Traditional Aesthetic Characteristics Traced in South Korean Contemporary Fashion Practice

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to look at the aesthetic characteristics embedded in Korean traditional artifacts to examine how these characteristics have been rejuvenated in contemporary Korean fashion. Traditional Korean aesthetic characteristics were categorized into four areas: pure formality, naturalistic simplicity, symbolic decoration, and playful spontaneity. The examples of fashion design which represent these four aesthetic characteristics were found mainly in fashion collections of Korean designers such as Lie Sangbong and Lee Young Hee.
Examples were also drawn from fashion products from Minja Kim’s fashion design research laboratories at Seoul National University. The framework of the four aesthetic characteristics has shed light on how the aesthetic values of the past have been passed down to contemporary fashion design practice. Moreover, eclectic crossover features were found in contemporary fashion practice. There is a combination of past and present, Korean and Western, high culture and popular culture, and fashion and art. These features parallel the characteristics of postmodern fashion. However, Korean philosophy, ideas, and values as represented in the four aesthetic characteristics of Korean culture are embedded in the traditional cultural images that have been redesigned in contemporary fashion practice.

KEYWORDS: Korean, culture, tradition, aesthetic characteristics, fashion practice

Introduction

Culture is a “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society,” according to Tylor’s (1871; cited by Avruch 1998: 6) definition, which is one of the most comprehensive. In other words, culture is a way of life, and includes the material objects people own, the ideas, attitudes, and values that members share, social institutions, knowledge, and the behavioral patterns of a society (Ferraro 1998).

The inclusive definition suggests that the diverse domains of culture are related to each other. The common threads are referred to as cultural identity. In distinguishing the cultural identity of one society from another, its material objects including artifacts and works of art serve as visible reflections of its ideas or values. Therefore, examining material objects is the first step to identify the espoused, overt, and unconscious values of members of a society (Schein 1984).

A sense of identity or awareness of difference has become one of the main issues in cultural studies, which is reflected in the usage of terms such as cultural diversity or cultural acculturation. Questions about identity may well be asked when the traditional is confronted with the new (Tak 2000). Korean culture as national identity emerged along with the Gapsin Reform of 1884 that brought Western culture into Korea. Literature on art and aesthetics then began identifying features of Korean art and conceptualizing Korean aesthetic characteristics (Kim 2009).

Korea’s traditional dress (hanbok) had undergone spontaneous but slow changes affected by limited external forces until the late nineteenth century. The early form of hanbok found in mural paintings of the sixth century technically remained unchanged until the nineteenth century.
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Lee 2011. Although there have been minor alterations in length, width, and decoration, the basic structure of hanbok has been a jacket and pants for men and skirts for women.

However, since the late nineteenth century, Korea’s dress culture has gone through cultural acculturation and assimilation that brought radical changes; hanbok was relegated to a ceremonial costume. By the mid-twentieth century, Koreans were wearing Western-style clothes. Hanbok as ceremonial costume has retained its original form. Western-style clothes, first adopted by intellectuals, are now standard. Once the Westernization of everyday wear was complete, there was an effort to revive hanbok. In the 1960s, hanbok was reformed by using practical materials and by making the garments easier to put on and take off. These clothes are called saenghwal hanbok (Kim 2010). Since then, saenghwal hanbok has gained only small share of the apparel market, and is purchased mainly by middle-aged or elderly people who wear it for comfort and convenience or by those who wear saenghwal hanbok as a way of expressing their Korean cultural identity.

The results of modernization then led us to ask if Korean culture exists only in ceremonial hanbok or saenghwal hanbok. Our proposition is that Korean culture has been integrated into modern practice. Because modern dress in Korea started with clothes that are based on Western dress, designers had to find a way of self-exoticization, in short, doing something Korean (Skov 2003). Self-exoticization here refers to a designer’s strategy of integrating design elements that might appear exotic and Korean to foreigners, in other words distinctively Korean elements. For example, ramie or hemp, the shapes and high waistline of the hanbok skirt, or otgoreum (two strips of fabric in jeogori, the jacket) were considered iconic elements of Korean dress and they were the most frequently adopted design elements in Korea-inspired designs (Kim and Jang 1999; Yu et al. 2001). This strategy was effective even for the Korean market because a general aesthetic sense related to everyday wear has been diluted with European or American fashion in the process of modernization. This strategy could be compared with Orientalism (Said 1978), which denotes the Western aesthetic tradition toward the East on the basis of arbitrary awareness of the Orient. The Orientalist tradition in dress has reproduced an imaginative notion of the Orient as an unchanging and distant country. The Orientalist tradition in fashion design has thus built a large repository of design elements perceived as Oriental (Kwon and Kim 2011). Criticism about the Orientalist approach is that the main purpose of using the Asian components is to create the charm of the unknown or unusual, not to deliver the aesthetics of the original context. The self-exoticizing strategy is to adopt Korean design elements on the basis of understanding or consideration of cultural meanings and values behind them.

