasingly relevant in maximizing Korean cultural capabilities and rapid innovation,¹⁷² creating a more functional and innovative *hanbok* that still retains its cultural significance: future prospects may include 3D-printed accessories and smart fabrics incorporations, that will surely enhance the garment's features and characteristics to a whole new level: giving some examples, a temperature-regulating *hanbok* could be worn in every kind of environment, while the incorporation of LED-embedded designs during stage performances would significantly enhance its beauty to potential new consumers.¹⁷³

Taking advantage of virtual reality, we might also see the birth of apps and devices allowing users to virtually try on and customize *hanbok* designs, enabling people to engage with the garment, regardless of their location or economic possibilities. Digital realm has already been a crucial medium for showcasing and celebrating *hanbok* worldwide, providing instant feedback and direct connections between creators and consumers of *hanbok* fashion; moving forward into the digital age, these online platform are believed to play an increasingly significant role in shaping *hanbok* perceptions and driving its evolution and engagement as a fashion statement, continuing to adapt and thrive in our interconnected world.¹⁷⁴

As the demand for Korean cultural products grows, modern *hanbok* productions have also started to redirect modern issues and new necessities: with the evolution of fashion and shifting perspectives on gender, *hanbok* will further transform, gradually

¹⁷¹ Hee, Oh Jae. "Hanbok Fashion's International Surge: Powered by K-Pop." <https://seoulblend.com>, August 9, 2024.

¹⁷² Infokorea 2023. "The Development of Korea's Traditional Clothing Culture - 1 Changes in Traditional Korean Dress over Time." CEFIA Newsletter Vol. 235, February 2024.

¹⁷³ Hee, Oh Jae. "Hanbok Fashion's International Surge: Powered by K-Pop." <https://seoulblend.com>, August 9, 2024.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

moving toward inclusivity and gender-neutral versions that will challenge traditional divisions. Also, reflecting the growing demand for ecological fashion from environmentally conscious consumers', future *hanbok* will incorporate organic dyes and ethically sourced or recycled materials; in this regard, several brands are already leading the way towards innovative and sustainable methods of production,¹⁷⁵ fostering a deeper connection of the garment to the nature on both a physical and spiritual level. These conscious innovations are likely to lead to a further expansion of *hanbok*'s appeal, targeting a new, rising branch of consumers looking for a more sustainable alternative to mass-produced, synthetic garments¹⁷⁶. Hopefully, these sustainable alternatives will expand from the realm of *hanbok* production to the one of rental: just like contemporary *hanbok* designers, rental businesses are making efforts to incorporate eco-friendly *hanbok* in their shops, contributing to the reduction of environmental impact of *hanbok* production; in addition to this, an increasing number of *hanbok* rental services are also adopting circular economy principles, focusing on reusing and up cycling garments: by investing in higher-quality, durable fabrics, while choosing repairs instead of discarding worn garments, rental businesses can contribute to reducing textile waste.

The future of *hanbok* fashion looks as vibrant and dynamic as its history, promising exciting developments at the intersection of tradition, pop culture, and global fashion trends¹⁷⁷: innovations in design, technology, and sustainability will significantly contribute to making *hanbok* even more appealing and relevant in a modern context, ensuring its legacy in future years as living, breathing part of contemporary fashion.

Contemporary designers are likely to continue taking great inspiration from the garment,¹⁷⁸ finding new ways to incorporate traditional symbolism into the aesthetic appeal of modern wear; however, while these intentions give the positive prospect that the attire will not be left behind, it is also crucial for designers not to innovate to the extent the modernized versions get too far away from its roots: concerns about over-

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Lee, In Hwa, and Mi Young Son. "A Study on the Activation of Used Market of Hanbok and Hanbok Reform Market." *Family and Environment Research* 59, no. 1 (February 19, 2021): 59–69.

¹⁷⁷ Hee, Oh Jae. "Hanbok Fashion's International Surge: Powered by K-Pop." <https://seoulblend.com>, August 9, 2024.

