

Fig.1 Woven *hanchi* container. Photo courtesy of Artspace Publications, Korea. From *Koreana*, Vol 7, No 1, Spring 1993.



# Hanchi: Rediscovering a 'Korean-ness'

EN YOUNG AHN INTRODUCES US TO A TRADITIONAL KOREAN PAPER CALLED HANCHI, NOW BEING USED IN NEW WAYS BY CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

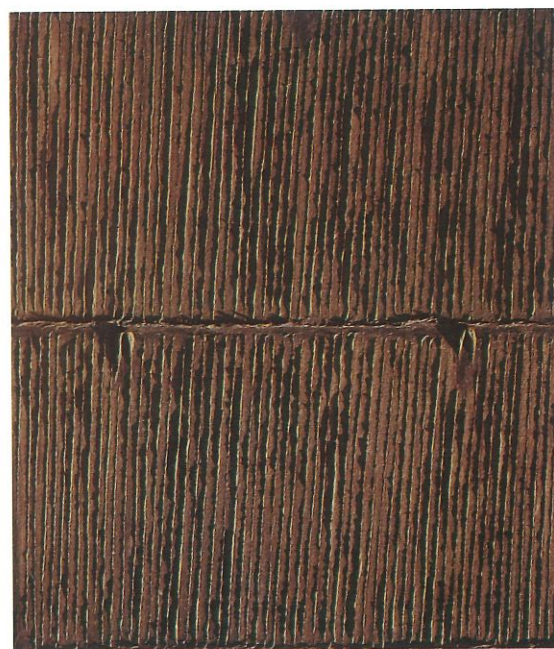
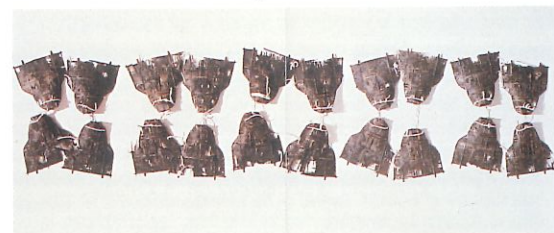


Fig.2 Seo-Bo Park, *Ecriture* 940113, 1994. Mixed-media with *hanchi*, 53.5 x 46 cm.

Fig.3 Jae-Bok Lee, *The Sad History* (*hanchi*).



HANCHI IS TRADITIONAL KOREAN PAPER, made from the bark of a particular mulberry tree (*Broussonetia kasinoki sieb*) which grows in abundance on sandy soil and dry farmland, on the slopes and in the valleys of small mountains, in all regions of Korea. It has been a material not only for painting, but for craft, furniture, building, clothing, and even for arrow-proof armour. *Hanchi* was used extensively in traditional Korean homes. It forms the translucent screens of wooden-grid-frame doors and windows, and when it is laminated, constitutes the sturdy walls and floors of traditional houses. The houses were furnished with various objects made from *hanchi* cured in oil. Storage boxes often contained a number of drawers and pockets, and large furniture pieces such as chests of drawers and cabinets for storing clothes were made from a special five-coloured *hanchi*. Sometimes *hanchi* was twisted into rope and woven into water-resistant vases, baskets and serving trays (fig.1). The oil-cured *hanchi* was also made into raincoats, hats, purses, and other accessories. These represent just a few of the creative ways the paper has been used by Koreans for over 1600 years. However, until recently, *hanchi* manufacturing and traditional paper-craft has been over-taken by the mass production of folk crafts.

During the '80s when Korea rose to be a significant economic power in the Asia-Pacific region, and having taken on aspects of Western culture (particularly American political and cultural dominance), it became conscious of its own unique characteristics. Rediscovering Korea's traditions and re-constituting its identity became the prevailing national imperative in the contemporary Korean art scene. Subsequently, there's been a growing interest in traditional Korean aesthetics, techniques and materials which were seriously threatened by modernity and Western influences. With this renewed cultural awareness, *hanchi*, a low-tech media, gained new respect in a high-tech society.