The research questions of this study are as follows. Firstly, what are the aesthetic characteristics that are embedded in artifacts and creations
of traditional Korean culture? Secondly, are the traditional aesthetic characteristics applicable in contemporary fashion design practice? In other words, how do the traditional aesthetics serve modern Korean fashion design? In order to answer the research questions, we first derive aesthetic characteristics from literature on the aesthetics of traditional Korean artifacts and creations such as dress, painting, dance, ceramics, and architecture. Using the aesthetic characteristics as a framework, we then deductively examine if the same aesthetics are found and how they are embodied in contemporary Korean-themed fashion designs.

The core component of tradition is transformed during transmission and learning by members (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952, cited by Singer 1968). Therefore, it is critical to investigate how tradition is reinterpreted and represented in current practice as well as to understand the cultural identity that is being transmitted. The significance of this study is twofold: the aesthetic characteristics of Korean culture are triangulated through the scrutiny of past cultural artifacts and present fashion practice. The findings will then provide insights into how traditional culture has been adapted to suit modern fashion practices that have dialectically evolved through their confrontation with modernization and Westernization.

**Aesthetic Characteristics of Korean Culture in Literature**

Early discussions of beauty are found in the work of Yu-Sup Koh (1905–1944), a seminal art historian and aesthetician. Koh identifies six characteristics of Korean art based on investigations of temples, pagoda, and calligraphy (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2006). The six characteristics are (1) artless art and planless plan, (2) simplicity and purity, (3) asymmetry, (4) disinterestedness, (5) taste of the small and the big, meaning graceful refinement and generosity, and (6) inlay technique (Koh 1972). Other literature adds asceticism and the golden mean of the Joseon dynasty, humor, naturalism, and grief (Kim 1987; Kim 2010; Shim 2000; Yang and Lee 2013).

With regard to the beauty of traditional dress, Geum (1995) finds four types of beauty: beauty of naturalism, noble personality, repulsing evil spirits, and tradition. Kim (2009) characterizes traditional clothing practice as the beauty of purity, humor, hyper-space, line, symbolism, layering, and the grace of vacancy. Kim’s list covers the diverse stylistic aspects of traditional dress explained with traditional ideas and values.

Recent scholarly efforts have been made to analyze modern designs inspired by traditional Korean dress. Yun and Park (2009) present three stylistic features of modern Korean designs: beauty of simple materials, elegant forms, and colors of the Five Elements. Through semiotic analysis, Lee (2000) presents connotations of the stylistic features as human-centeredness, nature-friendliness, egalitarianism, totemic-mythic
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ideas, and metaphors. Kim et al. (2009) analyze design strategies found in modern Korean design. They investigate how traditional elements are modernized and how traditional components are incorporated into design. They present three aesthetic values of these Korean designs: (1) being organic in pursuit of harmony between balance and imbalance, old and new, and East and West; (2) being optimal, meaning simple and restrained use of design elements; and (3) being lively as a result of colorful contrast, visual rhythm, and layering of fabric and gathers.

It is not easy to understand the aesthetic characteristics or values discussed in the literature. This is partly because some characteristics are based on abstract ideas (e.g. asceticism, disinterestedness, egalitarianism, and naturalism), others are based on visual features (e.g. simplicity, asymmetry, artless art, and beauty of line), and others are based on aesthetic values (e.g. humor, grief, and the grace of vacancy). Concepts such as simplicity and naturalism refer to characteristics of both form and content of a style. Another reason that adds more complexity is the influence of various religions on Korean culture (Geum 1995; Kim 2008). Korean culture has adopted ideas from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism on top of indigenous shamanism. Those religions and ideas have been adapted and mixed to fit Korean society.

Four Faces of Naturalism

On the basis of the literature review, we propose a framework that is inclusive enough to explain diverse aesthetic features and that is distinctive enough to explain the uniqueness of Korean culture. The framework includes four categories of traditional Korean aesthetics based on stylistic features of artifacts and how those features were developed. In addition, we attempt to discuss the four categories as different ways in which naturalism is manifested. Naturalism is by far the most frequently discussed and overarching concept in literature. Naturalism in different times and places reflects how the culture defines its relationship and attitude toward nature. Naturalism is believed to be the principal idea of ancient Greek and Renaissance art that had great interest in human beings, and it is sometimes associated with the realism that governs the form and content of art and literature (Kang 1998).

In Korean culture, nature is a sublime object and human beings are to adapt themselves to nature rather than conquer nature (Choi and Kim 1993; Kim 2007; Yun and Park 2009). Naturalistic beauty values pleasant simplicity without much intention to look perfect (Kim 2007; Kim 2008; Yun and Park 2009). Literature attributes this attitude toward nature to a gentle geography and a climate changing with the four seasons (Kim 2007; Yun and Park 2009). Many of the above-stated discussions relate Korean naturalism to simplicity and purity (Geum 1995; Kang 1998; Kim 2007; Kim 2008; Kim 2009; Koh 1972; Lee 2011). In other words, the pursuit of simplicity and purity is understood as unstudied
representation and a result of disinterest. Aesthetic features that literature does not necessarily link to Korean naturalism are humorous artifacts (Kim 2009) and aspects related to shamanic faith (Geum 1995; Lee 2000). Kang (1998) specifically maintains that naturalism in Korean design is translated into gentle and organic curves, natural fibers, and natural dyes, unstructured and flat shapes of garments, and depiction of natural objects such as colorful flowers.

