

Hanok and Its Cultural Significance During the Chosun Dynasty

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Abstract: Hanok, a traditional Korean architecture that emerged during the Chosun dynasty (1392–1897), embodies Korean cultural, social, and spiritual values. Constructed with natural materials such as soil, timber, stone, and Kiwa—a type of clay roof tiles—Hanok harmonizes with nature, adhering to the principles of Pungsujiri, Korean geomancy. Its unique architectural features, including curved roofs, ondol underfloor heating systems, and complex decorations reflect Korean values and beliefs during that period. The curved Kiwa roofs, and adorned with symbolic motifs, represent cultural and spiritual significance, while the structural layouts showcase social hierarchies. Decorative elements, including wood carvings and geometric patterns, further emphasize spiritual values. Jeonju Gyeonggijeon in Jeonju Hanok Village is not only a functional structure but also a significant cultural artifact, preserving Korea's architectural and historical legacy. This paper explores the diverse values of Hanok to promote its importance as a lasting representation of Korean heritage.

1 INTRODUCTION

Hanok is an architectural term describing Korean traditional houses, also referred to as houses built and used during the Chosun dynasty (1392-1897). There are also multiple versions of hanok during the Chosun dynasty; like Hanok is often referred to as houses that could represent the Korean culture the best. Hanok is usually constructed using soil, timber, and rock, but most uniquely, Kiwa. Kiwa is a type that is used for building Hanok roofs. Like normal pottery, Kiwa is made of clay. The uniqueness of Hanok mostly comes from the shape of the roof, and Kiwa is the material that helps build the uniqueness of Hanok (Cultural Heritage Administration, 2024).

Hanok currently holds a very high value in Korea and globally due to its unique usage of materials and patterns. Different architectural designs for Hanok during the Chosun dynasty had various symbolism. Hanok is not just a shelter for people to live in but is also considered an artwork. The value of Hanok like cultural, social, and spiritual values could be found through elements like the roof shape, structural layout, and decorations.

Hanok is a Korean traditional house, that first evolved during the Chosun dynasty (1392-1897) and embodies Korean culture and is designed to harmonize with nature. Hanok is built with respect to the principles of Pungsu-jiri which is Korean geomancy, which emphasizes the balance between

the habitats of humans and the surrounding environment (Jo, 2024). The Hanoks are built using materials like soil, timber, stone, and Kiwa, which is a material used for the roofs of Hanok. Kiwa allows Hanoks to have a curved roof that enhances Hanok's uniqueness and sustainability.

Another unique feature of Hanok would be the ondol floor. Ondol is an underfloor heating system that uses direct heat transfer from wood smoke to heat the thick floor. It is not only an easier way to heat up the house, but it also helps with blood circulation in people's legs and back. Moreover, the architectural layout of Hanok also represents the social values of the people. The layout often follows Confucian ideals, with distinct spaces for men and women due to their social rankings. The use of open courtyards and verandas also strengthen the connection between indoor and outdoor spaces, creating a serene living environment (Jeonju Hanok Village, 2024). Today, Hanok has been recognized globally for its cultural significance and functional design. Hanok's not aging design, functionality, use of natural materials, and cultural symbolism, make it a long-lasting example of Korean architecture.

The purpose of the paper is to explore the architectural and cultural values of Hanok, which is a Korean traditional house during the Chosun dynasty. This paper aims to present how the Hanok reflects cultural, social, and spiritual values through elements like the roof shape, structural layout, and decoration

of the Hanok. Moreover, the paper is aimed to promote Korean culture, especially traditional architecture. Although Hanok is a globally valued historical architecture, not everyone may be aware of its importance of it, and why people value it. This paper seeks to develop a better understanding of Hanok, and how it represents cultural, social, and spiritual values through multiple elements.

