

Fig. 1 Visitors of 'Once Upon a Time ... Hanbok Fairytale of Wooh Nayoung' exhibition wearing *hanbok*.



At the Crest of the Korean Wave, Down the Rabbit Hole of Hallyu: Creating Boundless Cultural Resonance through Wooh Nayoung's Reinterpretation of Popular Fairy Tales

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According to Scholastic Publishing, a bedtime routine, especially bedtime stories, is essential for a child's development. Traditionally, our bedtime stories revolve around household names like Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and the Little Mermaid. Fairy tales are essential to culture because they help us understand the world, inspire us to think creatively, and teach us lessons relevant to our lives. However, does it represent us as a person? Does it strengthen our cultural identity?



Besides aesthetically pleasing visuals and songs, characters that both represent a particular culture and help diversify cultural representations are becoming ever more important when representing these tales. Across the world, there is a need to have representation. How can we form our identities when our exposure to stories with beauty ideals is limited to a singular representation? From a broader perspective, how can we build our identity if we are only exposed to another culture's representation from a young age?

Folklores – fairy tales, legends, lore, oral tradition, and proverbs – shape a person's belief system. These stories build a cultural tradition integral to a person's identity. Traditions are essential to society, providing a sense of identity and continuity.

In its 5,000 years of history, Korea established culture, belief systems, practices, and traditions. Through colonisation and the Korean war, the country was devastated but the Republic of Korea managed to redevelop itself to become an ecocultural powerhouse. As its society famously embraces a *ppali-ppali* culture (빨리 빨리, fast-paced lifestyle), you might expect a culture of neglect when it comes to their long history of belief systems, practices, and traditions. However, culture and traditions rooted in long history has become Korea's strongest suit, which is now influencing the world.

Hallyu (한류), which translates to the 'Korean Wave', is an umbrella term for the most extensive global phenomenon in Asia. South Korea continues to build cultural ties with other countries as the Korean wave builds across the world exponentially. In line with the government's effort to support *Hallyu*, the Korean Cultural Center in the Philippines (KCC)



Fig. 2 Grand installation of 'Once Upon a Time ... Hanbok Fairytale of Wooh Nayoung' exhibition.

was established on 19 July 2011. It aims to expand the understanding and appreciation of Korean culture and promote a more interactive exchange between the Republic of Korea and the Philippines. Korean Cultural Centers promote cultural ties between nations across the globe through arts, food, film, language, literature, and music.

As part of the KCC's goal of cultivating camaraderie and cultural exchange in the Philippines, they recently held an exhibition entitled 'Once Upon a Time: A Hanbok Fairytale of Wooh Nayoung', from 17 November 2022 to 28 February 2023. The exhibition featured a stunning collection of the most famous works of Wooh Nayoung, a renowned Korean illustrator known for her unique art style and love for *hanbok* (한복), the traditional Korean costume.

The exhibition celebrated the timeless beauty of fairy tales through the Korean costume and how incorporating traditional art styles forms a new perspective and unites cultures. The exhibition garnered well over five thousand visitors from all over the country with the same purpose: expanding their understanding and appreciation of Korean culture.

Hanbok Halmoni's Enchanted Forest

Once Upon A Time, in the age of social media and the worldwide web, Alice fell into the rabbit hole and came out in a universe where she magically changed her pinafore into a beautiful *hanbok*. Alice found it peculiar when she saw the White Rabbit wearing a *hanbok* fit for a noble and a *gat* (hat) that Koreans wore back in the earliest times!

Entering a hall of ceiling-to-floor installations of these majestic 'Koreanised' fairy-tale characters was enigmatic, yet truly magical for the Asian eye. It was a leap to our childhood

with such familiarity but somehow still peculiar. It was as if, for the first time, in fairy-tale situations that are entirely different from ours, the nuances and cultural references finally made sense.

