What is a Chima-Jeogori uniform?

I wonder if you have ever seen school girls who go to Korean high schools in Chima-Jeogori uniforms. You might have seen the uniform in films such as ‘GO’ or ‘Pacchigi’. These are so-called Korean school-related films. You might have seen these school girls before, either on TV or in your area, as they sometimes venture out to collect signatures for their petitions or to seek approval from authorities. Their petitions were for free education for Korean high school students, as it is for Japanese students.

The design of the uniform itself is almost the same anywhere in Japan. It is comprised of two pieces, a Jeogori (shirt) and a Chima (skirt), a sleeveless one-piece dress with a pleated skirt. Students wear the Jeogori on top of the Chima, then fasten them with a ribbon-style sash, called Goreum, on the breast line. In the winter they wear black (navy blue is acceptable in some schools) wool uniforms. In the summer, students wear the one-piece uniform, combined with a white hemp (or sometimes manmade fiber blended) Jeogori with a black (or navy) non-natural fiber skirt. They call this special one-piece uniform ‘jeoksam.’

There have been no ready-made uniform shops for Chima-Jeogori uniforms, unlike Japanese school uniforms. Parents need to order uniforms from traditional dress makers or tailors, as there is no ready-to-wear uniform industry for Chima-Jeogori. Parents order them at the individual or school level from dress makers owned by Zainichi (Koreans living in Japan).

The present day Chima-Jeogori uniform has several unique features. First, the uniform has been improved by introducing western style features, such as the pleated skirt and metal hook for the hold-back. However the basic structure, design and sewing process still follow the traditional Chima-Jeogori dress.

Secondly, the uniform differs from the traditional Chima-Jeogori dress usually worn by present-day Korean women during festivities on the Korean Peninsula (or abroad, including Japan) in color, material and the length of the Chima.

According to several records and documents, the Chima-Jeogori uniform
was first introduced in the early 1960s. The uniform became a symbol of Korean schools. But, in the late 1980s there were frequent incidents of harassment of Korean school girls, called ‘Chima-Jeogori Jiken’1. They were easily targeted because of their distinctive uniform. Female students claimed that it lead to discrimination, as only girls wore the Chima-Jeogori uniform. For this reason, the Korean school board reviewed its Chima-Jeogori uniform practice and, in April 1999, Korean schools introduced a second uniform consisting of a blazer (in winter), blouse and skirt. From then on, girls could choose their uniform from one of the two styles.

In recent years, almost all young students have chosen the second uniform. This is because there have been an increasing number of harassment incidents since the Japan-North Korea summit meeting in September 17 2007, when the DPRK (North Korea) acknowledged the abduction of Japanese citizens. The DPRK-bashing media reports (that were related to the abduction), abusive language, and physical assaults have been happening on and off since the summit meeting.

The Birth of the “Chima-Jeogori Uniform”

Korean schools in Japan originated as small local Korean-language schools. These ‘terakoya’-style schools (literally ‘temple schools’) were established by Zainichi Koreans who wanted to return to their home country after the liberation on August 15 1945. These schools were created for Korean children who had been banned from using their own language and writing-style, under Japan’s Imperial state education.

After the liberation, many Korean people found an alternative way of staying in Japan. The main reasons for this were the setback of the repatriation program due to an increasingly complex North Korean political situation, and the General Headquarters of the Allied Forces’ (GHQ) disruption to the repatriation program. The Association of Korean Residents in Japan (‘Choren’) was established in October 1945 and started to organize education systems.

In September 1948, the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) was established in the north and the Republic of Korea (ROK) was established in the south. The Choren that had controlled Korean schools chose North Korea and backed DPRK’s political system. Therefore, Korean schools were suppressed severely by the GHQ and the Japanese Government until 1950 when the Korean War broke out.
In spite of fierce resistance, the Japanese Government ordered the closure of all Korean schools just after the Choren was given a ‘compulsory dissolution order’ from the government. Ethnic education for Zainichi Koreans continued in the form of Japanese public branch schools. ‘Ethnic classes’ were classified as extracurricular activities. However, there still were several independent Korean schools in some parts of Japan.

It took time for Korean schools to establish their own control again. The change was brought about by the formation of the ‘General Association of Korean Residents in Japan’ (Chosen Soren) by Zainichi Koreans in 1955, after the ceasefire of the Korean War. The Chosen Soren was formed following the dissolution of Choren. Korean schools then regained their autonomous education system.

The Association made ethnic education one of the essential policies in its organizational agenda. It worked very hard to reorganize decentralized Korean schools as independent schools. It focused on rich education content emphasizing basic academic skills—centering on their national Korean language—construction of new schools and its approbation, and improvement of educational facilities.