2 CONNECTION BETWEEN HANOK ROOF SHAPES AND CULTURAL VALUES

The cultural value of Hanok during the Chosun dynasty was strongly influenced by the shape of the roofs and the materials used to build Hanok. Kiwa roofs are rare roofs to see in other places, and in modern-day Korea. Kiwa is generally black and is shaped like a semi-cylinder. It has multiple benefits. For instance, Kiwa is a great material to use when wanting to express the curvy shape of the roof, easy to control its shape and color, and most importantly, it is environmentally friendly. Kiwa is made of clay, and it helps you avoid overheating, quick climate change, and humidity. Kiwa is not only useful but is also a strong tool to introduce Korean history during the Chosun dynasty to others (Korea National University of Cultural Heritage, 2025).

The uniqueness of Hanoks during the Chosun dynasty is increased by the shape of the roof, and for the roof to be shaped like a curve, it needs the help of Kiwa. Moreover, sometimes Kiwas are decorated with traditional Korean patterns or images that could express the cultural value behind Hanok. The most drawn things on the Kiwa would be different kinds of flowers and animals. For instance, lotus flowers are seen a lot in temples to represent enlightenment and spiritual growth. Dragons are also often seen on Kiwa to represent power and protection. Particularly, they are mostly seen in houses of people who have high social status like palaces. This is because that the people during the Chosun dynasty believed that dragons could drive away evil spirits (Cultural Heritage Administration, 2024).

3 CONNECTION BETWEEN STRUCTURAL LAYOUTS AND SOCIAL VALUES

The structural layout of Hanok could represent the social class of citizens during the Chosun dynasty. The social class of the residents could be clearly defined by the size of the Hanok, the decorations of the Hanok, the materials used for building the Hanok, and the location of the Hanok.

The size of the Hanok is clearly differentiated based on their social status. The Yangban, who are in the highest class in the Chosun dynasty would have large sprawling houses with various courtyards, while Sangmin or Cheunmin who were commoners would live in much smaller and simpler houses. Many of the Sangmin or Cheunmin lived in thatched houses or shingled houses. The Chosun government regulated the number of rooms, and the size of the Hanok based on the social rank of the owner. For instance, a yangban's Hanok would have separate areas for men and women and would include additional rooms like storage rooms (Jeonju Hanok Village, 2024; Jo, 2024; National Folk Museum of Korea, 2025; National Institute of Korean History, 2024).

People who were in a higher social class would also live in Hanok that are built with better materials. For instance, wealthier people might also have Ondol floor heating, which helps them stay warm during the winter as well. Living in a Hanok already indicates high social status, as the Sangmins or Cheunmins would probably be lived in places made of straws. Lastly, the people who were wealthier would also have great locations. In Yangban houses, the Sarang Chae is located near the main gate, while the An Chae for women is private and locates deeper inside the house (Kim et al., 2018).

4 CONNECTION BETWEEN DECORATION OF HANOK AND SPIRITUAL VALUES

The decorative elements of Hanok, showcasing the beliefs and desires of its habitants, expresses its spiritual values. The roof of Hanok commonly includes symbolic motifs, such as lotus flowers, dragons, phoenixes, and peony flowers. The phoenixes often symbolize peace and harmony and are related to royalty. Peony flowers are symbolism for wealth, honor, and beauty, which represents good luck. Additionally, wood carvings and paintings on

Hanok can increase the spiritual values of Hanok, like the spiritual value of a person's belief. The carvings on the wood may also differentiate based on the religion (Cultural Heritage Administration, 2024).

However, during the Chosun dynasty, the carvings are mostly related to Buddhism as it was the most common religion that people believed. Some common wood carvings include cranes that symbolize longevity and peace, pine trees that symbolize resilience and steadfastness, and peonies that indicate wealth and beauty (Cultural Heritage Administration, 2024).

Not only wood carvings but also patterns on doors and windows are the place where spiritual values were most expressed. Some good examples could be geometrics and Taegeuk (yin-yang), a traditional symbol of Korea, which can also be found on the Korean flag. The geometrics represent harmony and order, and Taegeuk symbolizes balance and the unity of opposites. Moreover, the emphasis on symmetry and balance represents a harmonious relationship between the spiritual world, human beings, nature, etc. It is also reflective of the Confucian and Taoist philosophies that deeply influenced the Chosun Dynasty (Cultural Heritage Administration, 2024).