The brutal and fearsome Beast is a chimera of all four-footed colossal animals in the Disney animation. Here, however, it transforms into a tiger; an equally brutal and fearsome animal relevant to Korean culture (Fig. 4). This reference has particular significance for Asians, as Korea is known as the land of tigers and has great regard for the magnificent beasts. This emphasises the tale's moral message of not trusting what we see with the naked eye. The painting shows a softer side of the Beast adorned by a flock of sparrows – an equally important symbol in Korean traditional painting.

The exhibition showcased more than just the beauty of the *hanbok*. It gave us a new perspective on our beloved fairy-tale characters – a skill that bedtime stories aim to develop in children. It gave us a new perspective on learning more about culture through integration and innovation, just like Belle would have done in her beautiful red and brown *hanbok*.

Cinderella's disappearance and total makeover now make sense, because no one would have recognised her if not for her changing clothes and appearance (Fig. 5). It demonstrates that, although we already know these fairy tales, seeing them in a cultural setting similar to ours makes them somehow feel more familiar. More relatable. Throughout this hero's journey, we discover ourselves in deeper ways and with a fresh perspective.

Symbolic animals are a recurrent particularity in Asian culture. Wooh Nayoung, the illustrator, crafted a special reinterpretation of the Filipino legend 'Ang Alamat ni Malakas at Maganda' ('The Legend of the Mighty and Beautiful', Fig. 6). During the exhibition's opening ceremony, she highlighted the lizard as her favourite while making the art for the legend.

'Ang Alamat ni Malakas at Maganda' is a creation story of the first man and woman. There are numerous versions of this legend from different islands in the Philippines. The legend blends the biblical creation story with the country's mythological and supernatural domains.

Fig. 3 'Once Upon a Time...Hanbok Fairytale of Wooh Nayoung' exhibition hall.



Fig. 4 'Beauty and the Beast' (2009).



Fig. 5 'Cinderella – Midnight Runway' (2019).





Fig. 6 Illustrations of Filipino folktale 'Si Malakas at Si Maganda'.

In this legend, God creates the world in a snap to recover from loneliness and sadness. On one of the days after the creation, a magnificent golden eagle flew across the globe into the forest. On his journey, he spots a bendy bamboo tree and rests momentarily. He hears three knocks from the bamboo tree. A cunning voice talks to the magnificent golden eagle and asks him to let him out of the tree. The eagle pecks and pecks until a lizard comes out. Not long after, the bamboo tree splits into two, and a handsome man comes out of the bamboo tree. The golden eagle pecks the bendy bamboo tree again, and out comes a beautiful woman.

In this version of the legend, the man invites the eagle to live with them. However, the magnificent king of birds declines as he is a resident of the skies. In return for the man's gracious invitation, the golden eagle asks the first man and woman to ride on his wings, and they fly across the seven seas to find a new home.

The couple see an archipelago sparkling from above. The eagle introduces the Philippines and its thousand islands as the Pearl of the Orient Seas. From then, Maganda and Malakas became the first of the Filipino race.

In the Philippines, lizards symbolise good fortune. It is believed that a house full of lizards is a household with never-ending good fortune. The lizard's appearance in the story is quick and somewhat unnoticeable, but it perfectly depicts the essence of a traditional Korean painting – harmonious with nature, straightforward, and spontaneous. Traditional Korean painting uses different colours based on the fauna and flora it depicts. Thus, in various ways, the exhibit imparted extensive knowledge of our legends: simple yet impactful.

Cultural resonance beneath cultural diversity

What is fascinating about this reimagination is how Wooh Nayoung captured the characteristics of both cultures and their traditions, Western and Eastern, Filipino and

Korean. 'Once Upon a Time: A Hanbok Fairy Tale of Wooh Nayoung' shows that regardless of cultural diversity, cultural resonance exists that invokes us to enjoy and recognise ourselves – what we are and who we are. It provides a sense of belonging and representation through its incorporation of culture and tradition that deepens how we view society.

