

# A study of the standards of beauty and hair culture in East Asia: A historical analysis of wigs in the Joseon dynasty

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## **Short abstract:**

This paper describes East Asian hair culture and provides an analysis of standards of beauty. It focuses on hair exports to China and Japan during the Joseon dynasty and examines how hair culture differed in these regions. In so doing the paper raises the role of hair culture in East Asia anthropological research.

## **Long abstract:**

East Asian standards of beauty have historically included hair. This paper seeks to shed light on the history of East Asian hair culture, including the international trade in hair within the region. During the Joseon dynasty hair was exported to Japan and China, a situation which may have influenced how South Korea and China are today leaders in the international wig industry. Wigs have long been considered as little more than decorative products despite their role as one element in a broader hair culture. Throughout the region and over the centuries, wigs have been central in displaying hair to convey rank, authority, and social position, but there has been little attention paid to this role of wigs. This paper examines hair exports during the Joseon dynasty and considers the wigs made from that hair and the related standards for beauty in the context of the overall hair culture of East Asia. Consideration will be given to both historical materials and to legends and other traditional tales. This approach will clarify the history of the hair trade before looking at the hair culture of today. The paper does not, however, attempt to examine the present; rather it uses the long Joseon dynasty as a way into the overarching hair culture of East Asia.

## **Keyword**

**Hair culture; East Asia; Aesthetic Conditions; Representation of Authority; Import and Export of Hair**

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 The purpose of this paper and the location of its focus

The purpose of this study is examining the hair culture through the history of East Asia. There has so far been no study that tried to address the hair culture of East Asia as a whole, although a number of studies have been made on each individual country's hair culture and cultural history. This likely reflects a recognition that the hair cultures of the various countries are configured within in the history of each specific country. In addition to this recognition, there is another major problem: the huge volume of historical materials.

The historical material of the Joseon dynasty alone is enough to be in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register<sup>1</sup>. It is also true that the archives of related materials are so daunting that researchers have avoided them. Hair has always been involved in human society, and especially in East Asia, hair has played a role in aesthetics and the representation of figurative authority.

The purpose of this study is thus to examine the conditions involving hair's role in aesthetics and the representation of authority as well as its import and export.

## 1.2 Glossary

This paper combines China, Japan and Korea in its references to East Asia. In particular, "Korea" refers to the whole Korean Peninsula and carries no social intent. "China" is used as a geographical reference, so this paper uses "China" to refer to China geographically.

Another concern is that we can't go to North Korea, with the result that I have almost no documents for North Korea and have avoided reference to North Korea. Last, I limit the discussion to woman's hair history. I do not take up male hair cultures.

## 1.3 Previous research

As noted above, there has so far been no study that tried to address the hair culture of East Asia as a whole, although a number of studies have been made on each country's hair culture and cultural history. The major research on individual countries is as introduced below.

In Korea, Song [2004], [2012] studied the Korean hair culture history, as did Im [2009]. Song [2004] was at the heart of the controversy for Joseon dynasty. Song [2012] drew on Song [2004] about how to use hair wigs in historical drama. Im [2009] studied historical materials to give a summary of Korean hair culture summary and consider how "*Gache*" was used in the Joseon dynasty.

In Japan, Iijima [1986], Miyamoto[1966] used "*SamGukSagi*" (the History of the Three

Kingdoms) and “The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty.” He studied the import and export of hair and “*Gache SinGum ThyorMok*” (an interdiction on the use of wigs) in 1788. Watanabe [2014] studied the trade in hair and drew on documents not used by Miyamoto [1966]. Ito [1997], Aramata [2000] studied Japanese hair culture history but did not address other countries’ culture. Iijima [1986] studied the social history of hair in Japan. And Ito [1997] studied the case in Japan and used Japanese examples to discuss hair in world history. Aramata [2000] studied hair culture in cultural history. There has been very little study, however, of Japan’s most famous users of wigs, the *oiran*.

In China, Ye DaBing /Ye LiYa [2000], Hua [1989/2003], Guang [2006] studied Chinese hair culture. They gave relatively little attention to the Han nationality’s hair culture and studied Chinese minority groups’ hair culture.

Other studies were Miyamoto [1966] and Watanabe [2014], which studied the import and export of hair.

## 1.4 Setting period

The period addressed in this paper is the Joseon dynasty. This is for two reasons. First, the Joseon dynasty reigned for a long time. The Joseon dynasty ruled the Korean peninsula for about 550 years from its establishment in 1393 until the annexation of Korea in 1910. Second, the Joseon dynasty was closely tied to China and Japan.