¹⁷⁸ Kwun, Ayleen. "One Garment's Journey Through History." *The New York Times*, April 9, 2022.

modernization highlight an eventual loss of historical and symbolic significance of the new versions might likely lead to a further generational divide, fostering an increasing separation of the two designs, to the point that they might be interpreted in two completely different ways. Hence, striking and keeping the right balance is crucial for *hanbok* future preservation and evolution. Considering the fast pace with which fashion trends change in modern society, *hanbok* must not be considered, or sold, as a mere fashion statement, and it is important to consider the thin borderline standing before this change of perception.

Another crucial role in the future of *hanbok* will depend on how global awareness of the attire's cultural significance will be fostered: an eventual distortion of the visual representation of the garment is likely to cause the population to voluntary or involuntarily move away from integral aspects of tradition, not being able to recognize them as such. This would probably have repercussions on the solidity of the National Identity, which is already being compromised by the flourishing multicultural influence in South Korea; hence, future policies and initiatives will still need to address challenges of authenticity, modernization, and global branding to sustain *hanbok*'s economic growth.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

The research has shown how much the social meaning of *hanbok* has changed and adapted throughout its historical evolution, reflecting different styles and characteristics depending on the historical and social reality in which it existed. Reviewing what has been analyzed in the first part of the thesis, it is possible to observe the early role played by the traditional costume, which, during the royal and dynastic periods, became a medium through which a specific social distinction was established. In this regard, we can mention Simmel's theory,¹⁷⁹ which interprets fashion as a tool for differentiating social groups that aim to make visible the distance separating the upper classes in a hierarchically stratified society, such as the Confucian one. Along with Veblen, these theses are fully reflected in the symbolic and functional value attributed to the costume at the time, which, at once, encourages a sense of social uniformity —gathered under a shared ideology— and an internal differentiation.

However, the original form of this model presents, in its essential traits, two opposing groups: those who wish to keep a visible distance between social classes, and those who aim to erase it. Although I do not find this observation particularly relevant in the context of dynastic Korea—where clothing reflected an ideological doctrine, before the general stratification it produced— I believe this argument could offer an interesting starting point for future exploration. This phase therefore presents a vision of traditional dress that is deeply rooted in the state ideology, where garments reflect the praise doctrines through stylistic and design variations based on the wearer's gender, age, and social status; however, as noted by several scholars, this theoretical model may have been valid within the hierarchical societies of the past, but no longer holds much weight in the context of contemporary society.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Sellerberg, Ann-Mari. "*Enciclopedia Delle Scienze Sociali - Moda.*" Treccani, 1996.
[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/moda_\(Enciclopedia-delle-scienze-sociali\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/moda_(Enciclopedia-delle-scienze-sociali)/).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

*“Fashion does not aim to reaffirm social differences in a direct and unequivocal way: fashion becomes relevant only when there is a strong risk that one group might blend into another.”*¹⁸¹

This observation becomes particularly relevant when examining the development of *hanbok*, which undergoes an aesthetic and symbolic evolution: after *Chosŏn* dynasty collapsed under Japanese imperialism, Korean society began walking away from the former ideological constructs of social distinction. Reflecting this shift, the attire turns into a symbol of national identity resisting against the limitations imposed by Japanese rule; people begin wearing it with an increasingly weaker social distinction, as a mean of expressing a collective desire for independence —manifested through a sense of belonging to the Korean nation, culture, and values in the face of colonial oppression and later, American influence.

The following period of rapid industrialization sees Koreans turning their focus to the present and current fashion trends, while tradition and the past —where *hanbok* appears to remain confined—gradually fade into the background. Nonetheless, the costume makes a comeback in modern times in the form of vernacular design, evolving once again: from something worn only on special occasions, *hanbok* becomes increasingly perceived as a fashion statement and a part of everyday life. Strengthened by the newfound soft power generated by *Hallyu*, both government and private sectors launched an ambitious initiative aimed at promoting “Han Brands”, including *hanbok*, turning them into global cultural assets; by leveraging cultural tourism, digital media, and the worldwide appeal of Korean entertainment industry, South Korea has successfully integrated the garment into its broader soft power strategy.

