

Minimalism in Korean Aesthetics as a Historically Formed Ideology

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ABSTRACT: This review paper explores how minimalism characterizes Korean aesthetics from the past to the present. This paper, which draws on scholarship in cultural philosophy, history, visual art, architecture, and economics, argues that Korean minimalism is more than simply a contemporary style, but rather an aesthetic logic with historical depth formed through philosophical tradition and material circumstance. The first chapter examines how Neo-Confucianism influenced the Joseon dynasty to an extent that ideals of restraint, moderation, naturalness (jayeon), and the aesthetic of space (yeobaek) took visual form in white porcelain ceramics and buildings. The paper then elaborates on how Japanese colonization, economic exploitation, war, and post-war scarcity transformed the environment, arguing that the hardships of the 20th century intensified and diverted pre-existing tendencies towards simplicity. The emergence of Dansaekhwa in the late 1960s and 1970s, as examined by the essay, was a crucial moment in which inherited aesthetic restraint and historical constraint became a conscious artistic movement. By situating Korean minimalism in this historical and cultural context, the paper can also position it as a product of continuity and adaptation shaped not just by philosophical values but also by political and economic upheavals.

KEYWORDS: Behavioral and Social Sciences, Sociology and Social Psychology, Cultural Philosophy, Aesthetic, Korean, Korean Art History, Minimalism, Confucianism, Dansaekhwa, Joseon Dynasty, Material Scarcity, Jayeon.

■ Introduction

In the 20th century, minimalism became a defining feature of modern Korean aesthetics, the style and aesthetic choice forming a consistent and visible presence within everyday visual surroundings in the country. This paper strives to explain the different cultural, philosophical, and social aspects that contributed to the rise of this aesthetic within the nation.

Importantly, simplicity in Korean art was recognized long before the emergence of modern minimalist movements. In one of the earliest comprehensive surveys of Korean art, Eckardt identified its distinctive qualities as including “simple, modest and unobtrusive interpretation of forms” alongside “repose and moderation,” suggesting that restraint and clarity were already considered central characteristics of Korean artistic production.¹ Such early observations indicate that what is now termed “minimalism” may be rooted in longer aesthetic traditions rather than being purely a modern development.

Existing scholarship has approached Korean minimalism from several angles. Art historical studies of Dansaekhwa focus on monochrome painting practices emerging in the late 1960s, emphasizing repetition and the embedding of time and labor in the artistic process.² Other research situates minimalist tendencies earlier, identifying simplicity and restraint as key characteristics of Korean art and architecture from the Joseon dynasty onward, particularly in concepts such as yeobaek (the beauty of emptiness), hanok spatial organization, and the aesthetic of white associated with baegui minjok, all stemming from Neo-Confucianist ideology.³

This paper addresses this gap by examining Korean minimalism as a historically formed aesthetic logic that developed

through a cumulative process. It traces the development of minimalist aesthetics from Confucian-influenced traditions of restraint in the Joseon period, through their transformation under colonialism, war, and authoritarian modernization, to their rearticulation in Dansaekhwa art. By situating modern Korean minimalism within this broader chronological and cultural framework, the study contributes a more cohesive understanding of why minimalism remains a powerful aesthetic orientation and preference in Korea today.

Rather than examining these ideas separately, this paper synthesizes these various perspectives to propose a more unified understanding of Korean minimalism as a historically formed aesthetic logic that developed through a cumulative process. It traces the initial development of minimalist ideology from Confucian-influenced traditions of restraint in the Joseon period, through the onset of a materially enforced minimalism dictated by colonialism, war, and authoritarianism, to its rearticulation in modern aesthetics such as Dansaekhwa art. By situating modern Korean minimalism within this broader chronological and cultural framework, the study contributes a more cohesive understanding of how minimalism became embedded in Korean culture and why it continues to remain as a powerful aesthetic orientation and preference in Korea today.

■ Philosophical and pre-modern foundations

Confucius Values and Aesthetic Restraint:

To begin our examination of minimalistic values and tendencies in Korea, this paper first dives into the origins of the

philosophy that builds upon the foundations of lifestyle and moral values that have allowed minimalism to thrive in the nation. Confucianism first emerged approximately 2500 years ago in China, and according to Mitu, reached the Korean peninsula before the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE–668CE).⁴ Over time, and particularly with the rise of Neo-Confucianism, Confucian thought became institutionalized as the dominant ideological framework during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910).⁵ This extensive historical longevity allowed Confucian moral principles to diffuse deeply into Korean society, profoundly shaping the way that Koreans think and behave.