# Chapter 2 Diplomatic relations and trade in the Joseon dynasty

The Joseon dynasty was a subject state of China, but it did have exchanges with neighboring countries. Records exist about activity to dispatch ambassadors such as *YoHengSa* (Joseon missions to Imperial China) and *ChosonTongXingsa* (Joseon missions to Japan) in “The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty” or “The Diary Records of the Royal Secretariat of the Joseon Dynasty”, and records written as diaries and the history of activities of the people who proceeded to China and Japan as ambassador also exist. First let us consider diplomatic relations and trade with each.

## 2.1 Exchange with China

The Joseon dynasty succeeded the Goryeo dynasty of Korea (918-1392 CE) and followed it as a client of China. Messengers periodically dispatched to China were called *YoHengSa*. These groups went China around three to five times a year. The *YoHengSa* might carry seasonal greetings to the Chinese emperor or report on a change of kings. A tribute for the court consisted of a variety of objects including hair [figure 1]. “The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty” also confirms that other informal exchanges with China also took

place. In addition, various personnel exchanges were also carried out when *Yohengsa* were dispatched. As an example, fishermen who had drifted to the other country's shores or been shipwrecked would frequently be exchanged during the visits, representing an active personnel exchange between the Joseon dynasty and mainland China.

## 2.2 Exchange with Japan

In this study I confirm the nature of the history of relations between Japan and the Joseon dynasty. Japan and the Joseon dynasty at the time of its founding conducted some restricted trade, but diplomatic relations were severed temporarily due to invasions by Hideyoshi Toyotomi and Japanese pirates. However, a change happened in the relationship after the beginning of the Tokugawa shogunate. Tokugawa Ieyasu made an effort to restore diplomatic relations and ambassadors were even exchanged. At this time, the mission which visited Japan was named "*Choson Tongxingsa*" by the Joseon dynasty. The Tsushima feudal clan was in charge of dealing with these missions for Japan and traded with them. In addition, "*Choson Tongxinsa*" had the opportunity to visit Edo to meet the Tokugawa Shogunate directly, and we can learn about such activities through the diaries and action records of the each ambassador. We cannot say, however, that these visits to Japan went entirely smoothly, as Ikeuchi [1991] reports fraudulent documents that were fabricated by the Tsushima feudal clan. It remains a fact, however, that the visits to Japan of the Joseon missions did take place and included the return of shipwrecked or stranded individuals as was done with China, so we can say that the interchange with Japan was deep. In addition, hair is not included in the presents from the *Tongxingsa*. However, hair is included in the export to Japan which went on as Japanese preparations for its invasion of Korea in the last years of the Joseon dynasty. This phenomenon becomes proof of the active exports to Hiroshima for Yano wigs<sup>2</sup> and to Manchukuo.

## Chapter 3 Export and import of hair

Documents are available regarding the export and import of hair. For example we can find such information in "The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty" and "The Diary Records of the Royal Secretariat of the Joseon Dynasty". The exports were primarily to China.

Miyamoto [1966] says export was started from Goguryeo [Miyamoto1966:108]. Miyamoto [1966] studies the export of hair from Silra to the Joseon dynasty [figure2]. But Watanabe [2014] points out that Miyamoto [1966] studies only export for hair. He does not use "The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty" and "The Diary Records of the Royal Secretariat of the Joseon Dynasty" and so on. Regarding the fact that records of hair

imports eventually disappear from Chinese accounts, Miyamoto [1966] suggests, “It was thought inappropriate to use hair as official presents” and “Demand for hair probably occurred in Joseon dynasty society” [Miyamoto1966:195-196]. However, as shown in figure 1, “The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty” was subjected to editing after the end of the dynasty, and the figures it presents are different from those in “The Diary Records of the Royal Secretariat of the Joseon Dynasty” which presents scenes from everyday life. Here we can find examples of procurement of hair which exceed those in table 2 of Miyamoto [1966]. In addition, there are also examples where hair was presented directly to the ambassador of the Chinese side. For this reason we look forward to research in many other documents.

Hair was exported not only to China but to Japan as well. While it is known that such exports to Japan were conducted around the end of the Joseon dynasty, it is not known how the hair was used in Japan. In materials from the post-Joseon period during Japanese occupation there is mention of the making of wigs, the exported hair was likely used as wigs in Japan.