We present a framework that identifies four aesthetic categories of naturalism found in Korean art (see Figure 1). The four characteristics represent different ways in which Koreans have interpreted naturalism. We attempt to encompass diverse aesthetics that are often explained with little connection to naturalism. In order to show the relationships between the four categories, we locate them on quadrants in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Aesthetic characteristics of traditional Korean culture: clockwise from top left. Dancheong in Bulguksa (temple) and Gyeongbok Palace, 2010. © Yoo Jin Kwon. Portrait of Heungseon Daewongun, Yi Haeung wearing bokgeon (headdress) and simeui (coat), 1880. Collection of Seoul Museum of History. Dal-hang-ari (moon jar) from the Joseon period, eighteenth century. Photo by Sean Pathasema/Birmingham Museum of Art is licensed under CC BY 3.0. Reproduction of seonangdang at Shilla Millennium Park, 2010. © Yoo Jin Kwon.
The horizontal axis represents the attitude toward the use of formal elements: from an expressive to reserved manner in using formal elements (e.g. color, line, form, and pattern). It represents the degree of expressivity. Artifacts created in an expressive style are distinguished by their intricate and abundant use of design elements, but those created in a reserved manner are simpler in appearance. This corresponds to how easily viewers can intuitively detect the statement of creators.

The vertical axis represents the attitude toward the use of stylistic rules: from an orderly to free presentation of symbolism and rules. It represents the degree of variability: how strictly aesthetic decisions are subject to cultural discourses of religion, ideology, or philosophy. Artifacts created in an orderly way obey elaborate systems of symbolism and rules of the culture, but those created in a free style are more spontaneous in terms of their design and there is a lot of room for improvisation. The following sections discuss the four aesthetic characteristics with examples and how naturalism influences them differently.

The beauty of pure formality

The beauty of pure formality is found in the artifacts that express the social order and ideology in a reserved manner. As depicted in the top right quadrant of Figure 1, pure formality arises from the substitution of the most significant idea with stylistic features. Therefore, simplicity based on philosophical codes features prominently in the beauty of pure formality.

Neo-Confucianism, which originated in China, was the national ideology of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). Rejecting superstitious or mystical aspects of Buddhism or indigenous religion, it developed a rationalist-ethical philosophy. There are five virtues that human beings obey: benevolence, righteousness, the proprieties, wisdom, and sincerity. Benevolence is the key ideology and it is practiced as a propriety (Kim 2009). The principle of proprieties led to the enactment of rules and cultural codes in every aspect of life, including culinary culture, housing culture, and etiquette. The pure formality expresses Korean aspirations to explore the forces that govern nature and the world, which has been specifically prescribed by neo-Confucians in the Joseon dynasty. Although originating from neo-Confucian, the proprieties and virtues are also related to the indigenous Korean view of the world. Koreans understand the world in terms of relationships between things and people with respect for and fear of nature (Kang 1998; Kim 2008). The pure formality represents the relationships contained in the social order and ideology.

In dress, the pure formality conveys dignity and modesty. While the West values proportions among parts, Koreans perceive the body as a
whole in an abstract way (Kim 2009). Koreans associate beauty with inner character and traditional dress represents a person’s fine character, paying little attention to the body itself (Kim 2009, 2010).

The idea of pure formality also contains the value of austerity. Seonbi (intellectuals) are considered the embodiment of Confucian ideology. They possess a lofty character and erudition, practicing righteous behavior through self-cultivation, observing principles and virtues without desiring wealth and a government post. Seonbi pursues the aesthetics of clean-handedness. It is called the idea of cheong-baek. Cheong-baek, translated as blue and white, represents purity and austerity. Reserved expression represents the asceticism of Confucianism.

Koreans have favored white clothes and ceramics for centuries. White represents naturally existing purity. It is less a color than a state that is devoid of color. It is unbleached white, thus, imperfect white symbolizing the naturally obtained state of purity. Including white, Koreans generally liked to wear low chroma colors. Low chroma colors are used in various types of artifacts. For example, Goryeo celadon of the Goryeo period (918–1392), is named after its translucent pale green color.

Simple but strict formality is represented in noblemen’s attire (Kim 2010). The sumptuary laws retain the symbolic meaning of each article of clothing, controlling the use of decoration and color. Design elements specify the wearer’s class, rank, marital status, and the occasion. White was the dominant color and black was used for decorative purposes, as in the black band in the hem of jeogori and sleeve, neckline and ties, and headdress (see nobleman’s coat, the top right picture in Figure 1). Although noblewomen’s dress was more colorful, specific meanings were also allotted to color used rather than serving as personal expressions.

The pure formality is well represented in literary men’s penmanship and sumuk painting (i.e. ink-and-wash painting), which resembles the sumi painting of Japan. Penmanship was believed to reflect the writer’s character and dignity. Sumuk painting shows the effects of light and shade by adjusting the degree of dilution of black ink along with the lettering, minimizing the use of chromatic colors. The four gracious plants of sumuk painting (plum flower, orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo) are metaphors of the gentlemanly virtues of fidelity and integrity.