In this context, we can take into consideration the two types of society identified by Tarde in his theory on the evolution of fashion.¹⁸² interpreting them as two different methods implemented in the project of internationalizing the garment; the commercialization process in fact develops on multiple levels, involving an increasingly wide range of actors and factors across the production, promotion, and consumption of the traditional garment. Depending on the strategies adopted, this approach targets both

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

the society of tradition and the society of fashion, allowing for the coexistence of two realities that Tarde's theory had clearly distinguished. Commercialization strategies aimed at the "society of tradition" focus on presenting the conservative model—used in past historical periods—to modern society. By aiming to enhance a sense of cultural continuity through the preservation of customs, these promotions often see *hanbok* relegated to tourist attractions and cultural initiatives that often involve foreigners who may be unaware of the significance of the garment. The study shows that this approach, which is static and past-oriented, is often limited to the costume's visual appeal, while other elements such as craftsmanship, quality, history, and faithfulness to the original are overlooked. Nevertheless, by emphasizing accessibility, these experiences encourage both foreigners and locals to engage with Korean culture, turning the garment into a key attraction within Korea's evolving tourism industry.

On the other hand, innovations targeting the "society of fashion"—an audience often younger and more interested in practical and affordable styles—take a forward-looking approach, reinterpreting the garment in a modern key, adapting it to everyday life, and encouraging its evolution. Contemporary designers thus act as active intermediaries, capable of addressing public concerns, allowing for greater accessibility, by introducing cheaper alternatives and digital manufacturing techniques, while still preserving the core aesthetics of traditional *hanbok*.¹⁸³ Although the process has raised concerns regarding authenticity, environmental sustainability, and economic disparity—which have been explored throughout the study—the success of this branding effort is undeniable: Korea has transitioned from a war-torn nation to a global cultural powerhouse; in this regard, *hanbok*'s role in boosting Korea's cultural exports illustrates how tradition can be both preserved and adapted in a rapidly globalizing world, positioning it as a powerful symbol of national identity.

Final Reflections

*"Traditions naturally evolve over time; those that resist change often fade away.
Traditions endure precisely because they adapt, reflecting the ongoing dialogue*

¹⁸³ Lee, In Hwa, and Mi Young Son. "A Study on the Activation of Used Market of Hanbok and Hanbok Reform Market." *Family and Environment Research* 59, no. 1 (February 19, 2021): 59–69.

*between history and modernity. Rather than preserving traditions in a rigid form, it is essential to understand and respect the processes by which they evolve. This adaptation strengthens cultural identity and ensures that traditions remain relevant in a rapidly changing world, showcasing the creative ability of cultures to balance heritage with contemporary identity".*¹⁸⁴

From this statement, we can move on to two important aspects that formed the core of the research, concerning study on the constantly evolving nature of the traditional garment, which continues to develop under modern and increasingly international influences. First of all, globalization must be acknowledged as an inevitable and irreversible interdependent system, as it is predetermined by the evolution of nature.¹⁸⁵ This condition forced Korea to choose whether to confine the traditional garment solely to its own people—risking losing it due to its growing perception as obsolete and outdated—or to try and use it as a means to showcase Korean identity and the pride of a country eager to assert its uniqueness in the global market, even though the commercialization of deeply traditional elements. It has not been an easy decision, and not one without sacrifices, but what the government and private sector have done, and continue to do, is certainly what has allowed the traditional costume to survive in the modern world. Hence, while *hanbok* evolved alongside new sartorial influences, globalization paradoxically played a role in preserving *hanbok* traditions and making traditional designs more accessible.

Even though criticism will point out the visible and conceptual impacts of global demand on *hanbok*, pushing it away from its traditional aesthetics and significance, it is undeniably true that this process has fostered growing popularity and global recognition of Korean culture, and above all, it has prevented *hanbok* from becoming an obsolete cultural relic, keeping the heritage alive and dynamic. In fact, had *hanbok* remained frozen in the past, limited to the local market and used only sporadically, it is very likely that it would have faded quickly, along with the last generations who might have appreciated its authentic meaning, but rejected by the newer ones who would find it uncomfortable and outdated—unsuitable for modern life. In that case, Korea would have

¹⁸⁴ Oh, Seung Won, and Jae Won Lee. "Modernized Hanbok Meets Tradition: The Debate over Korea's Iconic Garments." The Hanyang Journal, September 4, 2024.