5 JEONJU GYEONGGIJEON AS AN EXAMPLE

In modern South Korea, it is hard to see Hanok in daily life. However, there are still several Hanok villages existing, and a famous one would be the Jeonju Hanok Village. Jeonju is a city in South Korea that is famous for its cultural heritage. It is a huge tourist attraction, and especially the Jeonju Hanok Village contains lots of well-preserved traditional Korean houses. The village also contains various national historic sites like the Jeonju Gyeonggijeon (Cultural Heritage Administration, 2025; National Institute of Korean History, 2024).

Jeonju Gyeonggijeon is the Korea Historic Site No. 339. It was built in 1410 during the Chosun Dynasty, in the 10th year of King Taejon, the founder of the Chosun dynasty's rule. The Gyeonggijeon also includes a portrait of King Taejon, which is Treasure No. 931. The Jeongjeon, the main hall, is a five-beam structure covered with a gabled roof, featuring detailed triple-bracket sets in the mid-Chosun style and double eaves. An open ceremonial pavilion creates the front exterior of the Main Hall, its roof gables representing the front of the roof (Cultural Heritage Administration, 2025; National Institute of Korean History, 2024).

Both buildings have plain round columns, and they stand on granite foundations. Inside the Main Hall, there are two tall pillars 5.8 meters high that support the horizontal beams, and the side columns are also quite tall that they can support the main crossbeams. The neat and solid roof structure that is built of carefully proportioned and skillfully carved members, showcases accurate joining and fitting techniques as well as adroit carving skills. The beautiful, coffered ceiling increases the dignified ambience of the royal portrait hall, distinguishing it from other Confucian buildings and signifies the high social class (Cultural Heritage Administration, 2025; Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2024).

Furthermore, the stern atmosphere is further emphasized by the spirit road stretching from the inner spirit gate to the Main Hall, the incense burners, and the columned corridors surrounding the elegant complex of the Main Hall. When observing the ceiling of the Gyeonggijeon, it uses a variety of colors. During the Chosun dynasty, it was very rare for Hanok to be colored, and whenever it is colored, it most likely shows that the Hanok is the royal family's province. Right above the portrait of King Taejeon, there are several patterns that include lotus flowers. These flowers represent enlightenment and spiritual growth, and peony flowers symbolize wealth, honor, beauty, and good luck (Cultural Heritage Administration, 2025; National Institute of Korean History, 2024; Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2024).

To conclude, the Jeonju Hanok Village contains highly valued landmarks like the Gyeonggijeon, which represents the cultural and architectural heritage of South Korea. This preserved site not only provides a glimpse into the artistry of the Chosun dynasty but also reminds people of the values and traditions in Korean history. The complex details, symbolic designs, and imposing atmosphere of the Gyeonggijeon strongly highlight the importance of Hanok in Korea's cultural legacy. By preserving and appreciating these national treasures, the cultural legacy could be continued during the modern generations and be shared with the world (National Institute of Korean History, 2024).

6 CONCLUSION

Hanok is a remarkable expression of South Korean culture, embodying multiple values such as cultural, social, and spiritual beliefs. These values are conveyed through various architectural elements: the uniquely curved roof shape from Kiwa clay tiles, the

structural layout that provides an idea of different social classes, and the decorations that symbolize various beliefs and religious traditions. These values allow observers to easily understand the importance of Hanok and why it is admired, not only historically, but also in the art and cultural world.

By examining Hanok's symbolic features and architectural designs, this research underscores its multifaceted significance as more than a shelter but a continuing piece of cultural heritage and artistic expression. The Jeonju Gyeonggijeon and the surrounding Hanok Village serve as exemplary cases, demonstrating the intricate craftsmanship, cultural symbolism, and historical importance of Hanok.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Hanok's role in preserving Korean identity and its relevance in a global context. By emphasizing its architectural success and cultural depth, the findings support greater appreciation, preservation, and promotion of Hanok as a vital component of Korea's legacy, ensuring its values and traditions are celebrated and passed on to future generations.

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