The beauty of naturalistic simplicity

The beauty of naturalistic simplicity is characterized as integration of simplicity and comfort. As depicted in the bottom right quadrant of Figure 1, it features the restrained use of expressive devices and freedom of artisans and appreciators. Compared to the beauty of pure formality, beauty of naturalistic simplicity manifests more of the indigenous ethos of Korean culture. Koreans believed that simplicity was the quintessence of nature. Compared to Western minimalism that tries to reduce everything to its essential quality, simplicity in Korean art conveys warmth, comfort, and ease of nature.
Artless art and planless plan and simplicity discussed by Koh (1972) epitomize the beauty of naturalistic simplicity. Artifacts are free of excess, which are deeply connected to functionality. Artless art includes skills that have developed spontaneously without much intention to develop skills. Planless plan means a creative process that is not led by an ambition to create something. The notions of artless art and planless plan refer to stylistic features that originate from real life in contrast to abstract ideas or the notion of art for art’s sake (Kim 2008). Koh attributes this feature to the folk arts, which are integrated with religious faith and real life. Artifacts created out of artless art and planless plan thus show naturally simple structures or forms.

Korean architecture manifests the beauty of naturalistic simplicity. Compared to that of the other Far Eastern countries, Korean architecture is modest. Gentle curves are preferred to perfectly straight lines. Corners of eaves are gently lifted up and the edges of roofs thus create graceful curves. Eaves in Chinese architecture are more curved and those in Japanese architecture are straighter. Gentle curves are also found in dress, furniture, and many other articles. Another example showing the beauty of naturalistic simplicity is dal-hang-ari (moon jar) (the bottom right picture in Figure 1). Moon jars were named after the moon, as it is round and moon-shaped. Compared to mainstream ceramics, dal-hang-ari is simpler in color and form. It emanates friendliness because the color and the texture are natural with little decoration and the round shape is not intended to be perfect (Lee 2014).

The pursuit of simplicity is related to the idea of buri (不二, monism) (Kim 2008; Yang and Lee 2013). Buri is a Buddhist monist doctrine. It denies the dualism of subject and object, host and guest, truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness, and form and content (Seo and Kim 2007). This non-dualistic conception is visualized as imperfection, incompletion, and deformation in Eastern art (Yang and Lee 2013). It represents the natural state of convergence before beauty and ugliness are distinguished (Muneyoshi cited in Yang and Lee 2013). Ugliness is distinguished from beauty according to Western aesthetic principles of proportion, balance, and order. The Eastern idea of genuine beauty is analogous to postmodern ideas in that beauty encompasses imperfection, imbalance, or deformation. Both realism and deformation are ironically rooted in the philosophy of naturalism.

The idea of buri leads to aesthetic irony and variability. Emptying is related to gong (空, naught). The idea of gong maintains that any material existence is variable, nothing exists inherently, and all things in the universe come into existence by various relations (Seo and Kim 2007). Emptying accompanies layering. Single units enter into relations by layering and becoming a whole. Emptying is realized by spacing and by limiting the use of color, line, and shape (Kim 2009).

Hanbok is simple and two-dimensional, but transformed into a three-dimensional object on a body. Simplicity is found not only in the
shape of a single item, but also in the entire structure of a garment. The shapes of undergarments and outer garments are the same. They are simply layered until a final ample silhouette is achieved. The similar structure of emptying and layering is also revealed in hanok (traditional architecture). Small-scale buildings and surrounding walls create multiple layers. Layering simple elements allow variability in form and volume. The shape of hanbok depends on how wearers layer the items and how the wearers move. The shape of hanok depends on how many layers the architect adds and how the user opens up walls and doors. In short, naturalistic simplicity is obtained through organic development of forms which are always open to change, pursuing the universal conception of beauty in the Eastern sense.

The beauty of symbolic decoration

The beauty of symbolic decoration is characterized as stylizing animate and inanimate objects based on symbolic ideation. Compared to the beauty of pure formality and naturalistic simplicity, the beauty of symbolic decoration (the top left quadrant on Figure 1) is characterized as diverse colors and intricate forms which are used as decorative patterns. The usage of colors and forms is subject to culturally defined codes. Motifs are selected from prescribed systems of symbolism, based mostly on Buddhism and Taoism. Examples are the ten symbols of longevity, the four gracious plants, and dancheong (multicolored paintwork on wooden building) (Kim 2009).

The elaborate symbolism system was used in both public and private domains. Government officials’ uniforms had embroidered panels that symbolized the wearer’s job responsibilities. The 10 symbols of longevity are Koreans’ favorite motifs for everyday items. They are used as decorative patterns for pillowcases, ceremonial dresses, accessories, screens, temple walls, and stationery of seonbi. The 10 objects consist of inanimate objects (e.g. sun and mountain), animals (e.g. crane and turtle), plants (e.g. elixir plant, bamboo, and pine tree). Chinese character for 10 (十) represents the four cardinal directions (i.e. north, east, south, and west) and the center, symbolizing completion (Kim 2009). Each motif has its own symbolic meaning in addition to longevity.

Chinese characters that are considered lucky were stylized and used as motifs. The characters are 福 (happiness), 寿 (longevity), 喜 (joy). A Sanskrit character, 卍 (pronounced man) was also frequently adopted, reflecting the influence of Buddhism (Kim 2009). The stylized characters were used as motifs for gilding or embroidery. Symbolic meanings of other floral, fruit, plant, and insect motifs were developed over time and used in textiles, porcelain, sculpture, and furniture (Kim 2009).