¹⁸⁵ Hermann, Zsolt. "Globalization Is Inevitable and Irreversible." Medium, August 30, 2020. <https://samechphoto.medium.com/globalization-is-inevitable-and-irreversible-c81a0df94016>.

lost not only the opportunity to create new businesses and soft power, but also the chance to assert its cultural identity, embodied in the traditional garment, on the global stage.

Further supporting this idea is the concept of *hanbok*'s evolution, which the thesis —through historical records— has shown not to be a modern phenomenon, but rather an intrinsic characteristic of the garment itself, that has enabled its survival up to the present day. Hence, it must be addressed as a dynamic symbol of national identity, and as such, it has never stopped evolving and never will, while serving as a powerful cultural emblem bridging Korea's rich past with its dynamic modern identity, reflecting cherished symbols of heritage, artistry, and enduring values that have shaped Korean society for generations, and keep its intangible heritage alive; hence, wearing *hanbok* is not only an aesthetic act, but also a way to reconnect with what the garment represents and reflects.

However, it is natural that the depth of meaning, originally held by the cultural symbol, becomes more superficial in proportion to the scale of its expansion; this phenomenon is clearly visible when observing commercialization strategies of the garment, which might not take into account, to the same extent, the transmission of its cultural heritage and value: commercial exteriority, therefore, seems to exploit tradition, reducing *hanbok* to a mere fashion statement, emptied of its original meaning. While this issue may not be particularly relevant to the elements involved in *Hallyu*, which are only loosely based on tradition, the peculiarity of the “*Han Brands*” actually lies in their strong connection to Korean heritage.

So, while it is true that —at least on a commercial level— *hanbok* no longer evokes the same historical and status-related meanings as before, on the other hand, this is the only way to preserve the symbol and its use, which would otherwise be lost; *hanbok*'s transformation is therefore a natural and inevitable evolution of the costume within a society that is itself evolving —one that respects the past while updating it, enabling cultural heritage to thrive in contemporary contexts. Thus, as controversial as it may seem, the result of the commercialization of the traditional garment is ultimately a “survival compromise”: the outcome of an attempt to preserve cultural uniqueness tied to national identity, on a transnational and mass scale. This historical fluidity suggests that the very concept of “traditional *hanbok*” is itself a construct shaped by different periods of Korean history: for instance, as *hanbok* changes away from the original guidelines, the very same “traditional” version we have today is also the product of a previous evolution.

Consequently, what is now seen as a “modernized” *hanbok* might, in the future, be regarded as yet another stage in the ongoing evolution of the garment. Together with the attire, its meaning also evolves, in a more or less parallel way: even if for some it will always remain superficial and for others deeply felt, the fact that some see it as superficial does not mean it is any less meaningful to others: despite future adaptations and innovations, there will always be those who see *hanbok* as a carnival costume or a relic of the past, and those, conversely, who continue to perceive it as a meaningful expression of national identity in the modern world.

Nevertheless, as consumer demand continues to grow, the real challenge will be to ensure that this growth remains sustainable, and that artisans receive the recognition and financial support they deserve in an increasingly competitive market; in addition, greater efforts should be made to educate national and international consumers on the history and meaning of *hanbok*, ensuring that its commercialization does not lead to cultural misrepresentation. When the promotion of *hanbok* will rely mainly on its traditional and cultural, other than aesthetic, value, it will be possible to foster an effective and sustainable exchange and divulgation, enabling a continuous development of a consolidated, long-lasting and untouchable Korean National Identity.

Future Research Directions

While still addressing the existing issues and controversies, I believe *hanbok*’s evolution must be appreciated and addressed as a natural and crucial process of the Korean attire that, continuing to reflect progress and contemporary needs, just as it used to do in the past, maintains its status as a dynamic and living entity. Standing at the core of the study, the survey and experience-based observations fostered a significant boost to the research; the insights gathered from a relatively small group of people, albeit from a deep and varied cultural background, whose proximity to Korean culture varies, were mostly aged between 20 and 30. Although this data allowed for an in-depth analysis of how this phenomenon has been embraced and accepted by the younger generations, it also implies that experiences of an audience belonging to different generations haven’t been taken into account.