Central to Confucian thought are ideals such as restraint, moderation, and harmony within the social classes, which all prioritize inner virtue and modesty over external display. Hence, this paper argues that simplicity (and in turn, minimalist styles) were considered by Koreans who followed this ideology as more ethically appropriate in different aesthetic contexts because they reflected these ideals of self-discipline and suppression of indulgence. This ideology set the pre-modern foundations for the birth of early aesthetic principles.

Neo-Confucianist values are evident across numerous historical records of Korean material culture, most notably during the Joseon dynasty, when Neo-Confucianism arguably reached its peak influence within the context of Korea.⁵ Practices such as the widespread wearing of white clothing and artistic emphasis on finding beauty in blank or unoccupied spaces reflect an aesthetic preference grounded in moral restraint rather than visual excess. Moreover, these ideals were materialized in artifacts that transformed Neo-Confucian moral discipline into a coherent aesthetic language of minimalism, such as in traditional ceramics.

The White-clad People:

One of the most widely cited cultural expressions of this aesthetic orientation is the phrase *baegui minjok* (백의민족), commonly translated amongst foreign scholarship as the "white-clad people." If we take the literal translations of the terms in this phrase separately, the term *baegui* means white, and *minjok* translates to "the people." This phrasing leaves a degree of ambiguity regarding the precise object to which the description of "white" is applied, which is significant because it suggests that the "whiteness" functioned as some kind of broader aesthetic ideal that applied to more than one aspect of aesthetics. However, for this paper, the focus is placed specifically on dress and clothing, as historical discourse most consistently associates *baegui minjok* with the widespread practice of wearing white clothing by the people of Joseon.

Seo explains that Confucianism places strong emphasis on moral discipline, encouraging the suppression of personal emotions and desires that could disrupt social harmony.³ Within this ethical framework, color is treated not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a choice that is associated with desire and emotional excess, which must be regulated. As Seo notes, color functions as a "symbol of desires that need to be suppressed," leading to the reverence of white and the discouragement of other vivid hues under what she terms the

gum-chae-saek or "no-color philosophy."^{3,6} The popularity of wearing white clothing amongst the Joseon people should therefore be understood as a lived expression of Neo-Confucian ethical discipline rather than a purely aesthetic preference. White garments symbolized purity, humility, and modesty, aligning with Confucian ideals that we have previously discussed. This was the opposite case for brightly dyed fabrics, which signaled excess or indulgence. Additionally, Koreans historically have valued harmony and fitting in amongst society, as this idea forms an important part of Neo-Confucian ideology. As wearing white, a neutral color, allowed people to blend in and not stand out amongst a larger crowd, it further reinforced its appeal (Figure 1).

Importantly, we must also note that this aesthetic restraint was not effortless: white clothing required constant laundering and maintenance due to the fact that it was particularly susceptible to visual staining. Consequently, this requirement institutionalized a strict visual discipline within daily routines. The act of wearing white garments thus signaled an individual's capacity to take good care of their belongings, keeping them clean and pure. As such, simplicity in dress functioned as an active moral practice, sustained through habitual effort rather than passive absence of decoration. This historical alignment offers an interpretive framework for understanding contemporary visual patterns in modern Korea, such as the monochrome, minimalist fashion trends colloquially described as the "Seoul uniform."

External observers also recognized the distinctive significance of whiteness in Joseon aesthetics. Japanese scholar Yanagi Muneyoshi, while admiring Joseon craftsmanship, interpreted the pervasive use of white as a reflection of collective suffering, describing it as akin to a "permanent mourning period" rooted in funeral traditions. His observations highlight how unusual Joseon aesthetic restraint appeared when contrasted with the more color-saturated visual cultures of China and Japan. However, such interpretations risk reducing whiteness to a single emotional register. As later scholarship has noted, whiteness in Joseon Korea functioned across multiple religious and philosophical contexts. Seo's analysis emphasizes that white attire appeared in Buddhist ritual dance, Taoist clerical dress, and Confucian ceremonial practice, suggesting that its significance extended beyond mourning to encompass purity and discipline.³



Figure 1: A market day in a countryside town (1906–1907). National Folk Museum of Korea.⁷ The widespread adoption of white garments across ordinary classes reflects the prioritization of collective societal harmony, visually demonstrating how the uniform use of this color allowed individuals to blend into the community rather than standing out.