Dancheong is paintwork on walls, ceiling, and columns and under the eaves of wooden buildings. The practical purpose of dancheong is to protect wood and to cover rough surfaces; the ideological purpose is
to present the authority and the sublime nature of royalty and religion in palace and temple respectively (Kwak 2002). Korean dancheong is colorful and has more highly detailed decorative patterns than China’s (Kim 2009). While dancheong was used only on interiors in Japan, it was applied on the interiors and exteriors of buildings in Korea. Exterior dancheong is quite colorful (the top left pictures in Figure 1). The color palette was expanded, including the five basic colors and the secondary colors. Along with the bright and splendid color palette, complementary contrast (e.g. red and green) and gradations of color were applied (Kim 2009).

The stylized patterns of natural objects are not to portray the objects per se. Through decoration based on elaborate symbolism, Koreans pay respect to nature and seek nature’s blessing. The decoration transforms an ordinary object to a lucky charm in some sense. An interesting naturalistic attitude is found. Even in work by a highly skilled artisan, subtle asymmetry is found in patterns in dancheong or embroidery. In altar portraits, repeated images of Buddha are deliberately drawn with minor differences (Kim 2009). These are not due to a lack of skill, but it reveals the distinctive sensibility of Korean naturalism.

**The beauty of playful spontaneity**

The beauty of playful spontaneity is characterized as playful and liberal expressions. The bottom left quadrant of Figure 1 presents the spontaneous disposition of Koreans. It is related to shamanism and humors found in the fields that allow informal expression. Playful and liberal expressions often result in vibrant energy. The tradition of shamanism was translated as playful use of colors, spontaneity in folk culture, and humor in artifacts. Kwon and Kim (2010) find the origin of spontaneity in shamanism. Rituals led by shamans are called gut. Gut is practiced for exorcism and to offer prayers to supernatural being. Gut is a religious ritual in that shamans exorcise, cure, pray, and chant an incantation. However, the mood is not necessarily sacred or solemn. It is a highly festive event in the village; plenty of food, alcoholic beverages, and lively music are offered to neighbors (Kim 2009).

The shamanistic tradition is characterized by the free use of colors and open forms. The arena for gut is decorated with colorful flags and drapes. Shamans’ costumes are adaptations of other clothing items, reflecting spontaneity. Most shamans’ costumes are colorful, using the five basic colors. *Saekdong* is a multi-colored striped fabric used for the costumes of shamans, children’s jackets, and some ceremonial coats. Although saekdong was originally designed to connect fabric woven on narrow handloom (Lee 2009), it came to contain a strong message of wishing for good luck and health and protecting the wearer from evil spirits.
Seonangdang, a shrine to the village deity, is usually located at the entrance to a village. Seonangdang is a gatekeeper and drives away any evil spirits. Seonangdang is an open place under a big tree decorated with colorful drapes and fabric strips; a pile of stones is located under the tree (the bottom left picture in Figure 1). The characteristics of seonangdang are an impromptu form and color. There is no definite prescription of the number of drapes or the size of stones. It is created by the spontaneous participation of village people. Seonangdang is a symbol of indigenous ancestor worship and the worship of village tutelary deities. The friendliness and openness of the shrine represent the playfulness and spontaneity of Korean culture.

Kwon and Kim (2010) view humor in Korean culture as a reflection of spontaneity. Humor is frequently found in genre painting or in secular genres such as mask dance. Characters from fables or animals resembling people are humorous; humor is also generated by the playful use of exaggeration and distortion or by satire or irony (Shim 2000). Making people laugh is a way of giving them an escape from the troubles of everyday life (Shim 2000). Mask dances poke fun at the irrationality of the class society in a socially acceptable way.

Genre paintings are traditionally colorful and the topics are secular. Many pieces of folk art articles and genre paintings depict fearsome objects such as dragon, tiger, or goblin in an amusing light. In the eighteenth century, Yunbok Shin and Hongdo Kim, who were not only government officials but also liberal artists, challenged the elitist painting style. They used saturated and diverse colors most effectively in contrast to black and white in traditional sumuk painting. The layout was playful and bold. Wit and humor were used to depict aristocratic romances, beauty, parodies of customs such as wrestling, games, or women doing laundry, and the lives of ordinary farmers and artisans.

The beauty of playful spontaneity depicts the culture of daily life and is the artistic response to realistic hardships and social issues. Artistic creations provided secular solutions, developing new genres and taking a break from reality. Cultural practices and artifacts that show playful spontaneity can be linked to the value of the present consumer culture. It is the lives of their subjects that painters focus on rather than the painters’ point of view. Shamanic objects or performances address ordinary people’s needs and concerns. The cultural values are determined by how people appreciate and create their own meanings from their lived experiences (Arnould and Thompson 2005). The aesthetic characteristics of the four categories and how they are linked to naturalism are summarized in Table 1.

Korean Tradition in Contemporary Fashion Practice
Korean traditional elements have inspired Korean fashion designers. The Korean government announced official plans to globalize
Korean traditional culture centering on language, cuisine, clothes, paper, housing, and Korean studies in 2005 (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2009). With the aggressive marketing of Korean traditions, the importance of traditional elements has become more prominent in Korea’s fashion industry. Therefore, understanding the ways in which traditional aesthetic characteristics were integrated into contemporary fashion practice is a timely research topic.