Considering their opinions could have provided the study more layered results, influenced by different external and internal factors, an idea for future research could be to expand the scope of surveys concerning the same topics to a wider spectrum of generational audiences, preferably using dissemination methods beyond social media, which is known to be frequented primarily by younger generation. Beyond more differentiated consumer insights, further studies should also consider a wider range of direct perspectives —preferably conflicting ones— of other actors and stakeholders involved in the promotion and production of *hanbok*. First of all, it would be valuable to collect perspectives from key figures in the production of traditional *hanbok* such as craftsmen, cultural commentators and policymakers, who traditionally advocate for the respect and preservation of the traditional style’s characteristics and implications; for this reason, they may offer additional insights into the perception of *hanbok* as a living tradition within modern society.

On the other hand, implementing interviews with *hanbok* rental shop owners and designers who advocate for contemporary adaptations, meeting the consumer demand, can provide new insights contrasting the previous ones. Additionally, while keeping *hanbok* as the core of the research, future studies might analyze how it is being interpreted and represented in North Korea, starting from the same historical overview up to the division of the peninsula after the Korean War; it could be fascinating to explore how socialist-nationalist ideologies and policies have been reflected in the evolution of the garment they call *ch’osonot*, (조선옷)¹⁸⁶, setting up a comparison between the two nations to illustrate how politics and state ideologies have embraced *hanbok* in distinct ways, resulting in different versions of the same rooted attire. Furthermore, starting from this study, it might be interesting to explore how the shifting perception and use of *hanbok* in Korean society has influenced the concept and execution of religious and traditional ceremonies in South Korea. Under the influence of globalization and a growing affluence of different cultures in the peninsula, these ceremonies seem to have gradually abandoned traditional practices —despite their historical value— in favor of Western ceremony elements, often stripped of their original meaning; the analysis of this dichotomy could

¹⁸⁶ Stephens, Zoe. “*Hanbok vs. Jeogori vs. Cheoson-Ot: A Traditional Korean Clothing History - Koryo Tours.*” koryogroup.com, 2020. <https://koryogroup.com/blog/hanbok-vs-jeogori-vs-cheoson-ot-a-traditional-korean-clothing-history>.

offer deeper insights into the potential risks of a decontextualized and superficial promotion of important historical symbol, and the ceremonies associated with them.

Finally, considering that the topic of commercialization amid globalization is extremely rich and complex, this research has limited its focus to the *hanbok* and its evolution; however, this presents a clear opportunity for future research to explore the development of other “*Han brands*”, such as *hansik* and *hanok*, as well as other cultural staples that have been incorporated into global promotion strategies. Further investigations could highlight the similarities and differences in how these elements have been adapted, disseminated and received both nationally and globally; in this context, analyzing the challenges of commercialization across various cultural elements could inspire innovative solutions and new perspectives — some of which may also be applicable to the future of *hanbok*.

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APPENDIX

The following appendix includes visual representations of the survey conducted as part of this research, designed to gather insight from a foreign audience on how *hanbok* is understood and experienced today —both in its traditional form and in modern adaptations. It also aimed to explore how commercialization is shaping the way *hanbok* is seen in terms of cultural identity, visibility, and sustainability. The figures below offer a clearer picture of the trends and preferences discussed throughout the thesis.