The Beauty in the Empty:

Another prominent aesthetic principle within Joseon visual culture was the concept of *yeobaek* (여백). Literally translating to “remaining blank space,” *yeobaek* refers to the intentional preservation of unmarked or empty areas within a composition, such as in a piece of poetry or artwork. The idea of *yeobaek* is such that absence functions as an active aesthetic element rather than a lack or an empty vacuum, finding meaning in the void. Koreans often use this word in the phrase “*yeobaek eu mi*,” meaning the beauty of blank space.

This aesthetic ideal was perhaps epitomized and shown in its purest form by ceramics in the Joseon dynasty, the most prominent example being white porcelain “moon jars.” Moon jars were traditional white porcelain jars that were purely white-colored without additional decorations and well-rounded in what was described as a “feminine shape.”⁸ The expansive white surfaces and rounded proportions of these ceramics foregrounded emptiness and restraint, and they also can be understood as embodying Neo-Confucianist values through their quiet, modest form and lack of ornamentation.

The significance of the color white reinforces this connection in a similar fashion to the ideas discussed in the previous section about the culture of “*baegui minjok*,” as the color itself can be seen as a direct manifestation of Confucianist ideals. Shin, when referencing Joseon ceramics, states that “The beauty of white porcelain lies in its great chasteness and beauty, which symbolized the dynasty’s taste, the whiteness representing the nation, simplicity and a conscious cult of asceticism,” showing the significance of the color choice in aesthetically attractive artifacts.⁹ Additionally, Shin goes on to say “at first, the white color of the white porcelain was a clear and glowing color, but later transformed into milky white, and after 1780 it turned into a bluish white with a cool blue color, which symbolizes the pure ideal of the Joseon Dynasty.”⁹ This observation is significant because it demonstrates that although the surface tone of Joseon porcelain evolved, its fundamental commitment to “whiteness” remained consistent.

However, it can also be argued that *yeobaek* stems from a broader aesthetic aspiration toward naturalness, or the concept of *jayeon* in Korean beauty. The word *jayeon* in the Korean language simply translates to “nature” in English, but is a concept often referenced by foreign and domestic scholars alike when discussing Korean aesthetic ideals.¹ Art critic Muneyoshi Yanagi argued that Korean art, particularly Joseon ceramics, represented a “return to nature.”¹¹ Importantly, his understanding of “nature” did not refer to the literal depiction of landscapes such as trees, mountains, or wildlife. Instead, it referred to a state that feels “natural” because nothing is artificially forced. When a work of art reaches this kind of state, it no longer feels overly constructed or controlled, but instead appears inevitable, as though it exists in its most appropriate, “natural” form.

If *jayeon* is understood as a deliberate avoidance of artificiality, then the principle of *yeobaek* can be seen as an extremely practical visual strategy for achieving this condition in Korean art. Often, we can see that objects that possess “*yeobaek eu mi*” (beauty in blank space) also embody a sort of natural beauty.

Let’s take the same example of Joseon ceramics. Moon jars embrace imperfections as part of their beauty, as these aspects demonstrate them to be pure. The shape of the jar is not mathematically circular nor symmetrical, as the two halves of the porcelain are joined together, as evident in the slight dent in the otherwise smooth curve of the pot. The current moon jar displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art possesses hues of pink on its exterior (Figure 2), which would have happened unintentionally during the firing process.¹⁰

Taken together, the ideas of *yeobaek* and the importance of the color white show that Joseon aesthetics were built on Confucianist philosophy, but also the concept of *jayeon*. In moon jars, emptiness is not meaningless, and even the small imperfections in the jars are valued, as they make the object feel natural rather than artificially perfected. These features show that beauty in Joseon Korea was often found through removal and a “lack” rather than addition.