In recent years, the use of *hanchi* has prevailed in both contemporary and traditional Korean art works. Once one of the most popular mediums for written communication, it is now a popular medium for artistic language, in an information laden society. Seo-Bo Park—internationally well-known for his elegant mono-tone minimalist paintings—in his recent *Ecriture* series (fig. 2), illuminates an innate aesthetic quality of *hanchi*.

The *hanguk-hwaga* (contemporary traditional Korean artist) Jae-Bok Lee has gone further in experimenting with the special character, texture and other properties of *hanchi* (fig. 3).

There are several artists that make us think about *hanchi*'s remarkable creative possibilities, (while not necessarily having special knowledge about it). For example, in Nam-Yong Jang's 'paper sculpture' installation *Life, Non gravitation* (fig. 4), the artist's persistent endeavour to perfect paper making techniques, and his meditative and questioning approach to life, flow together well. His paper constructions explore the plasticity and flexibility of *hanchi*. They were cast in plaster moulds made by the artist, and to give them solidity, Jang fused papers (often made by him) with rice-straw, tree branches and clay. The feet appearing here—as in several of the artist's works, represent his father's feet—are a symbol of the daily labour to earn a living for his family, juxtaposed with the riddle of Sphinx given to Oedipus to solve. In contrast to the natural light and fragile appearance of the dyed paper, the paper feet have the appearance of solidity, strong enough to bear the burden of life, represented by carrying the stacks of heavy rice sacks (rice being the metaphor for life in Korean culture). The sacks were deceiving, suggesting a heaviness from being filled with rice—but a close look reveals, in fact, these sacks were not heavy at all, being supported by fine strings from the ceiling.

Another intriguing example of contemporary experiments with *hanchi* is found in Ahn, Pil Yun's installations.<sup>1</sup> In her exhibition *Gambling*, a 'papered' environment was installed on a ground floor gallery, contrasting with a high-tech environment on the first floor (fig. 5). The two contrasting floors hinted at a resistance to a masculine notion of progress, inextricably linked to operations of transnational capitalism. On the ground floor, there were three paper doors, white and coarse textured, dyed with Chinese ink, with a quilt-like door, representing the entrance to life and the ritual passage of womanhood. Here both the softness and tenaciousness of *hanchi* represents the image of Korean women, subservient yet strong. Traditionally, Korean women were defined as either a submissive daughter, or loyal wife and nurturing mother.

This feminine quality—softness and tenaciousness—of *hanchi*, is more tangible in the remarkable paper dresses designed by contemporary Korean fashion designers. Designers like Young-Hee Lee use a special *hanchi* as fine and smooth as silk, using washable paper produced by the *hanchi* expert Kyung Kim (fig. 6). With 30 years of devoted research to *hanchi*-making, Kim renews traditional techniques for making paper garments. Like this coordination between Lee and Kim, the coordination between artists and *hanchi*-makers is vital for the artists to continue to interpret the creative possibilities of the *hanchi* craft.

The popularity of *hanchi* is due to its multiple uses in everyday Korean life. Although the material of flooring and heating systems have changed in modern times, the warm memories of *chanpanchi* (*hanchi* laid over the heated floors of traditional Korean homes) still comfort Koreans. Perhaps the consumption of locally produced *hanchi* signifies a resistance to the dissolution of cultural and national boundaries accelerated by global communication and capitalism. It enables Koreans to re-affirm their special identity—the versatility, strength, durability, and naturalness of *hanchi* reflecting certain character traits of Korea and Koreans.

## endnotes

1. Ahn, Pil Yun visited Australia and exhibited *Swallowed Moon*, curated by En Young Ahn, at Sherman Galleries, Sydney, in 1996 (see *Object*, issue 2/97).

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Fig.6 Fashion design, washable paper (*hanchi*). Photo courtesy of Artspace Publications, Korea. From *Koreana*, Vol 7, No 1, Spring 1993.



Fig.4 Nam-Yong Jang, *Life, Non Gravitation*, dyed handmade paper (*hanchi*), rope, 1994. 630 x 340 x 380 cm.

Fig.5 Ahn, Pil Yun, *Gambling* (downstairs), papered environment (*hanchi*), 1994. 12 x 15 x 3 m.