A) Traditional Hanbok and Hanbok Rental

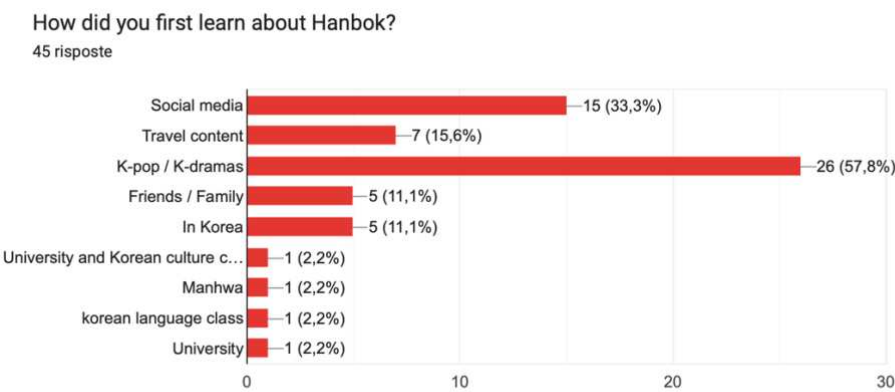


Figure A1. Initial exposure to hanbok among foreign respondents.

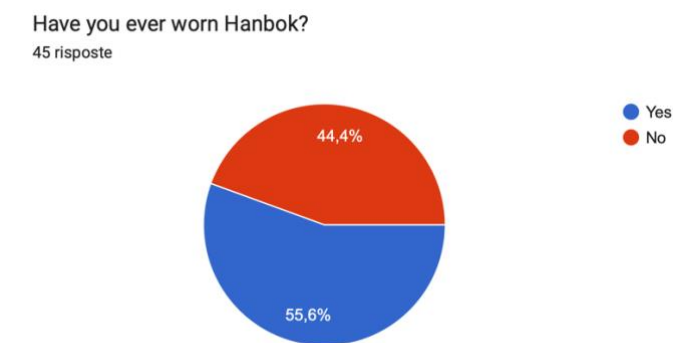


Figure A2. Experience of wearing traditional hanbok.

Have you participated in any Hanbok-related cultural events or festivals (in Korea or abroad)?
45 risposte

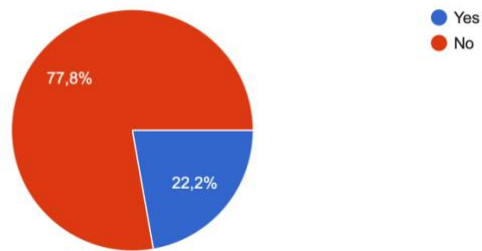


Figure A3. Participation in hanbok-related cultural events or festivals.

Have you ever rented an Hanbok in Korea?
45 risposte

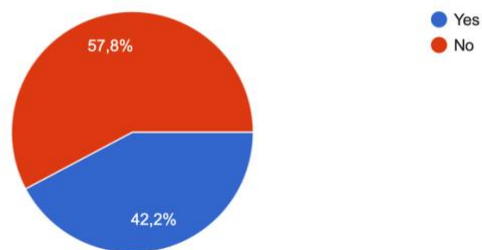


Figure A4. Hanbok rental experience in Korea.

(If yes) When renting, were you given any explanation about the garment's history, symbolism, or meaning?
19 risposte

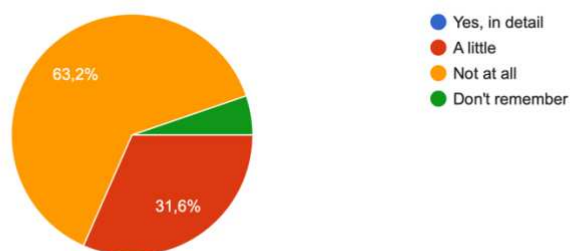


Figure A5. Cultural explanation received during hanbok rental.

(If yes) What factors influenced your choice of Hanbok design then renting one?

19 risposte

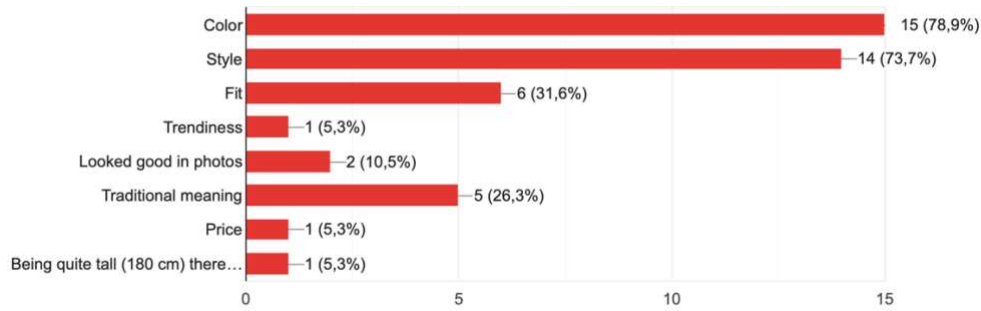


Figure A6. Factors influencing hanbok design choice when renting.

