



When is a skirt “national”? The popularization of the *Wolnamchima* (“Vietnamese skirt”) in South Korea during the Vietnam War

Minjung E. Lee, Susan B. Kaiser, University of California, Davis, USA

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From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the Republic of Korea obtained a high degree of economic development in the textile industry, resulting in the “garments revolution” (Ahn, 1985). During this period, skirts with the modifier *Wolnam*, the sound of Sino-Korean characters of Vietnam, emerged and became popular. *Wolnamchima*, a full skirt with a rubber band on the waist, was a breakthrough for the mainly middle-aged women accustomed to wearing Korean traditional *hanbok* dress. Some Koreans have described the skirt as being modelled on the Ao Dai, the Vietnamese traditional women’s dress, during the Vietnam War era. Other Koreans, in contrast, have suggested that it was because Korean soldiers brought the new kind of long skirts from Vietnam as a homecoming gift for women in their lives. Lee (2003), as a veteran and writer who served in the Vietnam War, denied the hypothesis of either an imitation of Ao Dai or a gift, and focused instead on the negative and “otherizing” image imbued in the modifier “Vietnamese,” assuming that the naming process occurred in South Korea. We do not find any of these explanations to be sufficient, and suspect that the answers lie in multiple factors and perspectives.

Wolnamchima especially represents a dominant cultural phenomena among housewives and rural women in South Korea in the 1970s. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the *Wolnamchima*, with its Vietnamese modifier, had the ability to become so ubiquitous and to remain popular so long (until the 1980s) in rural areas of Korea. We have approached this study through the lens of two concepts. We borrow the first concept from Benedict Anderson (2006), who characterized a “nation” as an “imagined community.” Through his concept, one can examine impressions and stereotypes that Koreans held regarding the nation of Vietnam: the imagination of a country as *different* from Korea. The second concept is cultural authentication (Eicher & Erokosima, 1995), as compared to de-cultural authentication (Lutz, 2004). We have used a historical research methodology to gather and interpret our data, using primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include evidence through interviews with individuals who experienced the adoption of the *Wolnamchima*. The secondary sources include archives of various newspapers, magazines, movies, and TV dramas from the period. Past literature, essays, dissertations and theses, biographical books, and books about society, culture, women, and fashion and textile history were also used to interpret how and why the *Wolnamchima* got its Vietnamese modifier in Korea.

The senses of "Vietnamese" in Korea during the late 1960s and early 1970s were as follows: Vietnam became a lucrative importing market for Korean textiles during the war, easing Korea's poverty. Vietnam was also considered to be a somewhat exotic foreign nation. Yet Vietnam also shared some geopolitical issues with Korea; both were divided into North and South, with the South fighting against Communist North with U.S. involvement. Further, before 1985 the majority of Koreans were farmers. Those who had been sent to Vietnam as troops or laborers were mostly rural. Therefore, Vietnam had greater meaning for farmers than for urban wage earners. These demographics may explain why the *Wolnamchima* phenomenon lingered so long in rural Korea, whereas it disappeared quickly in urban areas. Imaginings of community, then, are likely to involve the interplay between rural-urban, as well as nation-to-nation dynamics.

Applying concepts of cultural authentication and de-authentication to *Wolnamchima* becomes similarly complex, and involves entanglements with the U.S., as well as Vietnam. Korea's adoption of the style in the late 1960s, although associated in some ways with hegemonic American influences (e.g., hippie-styled long and full skirts), must be considered in light of Korea's production of the floral-printed textiles often made into styles such as *Wolnamchima*. Further, for Korean consumers, the relatively inexpensive, mass-produced, lightweight, and functional invention of the long, full skirt offered alternatives to traditional *hanbok* (dress with a full skirt but with the suppression of women's breasts) and existing work clothes (looser than *hanbok*, but not as colorful or feminine as *Wolnamchima*).

In sum, *Wolnamchima*, although named after Vietnam, can be described as a culturally ambivalent phenomenon that includes identifications and dis-identifications with more than one "imagined community." It also has to do with issues of political economy, material production, and Korea's economic gains as a result of the Vietnam War.

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