In this research, we mainly focus on fashion designs presented by Lie Sangbong, Lee Young Hee,¹ and Seoul National University fashion design research laboratories led by Professor Minja Kim.² We searched style.com Korea (www.style.co.kr) using hankukjeok design—literally meaning Korean design—as keywords on November 13, 2014. Style.com Korea was chosen since it is one of the fashion branches of style.com USA and has articles from well-known fashion magazines such as Vogue, GQ, Vogue Girl, Allure, W, and GQ Style. From the search results, four designers were found: Lie Sangbong, Lee Young Hee, Chungchung Lie, and Jinam Lee. Chungchung Lie is the director of the brand Lie, the second brand of Lie Sangbong, which introduced its first collection for spring/summer 2013. Jinam Lee is a bag designer who started her business in 2011.

Due to the limited amount of information on the latter two designers’ work, we mainly concentrated on the two designers with the longest careers. Lie Sangbong is well known for being inspired by Korean traditional art and motifs. He started his collection in Seoul in 1985. He began to attend Paris prêt-à-porter collections in 2002. Lee Young Hee is also a well-known Korean fashion designer who introduced hanbok-inspired designs in Paris and New York from the 1990s. Minja Kim is a well-known scholar who has researched and developed Korean traditional culture-inspired fashion products. Her research team at Seoul National University fashion design laboratories carried out a project for more than five years to create and promote Han Style fashion designs sponsored by the Korea Institute of Industrial Design.

### Table 1
Four faces of naturalism embedded in Korean aesthetics.

| Category                  | Characteristics                                | Interpretation of Naturalism                                                                 |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pure Formality            | Simplicity based on ideology                    | Stylistic features represent virtues that govern nature and the world.                      |
|                           | Austerity and strictness                         | Stylistic features represent virtues that govern nature and the world.                      |
| Naturalistic Simplicity   | Unplanned simplicity Organic                    | In nature, beauty and ugliness are no different.                                           |
|                           | creation and change                              | In nature, beauty and ugliness are no different.                                           |
| Symbolic Decoration       | Decoration based on elaborate                  | Human beings seek nature’s blessing through artifacts.                                     |
|                           | symbolism system Stylizing animate and animate  | Human beings seek nature’s blessing through artifacts.                                     |
|                           | objects                                         | Human beings seek nature’s blessing through artifacts.                                     |
| Playful Spontaneity       | Informal and liberal expression                 | Art responds to realistic issues with secular solutions.                                   |
|                           | Vibrant energy                                  | Art responds to realistic issues with secular solutions.                                   |

¹ Lie Young Hee
² Professor Minja Kim
Promotion. Han Style is a product line inspired by Korean traditional culture. Han Style projects aim to globalize and commercialize the products (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2009).

Korean-themed design examples which represent the four aesthetic characteristics were mainly drawn from the works of Lie Sangbong, Lee Young Hee, and Kim’s design team. Photographs and information about the design collections of Lie and Lee could be reviewed on their official websites (liesangbong.com and www.leeyounghee.co.kr), mobile application (Liesangbong), and style.com Korea. The information about the works of Kim’s design team could be obtained from Han Style catalogues and Kim in person.

Our examples are not only high fashion designs but also apparel products including garments for everyday life, uniforms, and graduation gowns, since fashion comprises styles which last only a few months as well as decades and centuries (Sproles 1981). Design examples were selected to explain how the four aesthetic values were applied in contemporary fashion practices.

**Pure formality in fashion**

The traditional coat, or simeui, is a popular garment which typifies the importance of pure formality in the noblemen’s attire. Simeui originated in China and was worn by Korean noblemen who studied neo-Confucianism. Philosophical symbolic meanings are embedded in simeui. The garment consists of an upper part and the skirt connected high on the waistline (the top right picture in Figure 1). The upper part of the coat symbolizes heaven and the skirt symbolizes earth. Heaven and earth are joined to symbolize the harmony of the universe. The skirt consists of 12 panels representing the 12 months and 4 seasons of earth controlled by heaven. The black bindings on the neckline, center front, sleeve and skirt hemlines, and waistband symbolize respect for parents and filial duty (Lee et al. 2003: 46). The even hemline of the simeui’s skirt is believed to bring peace to the mind and will of the wearer. The symbolic meanings and harmony of simeui would maintain the wearer’s clean and austere spirit (“Simeui,” *Naver Encyclopedia of Knowledge*).

Some of the designs for graduation gowns in Korea are inspired by traditional noblemen’s costumes to honor their austere and noble spirits. Kim’s design team introduced the graduation gowns of Seoul National University and Korea University inspired by simeui and *hakchangueui*. Hakchangueui was a popular traditional white coat also worn by noblemen, especially Confucian scholars, at home. It looks similar to simeui and also has black bindings. These graduation gowns have black bindings on the neckline, center front, cuffs, and hemlines. The Seoul National University graduation gown has a seam high on the waistline which connects the pleated skirt to the upper part of the gown like simeui. Kim used the design of simeui to symbolize the harmony of
the universe and emphasize the value of the ethical and austere lives of seonbi (SNU PR Team 2011). Indigo, the main color used in the gown, is the color of Seoul National University.