Do you think foreigners wearing Hanbok contributes positively to Korean cultural visibility?

45 risposte

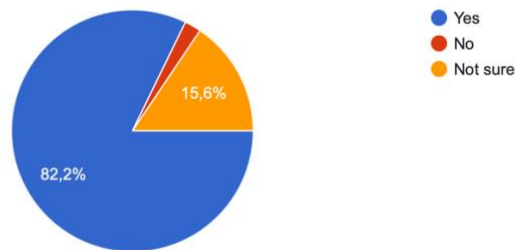


Figure A7. Perception of foreigners wearing hanbok and cultural visibility.

Do you think there are risks of cultural appropriation when non-Koreans wear Hanbok?

45 risposte

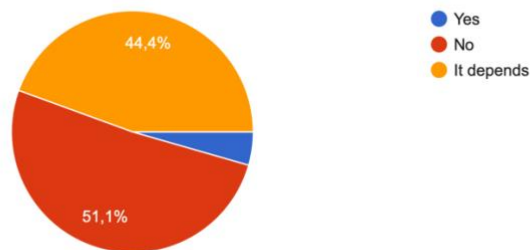


Figure A8. Concern about cultural appropriation of hanbok.

B) Modern Hanbok and Everyday Wear

Are you familiar with modern Hanbok or everyday reinterpretations?
45 response

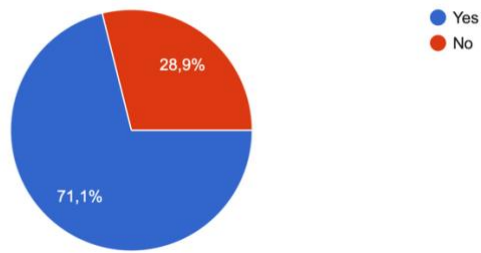


Figure B1. Awareness of modern hanbok and everyday reinterpretations.

Have you ever worn or seen modern Hanbok in person?
45 response

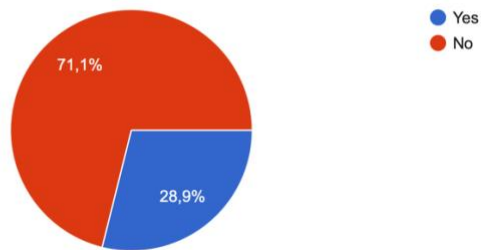


Figure B2. Experience seeing or wearing modern hanbok.

Where have you seen modern Hanbok most often?
45 response

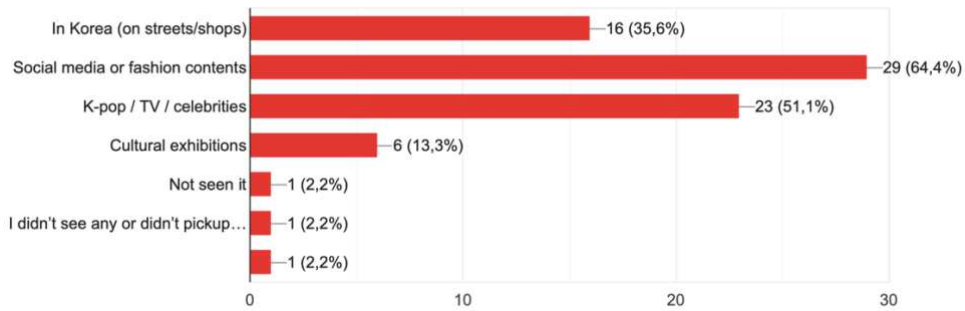


Figure B3. Common context in which modern hanbok is encountered.

Do you think modernizing Hanbok makes it more relevant globally?