Because of this, minimalist tendencies in modern Korean art and design can be understood as part of a longer tradition rather than a completely new development. The preference for simplicity, blank space, and natural form did not suddenly appear in the twentieth century. Instead, these qualities were already deeply rooted in Joseon visual culture and shaped by Neo-Confucian values and the idea of *jayeon*. Modern Korean minimalism can therefore be seen as a continuation and reinterpretation of these earlier aesthetic principles, rather than a complete break from them.



Figure 2: “Moon Jar,” Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910). Porcelain. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹¹ The subtle, accidental pink hues on the exterior highlight the unpredictable nature of traditional kiln firings. This imperfection embodies the Neo-Confucian aesthetic value of unforced, natural simplicity rather than technical perfection.

■ Minimalism Under Constraint: Poverty, War, and Scarcity

While pre-modern Korean aesthetics reveal a voluntary and philosophically grounded commitment to simple aesthetics, the twentieth century introduced a different set of pressures that reshaped minimalist tendencies for a wholly different reason. The Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), followed by the devastation of the Korean War (1950–1953), created widespread material scarcity and severe economic hardship within a nation that had once been prosperous, depriving it of the agency to make decisions of its own. The policies imposed on the common people by colonial powers also limited freedom of expression and opportunities for a lifestyle of extravagance,

while urbanization created spatial constraints that forced the simplification of architecture. There was no longer an agency to make a choice on aesthetics for the people, as aesthetics were the last of their priorities. The option of choice was no more. In this context, simplicity became a choice that prioritized practicality, rather than one that stemmed from aesthetic desire.

Japanese colonization fundamentally restructured the Korean economy in ways that intensified material scarcity for the Korean population, despite visible signs of industrial growth. As King argues, the colonial period produced a “dialectic” of development, whereby infrastructure expansion and industrialization primarily benefited Japanese interests while Koreans experienced exploitation and economic marginalization.¹² By the late 1930s, a significant proportion of agricultural land had been transferred to Japanese ownership, and tenancy rates among Korean farmers rose sharply, reaching over half of the rural population. While agricultural output increased overall, much of the rice production was exported to Japan, resulting in what has been described as “starvation exports,” as per capita rice consumption for Koreans actually declined. Industrial development similarly favored Japanese firms, which dominated manufacturing and finance, while Koreans were largely confined to low-wage or unskilled labor. Although gross national product grew during the colonial period, wealth distribution remained highly unequal, and many Korean households struggled with poverty and limited access to resources.¹² These economic realities reshaped daily existence at a structural level. Scarcity influenced how homes were organized, how objects were produced, and how resources were used, fostering a culture of spatial and material economy that developed out of limitation rather than philosophical intention, as it was in the Joseon dynasty.

This article interprets these historical developments not merely as economic shocks but as catalysts that repurposed the Korean aesthetic landscape, as these economic realities heavily constrained daily existence. Drawing on these underlying data points, this paper highlights how the laws and economic restrictions that came into effect during colonial rule banned Koreans from extravagant decoration and lifestyle practices of material excess. Limitations on economic freedom of choice, coupled with unequal access to capital and resources, restricted both production and consumption. With Korea’s industries and cultural expression repositioned to serve the empire, the chances for ornamental display and artistic explorations diminished. Therefore, this paper theorizes that modern minimalistic tendencies were structurally reinforced by political control and structural inequity, consolidating what can be conceptualized as a “materially enforced minimalism.” The philosophical trend was not the only reason why minimalism prevailed; the limitation of economic and expressive possibilities due to colonial power was another primary historical cause.

Therefore, minimalistic tendencies became a result of political control and structural inequity. The philosophical trend was not the only reason why minimalism prevailed. The limitation of economic and expressive possibilities due to colonial power was another cause.

A similar pattern of minimalism under constraint can be observed later in time, in the early 20th century, and particularly within the evolution of hanok architecture. During this period, simplified housing models were introduced to accommodate rapid population growth, urban development, and economic hardship. As noted in urban planning records, housing for lower-income residents was reduced to a basic spatial composition of two rooms, one kitchen, and one living area. This arrangement became conceptualized as a “minimal unit,” a foundational layout that later influenced modernized hanok dwellings.¹³ Therefore, the concepts and designs that rose to prominence during times of economic strain influence Korean housing to this day.