The pure formality in seonbi’s penmanship and sumuk paintings has inspired Korean fashion designers. The restrained colors and the careful handling of the brush symbolize modesty and dignity, which also can be found in simeui and hakchangeui. They also represent the seonbi’s desire to explore the universe and the essence of life (Kim 2009: 128–129).

In contemporary Korean fashion design, hangul, Korean alphabet, written with black ink and motifs drawn in sumuk paintings, are printed on fabrics. Instead of Chinese characters and four plants written and drawn by seonbi, hangul and a variety of motifs including abstract forms and plants appeared to meet popular tastes. However, the innate ideas pursued by seonbi are maintained through restrained colors and brush strokes. Examples can be found in Lee Young Hee and Lie Sangbong’s collections. The first two examples in Table 2 are from Lee Young Hee’s fall/winter 2010/2011 haute couture collection and Lie Sangbong’s spring/summer 2007 collection.

**Naturalistic simplicity in fashion**

Naturalistic simplicity inspired Jinam Lee and Chungchung Lie. The outer lines and the inner lines of Lee’s bags represent the curves of Korean traditional artifacts. Lie uses the curves as both constructional inner lines and outer lines, especially in the spring/summer 2013 collection. The curves in Lee and Lie’s works look similar to the curves in traditional buildings, which resemble the curves from nature.

According to the philosophy of naturalism, dualistic conception is impossible. This idea of monism brought imperfection, imbalance, and deformation to Korean cultural artifacts. These features of artifacts are also related to the idea of empty space which believes in the circulation of energy in nature. Empty space negates the permanent fixation of forms and existence. The imperfection, imbalance, and deformation are visualized in the simple shapes and structure of hanbok, as mentioned previously (Kim 2009).

In Lee Young Hee’s designs, hanbok is modified to improve practicality and to accommodate Western tastes. However, the layered, indeterminate, loose characteristics of hanbok still dominate her collections. Her strapless evening dress inspired by the hanbok skirt was named a costume de vent by a French journalist (Lee 2008: 12–25). The hanbok skirt is a wide and long simple skirt with small pleats and sewn-on waistband which overlaps at the back and is worn over the bust. The name costume de vent describes the indeterminacy of the dress’s form along with the idea of monism and circulation of energy.

The structure of hanok, a Korean traditional house composed of small-scale buildings and multi-layered walls with a courtyard at the
Table 2
Pictures of contemporary fashion design examples representing four aesthetic characteristics of traditional Korean culture.

| Category          | Contemporary Fashion Design |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Pure Formality    | Designs inspired by sumuk paintings. Left: Lee Young Hee’s 2010/2011 fall/winter haute couture collection. Courtesy of Lee Young Hee. © Lee Young Hee. Right: Lie Sangbong’s 2007 spring/summer collection. Courtesy of Lie Sangbong. © Lie Sangbong. |
| Naturalistic Simplicity | Lie Sangbong’s 2013 fall/winter collection inspired by hanok window and door frames. Courtesy of Lie Sangbong. © Lie Sangbong. |
| Symbolic Decoration | Left: Golf wear with a turtle motif, 2004. Courtesy of Minja Kim. © Minja Kim. Right: Neckties inspired by dancheong, 2008. Courtesy of Minja Kim. © Minja Kim. |

(Continued)
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The center, also represents the idea of monism and empty space. The size of space is indeterminate due to the sliding doors which can separate and integrate spaces. The frames of windows and doors are covered with changhoji, traditional Korean paper made from mulberry bark (the top left picture in Figure 1). Simple geometric designs create a lively effect. The sunlight and moonlight which shine through changhoji on windows and doors connect the inside and the outside of buildings, creating the sense of indeterminacy. The shadows of plants on changhoji also bring nature into the house (Yoon and Oh 2009).

Lie Sangbong presented designs with textile prints and surface decoration inspired by hanok window and door frames in his fall/winter 2013 collection. Some of the designs from the collection are shown in Table 2. He explained that the design concept was developed from the moonlight shining through chanhoji on windows and doors connect the inside and the outside of buildings, creating the sense of indeterminacy. The shadows of plants on changhoji also bring nature into the house (Yoon and Oh 2009).

Lie Sangbong presented designs with textile prints and surface decoration inspired by hanok window and door frames in his fall/winter 2013 collection. Some of the designs from the collection are shown in Table 2. He explained that the design concept was developed from the moonlight shining through hanok windows and doors (Lie 2013). His designs embody the sense of indeterminacy between the inside and the outside of hanok buildings and the relation of units, the ideas of monism and empty space, and ultimately the philosophy of naturalism.

**Symbolic decoration in fashion**

Symbolic motifs from Korean traditional artifacts including symbols of longevity, Chinese characters, and dancheong are popular elements in contemporary fashion practices representing Korean culture. For example, the designs for functional activewear developed by Kim’s design team utilized symbolic motifs such as dragon, cloud, turtle, and the yin-and-yang in uniforms for soccer, taekwondo, swimming, golf, and aerobics. A turtle motif, a symbol of longevity, was used in the golf-wear design in Table 2. However, these motifs were not used exclusively in Korea but also appear in other Asian countries which have been influenced by Buddhism and Taoism.
The designs of Korean dancheong include geometric forms, vines, inanimate objects from nature, Chinese characters, lotus, and many others which are associated with religion. Kim’s design team developed accessories—belts, purses, and neckties—using dancheong motifs. Necktie designs in Table 2 are inspired by dancheong.