45 response

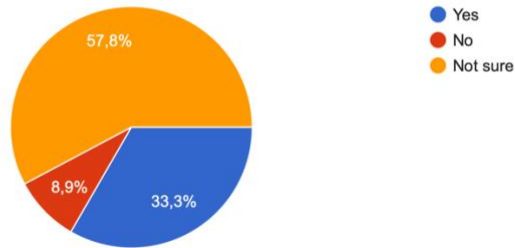


Figure B4. Perception of modernization's role in global relevance.

Do you think modern Hanbok strengthens or weakens the garment's traditional meaning?

45 response

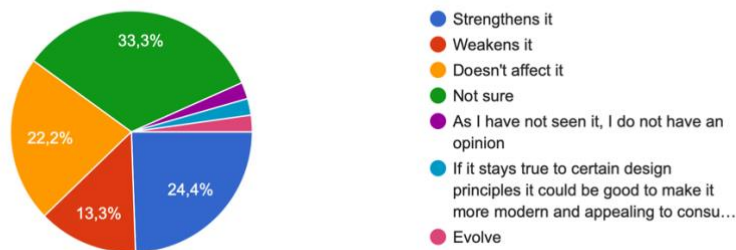


Figure B5. Perceived impact of modernization to traditional meaning.

Do you try to wear or shop for Hanbok in a conscious or respectful way?

45 response

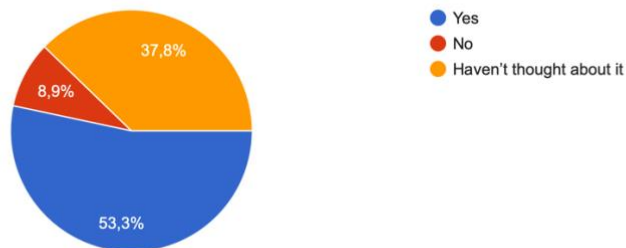


Figure B6. Conscious and respectful approaches to wearing hanbok.

Would you consider wearing modern Hanbok casually in your own country?

45 response

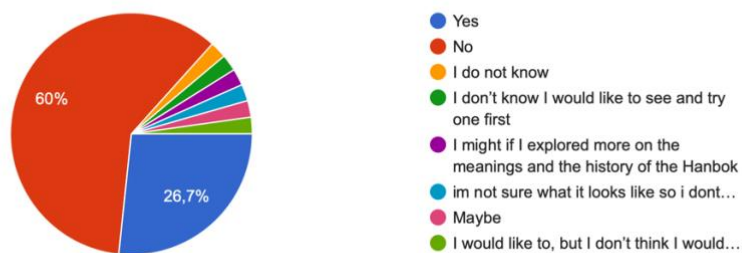


Figure B7. Willingness to wear modern hanbok casually abroad.

C) Perceptions of the Future and Cultural Sustainability

Do you think current commercialization (rental shops, mass production, tourism-focused marketing) helps or harms Hanbok's cultural value?

45 response

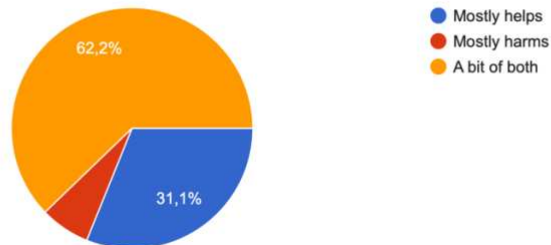


Figure C1. Views on commercialization and its impact on cultural value.

Do you think Hanbok is at risk of becoming just a fashion trend, rather than a cultural symbol?

45 response

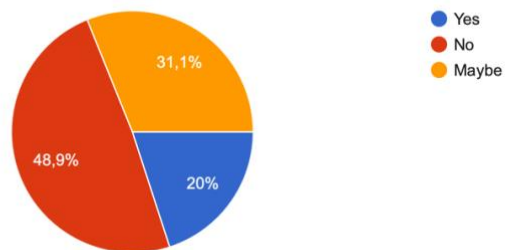


Figure C2. Concerns over hanbok becoming a trend.