Ito [1997] notes that when Japanese Buddhist monks visited Song China they carried wigs with them, indicating that in the past there were exports from Japan [Ito 1997:40-43]. In addition, Aramata [2000] indicates that Japan imported large volumes of hair from China during the Warring States Period [Aramata 2000:77-81]. Further, since hair was reduced during the Edo era and people competed for beauty by using wigs, it is thought that a large quantity of hair produced by the Joseon dynasty and given as tribute to the Chinese court was re-exported through China to Japan. It can even be thought that many of the wigs from this period used basic materials originating from the Joseon dynasty, which were used in Japan to produce the wigs themselves.

## **Chapter 4 Aesthetic conditions and representation of authority**

So far we have looked at the import and export of human hair. Here, this study will consider a reason for such trade in human hair, aesthetic conditions and the representation of authority.

### **4.1 Aesthetic conditions**

In East Asia, there are two common factors in aesthetics. The first is the influence of the classic work “Filial Piety.” It is said that the three countries of East Asian each had its own culture and way of doing things, but Confucianism exercised a variety of influences in each county. It is thought in particular that the following words from the “*Xiao Jing*” (Filial Piety) “The Scope and Meaning” greatly contributed to this situation.

Our bodies - every hair and bit of skin - are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or harm them.<sup>3</sup>

The Scope and Meaning,  
"Xiao Jing"<sup>4</sup>

This description of the body being inherited from parents is intended to persuade that the body must not easily be subjected to damage. This "*Xiao Jing*" and Confucianism thought originated in China and strongly affect China and Korea. One reason is the definition of beauty in China and Korea. In these countries, there was strong recognition that "a person with long hair is filial and beautiful."

What about Japan, however? Although Japan was not so strongly influenced by the "*Xiao Jing*," thoughts on filial piety in such sources as the "*Nihon Shoki*" did have an impact, and eventually it came to be thought that long hair was beautiful. A woman's long hair was thought to have mystical power, and women with long hair came to be regarded as both precious and beautiful.

A second reason would be the common color of hair in East Asia. Throughout China, Korea, and Japan there is a variety of expressions dealing with black hair. For example, black hair in China is represented as "Raven Black," and Korea also has the expression "Raven Black." Even Japan has the expression "dark green hair" or "Raven Black". Black hair is common throughout Asia, but the predilection for black hair in the three countries of East Asia in particular has given rise to a variety of expressions and characterizations.

While hair color must be mentioned as one of the criteria of beauty, there are a number of other common criteria as well, such as the shape of the face. I would like to emphasize hair, however, as hair figures strongly as a symbol of authority as dealt with in the following sections.

## 4.2 Representation of authority

Representation of authority or power in China has a varied history. In Chinese history there are examples where men were forced to change their hair into a variety of shapes. For example, it is widely known that in the Qing men were compelled to have their hair in a Manchu style queue or pigtail. Other examples would be hair in the original Mongolian style or coiffured hair in the Ming period. Men were kept busy responding to the busy changes in symbols of authority. Women's hair styles, however, went through few great changes in China. During the transition from Ming to Qing, however, there were changes in the seraglio system, and just like for the men, some types of Manchu clothing became mandatory. Two types of hair style co-existed, the Han and the Manchu. If you chose to adopt the contemporary Han hairstyle, you likely would use a hair wig, as a continuing the custom from the Ming dynasty. The wigs of this time deserved to be

viewed as hairpieces, but Ye DaBing /Ye LiYa [2000] point out that they can also be considered as a tool to symbolize power [Ye DaBing /Ye LiYa 2000:74-81]. For example, Guang [2006] noted that about Qing women's hairstyles used decorative elements such as hairpins and ornaments, but in addition hairpieces could be used to give the hair more volume and the "peony head" hairstyle expanded the hair to huge proportions to illustrate how high a person's position was [Guang 2006:52-56].

Hair played an extremely important role as a power representation in the Joseon dynasty. As previously noted, the custom was to consider hair as inherited from one's parents and as something not proper to cut, with the result that hair was traded only at a high price. For the poor, cutting off and selling the hair was one way to improve their impoverished lives at least a little. The custom of the Joseon dynasty poor to wrap a white cloth around their heads did increase their efficiency as they worked in agriculture or other jobs, but it also had the effect of concealing the fact that they had cut their hair. What, then, was the case in the court? Song [2004] suggests that during the Joseon dynasty and all the other dynasties as well, women in court competed with one another to show how long their hair was. He also points out that even royalty such as queens and princesses tended to wear large types of wigs [Song2004:206-214]. Im [2009] likewise points out the growing size of wigs and use of the large size of the wigs as a symbol of authority or wealth, noting that this trend even appeared in the ordinary social classes [Im2009:19-24]. The cost of the wigs that spread into the commoner classes was exorbitant, to the extent that a wig could cost about as much as a house. As a result, edicts were issued a number of times during the Joseon dynasty to ban the use of such wigs, but such bans were fully enforced only from the time of Yeongjo and JeongJo. Until that time fashion came and went, but the growth of wig size continued, and we can even say that wigs ruled as a representation of power.