Lie Sangbong’s spring/summer 2012 collection was also inspired by dancheong. He printed dancheong shapes and colors on fabrics. Materials were cut in different sizes of dancheong motifs and were attached together to form garments.

**Playful spontaneity in fashion**

Liberal and playful shamanistic rituals accompany colorful clothes. Lie Sangbong’s spring/summer 2004 collection was inspired by elements such as fabric straps, floral embroidery, tassels, and beads made of bright colors from Korean traditional shaman costumes (Table 2). His fashion show started with a gut performance by an actual shaman who imbued the runway with joyful and vibrant energy.

Liberal and playful usage of colors could be found in saekdong, the multi-colored stripes on Korean shaman costume and children’s hanbok. Saekdong is believed to repel evil spirits and bring good luck to the wearer. Like other traditional motifs, saekdong often appears in fashion designs as a Korean cultural element. Kim’s design team created blouses, purses, scarves, and school uniforms that used saekdong prints. Saekdong is combined with plum flower motifs in saekdong scarves. Since plum flowers appeared in sumuk paintings of seonbi to represent virtue, the combination of plum flowers with saekdong evokes pure formality and playful spontaneity, and the mixture of high and popular culture.

Humorous spontaneity is seen in fashion designs which contain motifs such as tigers and figures borrowed from folk and genre paintings. Kim’s design team used tigers on soccer uniforms. Kim’s design team has also introduced a product line of clothes inspired by the faces of figures in old genre paintings. The figures on the T-shirts in Table 2 are a man and a woman from Shin Yunbok’s Wolhajeongin (“a couple in the moonlight”). Wolhajeongin depicted lovers meeting secretly at night. This couple appears in two T-shirt designs on the upper row with witty name tags introducing themselves as a pretty maiden and a gorgeous bachelor. Two designs on the bottom row are for Korean soccer fans—almost all Koreans become fans during the World Cup. Korean soccer fans are called Bulgeunakma (“red devils”). These devils are dokkaebi, the mischievous horned goblins of Korean fables. A variety of dokkaebi motifs appeared in old paintings and convex tiles to scare away evil spirits. Dokkaebi is the emblem of Red Devils. Horns along with the yin-and-yang symbol were added to the couple on the Red Devils T-shirts. The yin-and-yang symbols which represent Korea are often drawn on the faces of Bulgeunakma who cheer on their favorite teams. The people
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Conclusions
We proposed an analytical framework composed of four aesthetic characteristics by studying past Korean cultural practices in order to understand how aesthetic characteristics from the past have been transferred to contemporary fashion designs inspired by Korean traditional culture. The application of four aesthetic characteristics to the analysis brought an in-depth understanding of contemporary fashion designs, by connecting the form and the ideology of Korean traditional culture and contemporary fashion practices.

Moreover, we found that the traditional culture was adapted to suit contemporary fashion practices by accommodating eclectic crossover features. There has been a combination of past and present, Korean and Western, high culture and popular culture, and fashion and art. Diverse cultural motifs and costumes from the past are brought into the present to form new styles of everyday fashion, accessories, and garments worn on specific occasions such as graduation and sports matches. In most of the current fashion practices, the elements from Korean traditional culture meet today's Western styles. The traditional cultural elements from high culture and popular culture are combined, as in the textile design composed of saekdong and plum flowers. In addition, elements such as simeui, calligraphy, and ink-and-wash paintings from the past elite culture are redesigned as an everyday contemporary style. Overall, the cultural elements are not only drawn from the past fashion but also from architecture, crafts, and paintings.

The eclectic crossover features of contemporary fashion practice parallel the characteristics of postmodern fashion analyzed by Morgado (1996). Reappearance of styles from the past, broken distinctions among styles for the different social classes, and the existence of ethnic and subcultural styles are among the characteristics of postmodern fashion. Therefore, the contemporary fashion designs presented in this study are definitely postmodern. However, Korean philosophy, ideas, and values presented in four aesthetic characteristics of Korean culture—pure formality, naturalistic simplicity, symbolic decoration, and playful spontaneity—survive in the images redesigned and regenerated in the contemporary fashion practice inspired by Korean traditional culture.

This study mainly applied the framework of aesthetic characteristics to the contemporary fashion designs of Lie Sangbong, Lee Young Hee, and Minja Kim's design team. Most of the contemporary fashion design examples were confined to the works produced in the twenty-first century. Further application of the framework in the analysis of Korean-themed fashion designs introduced by other designers from the
second half of the twentieth century might enhance the understanding of how the fashion practices have evolved.

Notes

1. Family names should be written after the first names in English. However, these designers named their brands with the family names placed before their first names, in keeping with the Korean style. We used the brand name as the designer names in this study.

2. Professor Minja Kim’s Seoul National University fashion design research laboratories will be referred to as “Kim’s design team.”

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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