Colonialism and scarcity did not produce Korean minimalism from nothing. Rather, they intensified and redirected existing tendencies toward simplicity. What began as an ethical and philosophical commitment to restraint during the Joseon period gradually evolved, in the twentieth century, into a condition shaped by political suppression, economic limitation, and post-war reconstruction. Minimalism in modern Korea, therefore, reflects a process of historical intensification: it shows how deep-seated philosophical values became structurally locked in by severe material constraints, embedding minimalism further into Korean society.

■ Modern Art

The convergence of inherited aesthetic restraint and twentieth-century material hardship became particularly visible in the emergence of modern art trends, such as Dansaekhwa in the late 1960s and 1970s. Often translated as “monochrome painting,” the movement reduced color to restrained palettes of white, umber, grey, and muted blue (all notably neutral colors). Artists such as Park Seo-Bo, Ha Chong-Hyun, and Lee Ufan developed practices that emphasized limited palettes, repetitive gestures, and the embedding of time and labor within the canvas, which foregrounded the process.¹⁴ The movement also resonated deeply with South Korea’s post-war condition. Developing during a period marked by recovery from the Korean War and rapid industrial modernization, Dansaekhwa reflected a society negotiating reconstruction and urban transformation. Its restrained surfaces and repetitive processes can be understood as responses to instability and rupture. Rather than portraying overt or sometimes controversial political imagery, these works conveyed persistence and a kind of strength that stemmed from their quietness.

Within Dansaekhwa, each of the core aesthetic principles discussed earlier appears in concrete, material ways. First, *yeobaek* (active emptiness) is visible in the large, unbroken monochrome fields that dominate many works. In paintings by Park Seo-bo, for example, vast areas of off-white canvas are repeatedly inscribed with pencil lines. The surface may appear empty at first glance, but close viewing reveals subtle variation and accumulated gesture. The “empty” space is therefore structured and intentional, not blank. The lack of additional colors or patterns also leaves space for the viewer to ponder and meditate, handing us a greater amount of agency and freedom for interpretation.

Second, *jayeon* (naturalness) is expressed through process and material choice, but also color. Artists such as Lee Ufan allowed paint to soak into raw canvas or applied pigment in ways that emphasized gravity and absorption.¹⁵ Rather than constructing illusionistic images, they foregrounded how materials behave: canvas absorbs, oil spreads, paper wrinkles, making natural processes central to the composition. Additionally, the colors used in Dansaekhwa art mostly revolve around colors that pre-exist organically in the natural world. This often gives the artworks a placid, soothing quality and supports the movement's broader emphasis on what is deemed as natural human feeling. In conclusion, Dansaekhwa can thus be seen not only as a modernist movement in its own right but also as a contemporary expression of traditional Korean aesthetic ideals.

■ Conclusion

This paper has argued that modern Korean minimalism cannot be understood as a contemporary trend or a stylistic choice, but rather as a product of complex historical processes that link the country's philosophical traditions to its material circumstances. The Joseon Dynasty, for instance, saw the spread of Neo-Confucianism and its associated aesthetic values that emphasized restraint, purity, balance, and naturalness. The very existence of terms like *yeobaek* and *jayeon*, and the symbolism of whiteness in ceramics, demonstrates that the values associated with simplicity were already deeply ingrained in Korea's ethical and aesthetic frameworks before the advent of the twentieth century.

It was, however, the impacts of colonialism, conflict, and economic hardship that saw these values altered in conditions of restraint and limitation. The economic restructuring and rebuilding that the Japanese occupation and post-war rebuilding necessitated saw a situation where there was a lack of access to resources and space, and it was here that minimalism transcended its role as a moral and philosophical stance and became a product of material circumstance and experience. The emergence of Dansaekhwa art in the late 1960s and 1970s represents a critical juncture in which these various strands came together to produce a distinctly modern and minimalist aesthetic that combined the legacy of Korea's aesthetic restraint with the experience and reality of modern Korea.

It can be seen, then, that modern Korean minimalism does not derive from a single source or event, but rather emerges from the complex interplay between the country's cultural and ethical philosophies and the various periods of political and economic upheaval that it has endured throughout the centuries. As a product of this complex interplay between choice and necessity, and tradition and innovation, it can be seen that modern Korean minimalist art and design represent a complex and multi-layered aesthetic that transcends its role as a contemporary trend. It is an aesthetic that was actively forged into the material reality of the Korean people through its structural resonance throughout Korean history.

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