

# A Historical Study on the North Korean Womens Clothing Culture

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## I . Introduction

Two societies under the different systems form a racial consciousness is a keynote of efforts to be one society. For the cultural coordination and the recovery of the racial homogeneity, the cultural exchange between South and North Korea can be a very important means.

Germany achieved unification in 1990 but still suffers a delay of cultural homogeneity recovery due to the radical coordination of political ideas. South Korea established an own democratic government in August 15, 1948. The Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea was set up in North in September 9, 1948. Since 1948 the partition of the Korean peninsula has been continued but recently the cultural and economic exchanges started under the certain restriction. Not as an accompanying activity of the political or economic exchanges, the cultural exchange can be the most important means of achieving unification based on the recovery of the racial homogeneity. Clothing, which is one portion of the culture, is very important because it symbolically expresses the lifestyle and the emotion of a society.

Exchanging the hometown visiting group and the art performance group in 1985 started the cultural exchange between South and North Korea and it has continuously promoted under the legal and the institutional supports till 1990s. The South Korean president, Kim Dae Jungs visit to North Korea in June 2000 became an opportunity to raise South Korean peoples interest in North Korea and to show several aspects, which was not exposed to common South Korean people. It boosted more systematic studies about North Korea.

The main purpose of this research is to review the historical change of the female clothing culture in North Korea since 1948. To prepare for future unification, we hope this research helps to minimize the side effects or cultural heterogeneity. Comparing with thousands of studies for the South Korean female clothing, the existing studies about the North Korean clothing culture are sporadic and unessential. Thus, by scientific readjustment and consideration, we would like to make a solid base for the future succeeding studies.

The research is based on actual documents and pictures. We referred to books, thesis, and dissertations from the research institutes of North Korean issue. We also found information from newspapers, magazines, and Internet sites. The scope of research is limited to the female clothing since 1950s till now.

## II. The political and economic background of the North Korean clothing culture

Due to closing and isolated social system, the North Korean clothing might be more influenced by the internal social circumstance than world fashion trend. Therefore, we will review the political and economic background first.

### 1. Political background

#### (1) 1950's~1970's

The basic political ideology, which leads North Korea, is the Juche idea. Juche is Kim Il Sung's revolutionary idea which holds to Marx and Lenin's principle but creatively adapts to the specific Korean conditions and the racial characteristics.

Based on the ideological Juche (1955), the economic independence (1956), the political independence (1957), and the national self-defense (1962) were accomplished, and then they were organized (1967) and formed (1982) as the Juche idea. As important propositions, human, revolution, and the independence line were presented. The philosophical principal, the principal of social history, and the principal of leader form the theoretical compositions.

Before the Juche idea was established, there was no specific instruction to influence the North Korean clothing culture. The male clothing was a typical Communist party style (Lenin style) and the female clothing was a traditional Korean Hanbok (white jacket and black skirt). This clothing culture emphasized the racial Juche characteristics, but the disadvantage was too monotonous and uniform.

#### (2) 1970's~1980's

In October 1978, the first fashion show was held in Pyongyang. After the Kim Il Sung's instruction in April 1979, colors of people's clothing in main cities where many foreigners visit had been changed. In 1980 Chosun Female (magazine) defined the clothing as a mirror, which showed people's dignity and culture level. The magazine emphasized that the clothing must be fit to the socialism life style but it also proposed to diversify according to the private favor, age, physique, and hobby, etc.

#### (3) 1980's~1990's

In February 1984, Kim Jung Il ordered to produce high quality textiles by boosting the light industry. In May 1984, Kim Il Sung instructed men to wear business suits instead of Lenin or Mao style. Following the instruction, people had to wear the business suits whenever they participated in official meetings. To improve the defect of the heavy industry driven policy, the North Korean government started to promote the light industry from 1984. In October 1984, a joint

venture with a Japanese company was set up. By exporting OEM products to Japan, the North Korean clothing industry had grown rapidly. Based on this circumstance, the transition to business suits and Western style dresses was made. In February 1986, following Kim Il Sung's instruction, female trousers and khaki and black tone clothing was prohibited. The holding of the 13th world students festival in 1989 accelerated the change of North Korean clothing style. Since the North Korean government worried about the exposure of peoples life through the world festival, the government tried to change peoples clothing style by mass campaign or political efforts.

#### (4) 1990's~now

In 1990 ready-made clothes started to be produced in full scale at the factory in Kyesung. Not only Half sleeve T-shirts and knee trousers were allowed but also various designs and production methods were announced at popular magazines. In June 1996, another joint venture factory for ready-made clothes started to be operated but in October 1996, the government prohibited the clothing with English marks and Jeans. In 1994, the first fashion show was held with many specialists of the North Korean clothing. In 1995, Hanbok fashion show was held and in June 2000, the South Korean designer, Young Hee, Lee was invited for the first time to have a fashion show in Pyongyang. These kinds of events have been increased owing to the open-door policy and social mood. As an educational institute, there is a clothing department in Pyongyang Commerce University.