During this time, notable changes took place. In April 1957, the DPRK Government sent educational support grants and scholarship money to Korean schools for the first time. And in December 1959, the door was opened to North Korea under a repatriation program after a massive campaign.

These changes boosted Korean nationalism among Zainichi Koreans and brought them innovative changes in their life-style and culture. The Chima Jeogori uniform was one of the results of this movement.

The 7th General Meeting of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chosen Soren) was held in June 1964. The Association stated in its official report that Zainichi Koreans had raised ethnic spirit in their daily life. It pointed to the use of the Korean language in schools as an example. It also cited the Chima Jeogori uniform worn by Korean school girls every day.

In the years around 1960, almost no one except the first-generation wore the Chima Jeogori as everyday wear. Therefore, the Chima Jeogori uniform was a phenomenon of ethnic revival with the reinterpretation of Korean tradition, not the direct inheritance of the ethnicity.

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1 A series of incidents occurred in the 1980s to 1990s when Japanese society as well as the Japanese media began to criticize heavily the DPRK as a response to events including the 1987 Korean Air Incident, the 1989 Pinball Financial Scandal, the 1994 suspicion of nuclear development and the 1998 suspicion of nuclear missile development
2 The first remittance was 12,109,068 yen (USD150,000) in total. The remittance still comes to Japan from the DPRK a few times a year.
3 The repatriation program was carried out from December 1959 to the final 187th ship in 1984, with two intervals. The 93,340 repatriated individuals included Japanese spouses who emigrated to the DPRK. Although most of them originated from the Southern part of the Korean Peninsula, they returned to the North Korea as their “home.”
4 A simple although perhaps limited definition could be “women from an intellectual background, who were educated in the 1920s and 30s under the colonial period, and advocated awareness-raising and reconceptualising of daily life.”
Under these circumstances, in around 1959 young school girls voluntarily started to wear *Chima Jeogori* as their uniform in Korean schools. Then some classes chose *Chima Jeogori* as their official uniform. This move prompted Korean schools to institutionalize the uniform.

At that time, there was no school uniform model in North or South Korea. The *Chima Jeogori* uniform was different from a traditional uniform. The *Chima Jeogori* was very much like western-style clothing in design after gradual modernization. Historically, the *Chima Jeogori* uniform was similar to the clothing worn by so-called ‘New Women’ in the 1920-30s. These women improved the design of their clothing by incorporating the influence of western-style clothing.

**Achievement of Ethnic/National Self-esteem and Its Expression**

According to an interview survey by the author, female students wearing this uniform first appeared in 1959. In some cases, female students wore the uniform in class as part of a teacher’s initiative. Until 1963-64, the *Chima-Jeogori* style uniform was the only approved uniform for all Korean schools (all junior/senior high schools and universities).

One woman, who attended Korean University in 1958 and started voluntarily wearing the uniform when she was at the university, talked with me, looking back on that time. Her story follows.

> *My parents were brought to this country during Japan’s era of imperialism. They lost their dignity and ethnicity. Without ethnic schools, in a worst case scenario, I would have been assimilated into Japanese culture.*

> *Under this situation, what motivated us to recall our ethnicity was the educational support from Great General Kim Il-Sung. He sent us educational assistance. He advised us that ethnic education had to be continued.*

> *I felt that my home country was much closer when I knew the repatriation program had started. Before that, I had been struggling with how to gain my own sense of ethnicity even though I had been studying at a Korean school. However, educational support from North Korea and the repatriation program changed the situation, and brought me a sense of affinity toward my home country. I think the Korean people wanted to share a sense of intimacy in their life-style by wearing Chima-Jeogori uniforms.*

> *I had a strong determination to keep my pride and dignity as I lived in Japan. Many Korean people were forced to change their mother tongue to Japanese. They changed their given names into Japanese-style names. They also needed to change their clothing from Chima-Jeogori to ’Monpe’ (Japanese working wear for women).*

> *After the restoration, Zainichi Koreans strongly believed that they should live life with pride as a liberated ethnic group in Japan. They thought that they should have been treated equally because Korea had restored their sovereignty.*

Young students wanted to express
something, such as ethnic identity or nationalism, in any way they could. The Chima-Jeogori uniform was a way of doing this. Students actively presented their feelings using the uniform as their own ‘media’.

The things they wanted to express were not only naturally inherited from their parents or ancestors, but also were comprised of their innate characteristics. These feelings were later developed within them and inspired by their ‘home country’. They had learned it through the Zainichi community and their school lives.

Young Korean students often witnessed the hardships of first-generation Korean people. During the colonial period, they almost rejected their human nature as their ethnic identity was ignored. What was worse, the situation continued after the liberation.