The feat of cultural exchange building camaraderie and rapport across nations is a mission that the Republic of Korea has continuously and successfully pursued over the years. *Hallyu* and its global impact show the importance of being well-versed in cultural diversity. This strengthens how we identify ourselves and understand the world.

The *hanbok* incorporates various traditions throughout history based on climate, economic status, and societal events. *Hanbok* also signals sociocultural differences through its colour scheme, designs, and intricate patterns.

Hanbok is the traditional Korean attire worn by both men and women. It has been an essential part of Korean culture for centuries. *Hanbok* consists of two parts – the *jeogori* (저고리), a top with long sleeves and front fastening, and *baji* (바지), trousers, usually worn by men, or *chima* (치마), a long skirt, usually worn by women.

To date, Koreans still wear a *hanbok* to celebrate special occasions like weddings, birthdays, and traditional holidays. The *hanbok* represents the rich cultural heritage of Korea and embodies the values of harmony, respect, and modesty. In the context of promoting *Hallyu*, the *hanbok* serves as a powerful symbol of Korean culture and identity.

Wooh Nayoung, known by her pen name 'Obsidian', is a Korean illustrator behind the famous digital illustrations of different fairy-tale characters wearing *hanbok*. Her Koreanised vision of Western fairy tales created a buzz on the internet. Her illustrations are well-known for her modern take on showcasing the beauty of the *hanbok* by combining her expertise in traditional Asian painting with digital design.

While reimagining Western tales and myths, Wooh Nayoung includes more than just a brush stroke of traditional Korean painting. Coalescing Asian and Western refinements, she crafts a new perspective in the magical world of fairy tales. Her fascinating illustrations create a new world for these familiar tales in a much closer and welcoming manner to people from Asia.

The creation process of each artwork follows a series of trials and errors to figure out the right brush stroke and detail she wanted. Her first ever art piece, 'Alice in Wonderland', took six months to complete. Wooh Nayoung never really had a patriotic desire to promote Korean culture. Her love for the traditional costume and its beauty became a gateway for people worldwide to develop their fascination with *hanbok* and Korean culture holistically. 'Drawing was a means of communication in the past, having its reason of existence only when there is a viewer to receive the message it holds,' Wooh says. 'It is with great luck that I live in the Internet era that enables me to show my drawings to many viewers.'

The creative struggle and admiration for the costume led her to utilise traditional art and incorporate *hanbok*'s nuances into her art, starting only from the desire to convey the aesthetic beauty of the costume.



Fig. 7 Artist Wooh Nayoung at the opening ceremony of 'Once Upon a Time ... Hanbok Fairytale of Wooh Nayoung'.

Her paintings depict intricate details of the *hanbok*, from the vibrant colours to the flowing design, highlighting the significance of the traditional costume in Korean culture. Her illustrations also showcase Korean landscapes rich in culture and history, making them an essential part of Korean identity. Wooh has gained international recognition for her artworks depicting Korean culture's beauty in various degrees – from fashion, hairstyles, and accessories to sceneries.

Fairy tales and traditional practices – including clothing, food, oral tradition, and other preparations – are indispensable in moulding our cultural identity. Promoting these traditions and creating possibilities to reinvent and represent identities in such a fast-paced world is a feat. As we become more aware of how diverse the world is through sharing cultural works and ideas, we gain more knowledge and understanding of the importance of traditions that are slowly disappearing. In the age of social media and a fast-paced generation, keeping up with a single identity that stays the same is challenging.

It is undeniably valuable to develop an identity at an early age. If we see more of ourselves from the materials we consume and the traditions we practise, we can build an identity that is uniquely ours. We can build a community that values its culture and understands the diversity of the world.

Creations like Wooh Nayoung's 'Hanbok Fairy Tale' and cultural institutions like the Korean Cultural Center in the Philippines embody and promote the cultural diversity relevant to our society. Furthermore, if we continue creating the cultural resonances that our society needs, traditions will live their *Once Upon A Time* happily ever after.

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Fig. 8 'Alice in Wonderland' (2011).