Japan had a strong awareness of hair from time immemorial, even ascribing a type of divinity to it, and classics such as "*Nihon Shoki*" recognize hair for its magic abilities. Since the Heian Era the upper classes therefore not only saw long hair as a symbol of beauty, taking a long-haired woman as one's wife was also deemed important as part of the representation of power [Ito 1997:21-43]. Likewise, Aramata [2000] notes that from the Heian period, long black hair was a sign of the upper class [Aramata 2000:23-27]. With the arrival of the Edo period, a variety of hairstyles were introduced, but they were expensive, and the ability to spend large sums of money on hair was limited to people who had power or wealth. We can see from this that hairdressing in Japan can also be viewed as one symbol of power.

## **Chapter 5    Consideration of hair culture centered on Joseon**

## Dynasty

It is no exaggeration to say that the Joseon dynasty, as the center of trade in East Asia, also stood as a leading source of hair. Primary distribution which was in China, but considering that hair was also sent from China to Japan, we can say that the hair culture of East Asia was primarily supported by the Joseon dynasty. The type of Joseon dynasty wig called the “*Gache*” grew steadily over time, and even though the number of users of such wigs fell sharply following the promulgation of the 1788 Ban Decree, the *Gache* remained a symbol of the Joseon dynasty and is used today in dramas and other similar presentations. During the same period, China also had the “peony head” style of wig as an example of hair expanded to huge proportions, as mentioned by Ye DaPing/Ye LiYa [2006]. There are not many references to the Japanese *oiran* courtesans, but it remains a fact that their hair also followed the trend of expansion in size and that the size of the *oiran*’s hair was a gauge for knowing the *oiran*’s importance, meaning that once again, the size of the wig served both aesthetics and representation of power.

From the above, we can see that East Asia can be examined for the role played by hair in aesthetics and representation of power just as can other regions. To date, culture research in previous studies was concentrated in Europe, but it would seem that there is a need for hair culture research not only in individual East Asian countries but in East Asia as a whole.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion

This paper sought to examine the import and export of human hair and its role in aesthetics and power representation against a historical background. It can be concluded from this paper that the countries of East Asia have been closely linked and have shared much in common, and it also dealt with the likelihood that hair exported from the Joseon dynasty passed through China and was exported to Japan. Further, in relation to the aesthetics of hair, this paper points out that China and the Joseon dynasty had much in common, as well as that there is a great variety of expressions in East Asia regarding black hair, indicating areas which need future research. This paper also clearly indicates that hair was used in the representation of authority, coordinates such matters with the histories of the various countries, and points out the need to shed more light on such matters.

Thus based on the research to date on hair culture, we can say that there is a need for even more research from a variety of viewpoints, including research into the history of interchanges within broad regions such as East Asia, and that research on the individual countries is insufficient. In the future, the writer intends to direct her efforts toward preparing a doctoral dissertation using research into the hair culture of East Asia with



greater emphasis on the history of such interchanges.

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Article

資料6 宮本(1966)による頭髪の輸出履歴									
国名	王名	在位年	西暦	書名	巻号	題名	該当年	概要1	概要2
新羅	文武王	2	662	三国史記	卷六	新羅本紀六	文武王 上	二年春正月	頭髪三十両
	聖德王	22	723		卷八	新羅本紀八	聖德王	夏四月	美髷
		29	730					29年春二月	頭髪八十両
		33	734					四月	頭髪一百両
	景文王	9	869	三国史記	卷十一	新羅本紀第十一	景文王	九年秋七月	四尺五寸頭髪百五十両
高麗	惠宗王		945	高麗史	卷二	惠宗王乙巳二年	惠宗王	乙巳二年	頭髪二十斤
朝鮮王朝	世宗	7	1425	世宗實錄	卷二十七		世宗	七年乙巳二月	使臣が美髷を求めた
		8	1426		卷三十一			八年丙午三月	使臣が美髷を求めた
	世祖	14	1468		卷四十六		世祖	十四年戊子六月	いたるところで髷を求め、随時配送した
		9	1503		卷四十八			九年癸亥正月	明使人へ髷子六百外 贈呈
		11	1505		卷五十七			十一年乙丑二月	髷子一萬
		11	1505		卷六十			十一年十二月	長三尺髷子五萬
		凡例						宮本(1966)を参考に発表者作成	
			1両＝37.5g						
			1斤＝600g						