The distinctiveness of language and culture is generally defined as one’s own ethnicity. These students, who were born in the later years of colonization or just after the liberation, were still deprived of their Korean identity, as the Japanese government banned the use of the Korean language at school.

Speaking more about the uniform, young students chose the ‘New Women’-style Chima-Jeogori as their own uniform. The style was created in the 1920s by ‘New Women’ who were in the midst of plight under Japan’s control. The design was born from both the modern and traditional styles.

Viewing this history spoken by women who first wore the Chima-Jeogori uniform, one cannot simplify the logic and say, “wearing Chima-Jeogori was not a good idea because it was a symbol of traditional/conservative, male-dominated ideology”.

At that time, the Chima-Jeogori symbolized their ethnic pride. They felt that they were finally able to gain a positive image through the rise of Korean nationalism. Before that time, they internalized their self-esteem as Korean people were often seen in a negative image in Japan.

Because of its positive self-image, Chima-Jeogori became fashionable (or a popular trend). Chima-Jeogori made it possible to show Korean pride to other people as a form of visual media.

Even now, many Korean women talk about the uniform. They say, remembering their own student days, “it was fashionable” and “so cute.” It is certain that when they recall their joyful student days, they pay gratitude to their ethnic/national pride.

**Conclusion: Multiple Meanings of “Clothing”**

In modern society, clothing has become a form of communication media used to express the identity of the person wearing it. Since clothing is something intrinsic to people’s everyday life, wearing clothing is not an act which can be simply interpreted as an ideology. By looking at the act of wearing clothes and at clothing itself, this article could redefine the image of ethnic minority women from one of passivity to subjective agency (although I have not explored issues of gender-power relations in Korean society in Japan as it is beyond the scope of this article).

Because clothing is a visual expression, it is inevitably being observed by
others. In this sense, clothing is a conspicuous medium of identity expression. If one conceives of ethnicity as a socially constructed entity, clothing as a visual expression often becomes a way of defining one’s own ethnicity.

On the other hand, the Korean school girls utilized clothing as a medium of performative identity expression. As I mentioned earlier, clothing in the modern time is a medium of expressing identity, which is also relevant to Chima-Jeogori Korean school uniforms. They are visible as well as performative because clothing is the thing you choose to wear or not to wear, which includes an aspect of performance compared to other forms of expression.

But, even though Korean women would have liked to express their ethnic identity through clothing, if there was no access to specific clothing items, or if such clothing was impractical, they could not have chosen this medium. According to my interview, there were plenty of tailors who were the first generation of Zainichi Korean women in their housing area and the price was quite reasonable. In addition, there were a large number of women who were able to sew at home.

The other factor is that Chima-Jeogori remade for school uniforms were created under the influence of westernized clothing with the advent of modernity in the 1920s. Therefore, functionally, Chima-Jeogori were westernized and the shoes, handbag, and underwear for Chima-Jeogori were the same as for western clothing. During the period of late 1950s to early 1960s, Zainichi Korean school girls who completely got used to western clothing could easily put on Chima-Jeogori and spent their school life without any uncomfortable feelings.

It may be just about “clothing,” but it certainly has its own history.

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5 I am often asked why only women wear the Korean style uniform. It was female students in the 1950s who created the Chima-Jeogori school uniform. They had a collective image of ‘Korean female students’ in the 1920s when New Women modified Chima-Jeogori and it inspired the making of the Chima-Jeogori uniform. In addition, students could rely on their mothers who were able to sew, or tailors who provided services at a reasonable price.

However, if male students in the 1950s had come up with the idea of making a Korean style uniform, they could not have worn “ethnic clothing”. This is because by the 1950s, men had completely westernized their clothing, except for a few elders who were the first generation in Japan. In the early 20th century, men were influenced by Western clothing prior to females as men worked in the public sphere such as in politics and diplomacy. On the other hand, females who were in the private sphere continued to wear ethnic clothes which had become marginalized as the Western clothes had become normalized.

Chima-Jeogori which were worn by Korean school girls in the 1950s and 60s, however, were not as “traditional” as above mentioned. In fact, they were a blending of tradition and modernity, which Korean New Women in the 1920s customized with a practical function for modernized daily life. By the 1920s, men who had already become westernized in their clothing did not create clothes like Chima-Jeogori. Therefore, male students of Korean Schools in the 1950s and 60s did not have an option to create a uniform like Chima-Jeogori.

However, male Korean School students wearing the school uniform became a symbol of nationalism in relation to Japanese society, and their street fights with Japanese high school students became an analogy of the tensions between the two nations.