## 2. Economic background

Even though Russia gave up the socialist economy, North Korea still persists in the centralized planned economy system. The characteristics of the North Korean economy are 1) socialist ownership system 2) centralized planned economy 3) independent nationalism economy. Until 70s, 80% of industrial investment in North Korea was focused on the heavy industry. Therefore, the light industry including clothing was fell behind, but after several policy changes, it started to be developed.

Regarding the textile industry, North Korea had produced Viscose Rayon since 1950s, Acrylic system of Anylon since 1970s, and PVC system of Mobyton since early 1980s. However, due to lack of production quantity, North Korea produces mainly Viscose Rayon and Vynalon that can be produced in large quantity with the existing production facilities.

According to the statistics, the total production capacity of North Korea had remained 17.7 ton per year from 1990 to 1998. Despite of small production quantity, the products were mainly exported through several trade agencies.

Since 1992, the South Korean companies have produced clothing by OEM method in North Korea. Homogeneity as a one race promoted the economic exchanges.

### **III. The North Korean female policies and the social and the economic status**

#### **1. The North Korean female policies**

The North Korean government planned the labor class system of the entire North Korean women by issuing the female liberation and the equality of sexes. The government has tried to remodel women as perfect communists but the North Korean female policies seems to be developed not much until now.

To summarize the North Korean female policies since 1948,

From 1945 to 1956, the government announced the laws and the ordinances for equality of sexes. By making women to possess the same economic, cultural, and political right; the North Korean government prepared the foundation of throwing female labors into industrial activities. From 1957 to 1971, North Korea had built kindergartens, rice factories, and food factories to put female labors into economic activities. From 1972 till now, the female revolution and the labor class system has been pushed forward.

#### **2. The social and economic status of women**

Even though North Korean women work as much as men based on the spirit of equality of sexes, they cannot be equally promoted or rewarded. In addition to economic activities, they must be responsible for their home life.

With their husbands salary, the home life cannot be maintained. Under this economic reality, economic activities of women are naturally required. Due to this reason, the convenient function of clothing can be more important than the esthetic value; thus, almost of North Korean women wear uniforms. Only few women at the privileged class can afford to show interest in selecting clothing style.

### **IV. The characteristics of the North Korean female clothing culture**

#### **1. The supply system for clothing**

North Korean people can get clothing by two methods. One is buying the clothing that was allocated by the government supply system and the other is from a black market. Due to economic difficulty and lack of materials, the quantity and the quality of rationed goods are poor. Generally the allocation is not made on time. People have to buy more expensive clothing from a black market.

#### **2. The dual structure of the clothing culture**

##### **(1) The dual structure of Hanbok and western style dresses**

Since the clothing culture can not be developed much because of lack of materials and production facility, the North Korean clothing culture became based on the traditional Hanbok style. After western style dress and business suits was allowed, the North Korean clothing divided into traditional Hanbok and the western style dress. Even if the North Korean government encourages wearing Hanbok, North Korean women wear it for the special events only.

## **(2) The dual structure between classes**

Generally, North Korean people are not so interested in clothing because of low standard of living, but the people at the upper class are concerned about clothing and sensitive to fashion trend. It shows that the dual structure between classes exists in the North Korean clothing culture.

## **3. Internal contradiction of the open-door policy and the policy of seclusion**

The clothing style of Kim Jung Nam (the first son of the North Korean leader, Kim Jung Il) family, which exposed in Japan during their traveling in disguise, extremely showed the internal contradiction of the North Korean policies. Kim Jung Nam family's up-to-date high-end style and the typical Communist party style, which Kim Jung Il wore at the South and North Korea summit conference, showed ideological contradiction.

By encouraging the traditional Korean clothing style with a single color tone, the North Korean government currently tries to discipline the political system. In early 90s, jeans and mini-skirts were induced by the young generation and college students but that kind of western style became a subject of control by the government who worry about ideological slackening.

## **V. Conclusion**

Until 1960s the typical North Korean female clothing was very simple and standardized, but rapid transition to the western style dress was made after Kim Il Sung's instruction in 1978. The joint venture with Japanese companies and the direct investment of Korean companies also caused the change of the North Korean female clothing culture.

Apparently the social status of North Korean women is prescribed equally based on female liberation and equality of sexes. The convenient function of clothing is more important than esthetic value because of outside economic activities and responsibility for home life.

Due to lack of materials and production facility, the clothing culture could not be developed much. The supply system of clothing is depend on allocation but people frequently purchase clothing from a black market. The traditional Korean Hanbok and the western dress coexist.

In the North Korean women's clothing culture, the dual structure between classes exists. Further, contradiction between the open-door policy and the policy of seclusion is extremely appeared in the clothing culture.