Figure 1

	王名	年	月	日	量	どこから	どこへ	出典
1	太祖							
2	定宗							
3	太宗							
4	世宗	7	2	2	×	各地方	明	朝鮮王朝実録
		8	3	15	×	濟州	明	朝鮮王朝実録
5	文宗							
6	端宗							
7	世祖	2	6	23	50箇	左副承旨	明 尹鳳	朝鮮王朝実録
		3	6	13	×		明	朝鮮王朝実録
		14	6	9	×	各地方	明	朝鮮王朝実録
		14	7	10	100箇	姜玉	明	朝鮮王朝実録
8	睿宗							
9	成宗	8	8	17	50箇	宮廷	明	朝鮮王朝実録
		9	12	21		宮廷	明	朝鮮王朝実録
		11	7	22	200	禮曹判書	明	朝鮮王朝実録
		11	8	19	300把	宮廷	明	朝鮮王朝実録
		12	12	22	500把	宮廷	明	朝鮮王朝実録
		14	8	18	500把	宮廷	明	朝鮮王朝実録
		14	9	16	500把	宮廷	明	朝鮮王朝実録
		15	8	24	300把	宮廷	明	朝鮮王朝実録
10	燕山君	8	1	14	150令(領)	各村	宮廷	朝鮮王朝実録
		9	1	23	600 200余	各地方	宮廷	朝鮮王朝実録
		9	11	29	1000	各地方	宮廷	朝鮮王朝実録
		11	2	24	10000	八道	宮廷	朝鮮王朝実録
		11	10	8	50	宮廷	入閣者	朝鮮王朝実録
		11	12	23	五萬	八道	宮廷	朝鮮王朝実録
11	中宗	1	9	5	×	八道	宮廷	朝鮮王朝実録
12	仁宗							
13	明宗							
14	宣祖							
15	光海君							
16	仁祖	5	10	6	40丹	濟州	宮廷	承政院日記
		9	8	8	×	濟州	宮廷	承政院日記
		15	3	15	×	濟州	宮廷	承政院日記
17	孝宗	9	6	19	×	喬桐	宮廷	承政院日記
		9	6	20	×	喬桐	宮廷	承政院日記
		11	7	20	6圓	勅使	都監	承政院日記
		11	10	3	12介	濟州	宮廷	承政院日記
		13	9	3	×	濟州	宮廷	承政院日記
18	顯宗							
19	肅宗	31	9	17	×	濟州	宮廷	承政院日記
		38	8	23	×	宮廷	明	承政院日記
		38	10	20	100箇	×	×	朝鮮王朝実録
		38	10	20	100介	水原	領議	承政院日記
		38	10	29	70	×	宮廷	朝鮮王朝実録
		38	10	29	56斤、100介、70介	×	×	承政院日記
		41	8	21	15介	×	×	承政院日記
		44	1	7	1丹	義禁府	副勅都	承政院日記
		45	3	3	1丹	都監	勅使	承政院日記
20	景宗							
21	英祖	3	8	2	30束	咸鏡道	宮廷	朝鮮王朝実録
		3	8	23	20丹	×	勅使	承政院日記
		5	5	28	×	×	勅使	承政院日記
		7	4	27	×	×	勅使	承政院日記
		11	8	12	436箇	×	×	承政院日記
		14	2	21	2丹	×	都監	承政院日記
		24	5	25	2丹	宮廷	明	承政院日記
		35	9	19	60丹	地方	宮廷	承政院日記
		39	3	28	×	×	閔氏	承政院日記
		50	5	19	×	宮廷	李氏	朝鮮王朝実録
22	正祖							
23	純祖	19	6	3	3000両	×	明禮宮	承政院日記
24	憲宗							
25	哲宗							
26	高宗	19	1	23	3000両	×	明禮宮	承政院日記
		19	1	24	3000両	×	明禮宮	承政院日記
27	純宗							

Figure 2

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<sup>1</sup> “The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty” was added to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in October 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Yano wig is a special product wig of Hiroshima produced from the Meiji era through the Taisho era.

<sup>3</sup>身體髮膚，受之父母，不敢毀傷，孝之始也。

<sup>4</sup> Xiao Jing is a Confucian classic treatise giving advice on filial piety, that is, how to behave towards a senior.

<sup>5</sup> “Gache” is Korean traditional hair wigs