

# Fashion in North Korea



Text and photos by Eric Lafforgue

In every corner of the earth, women love to look beautiful and keep up with the latest fashion trends. The women of North Korea are no different. Fashion is taken seriously here. But in North Korea, women do not read Elle or Vogue; they just glimpse a few styles by watching TV or by observing the few foreigners who come to visit. In the hermit kingdom, clothing also reflects social status. If you have foreign clothes it means you travel and are consequently close to the centralized power.

Chinese products have inundated the country, adding some color to the traditional outfits that were made of vinalon fiber.

But citizens beware, too much style means you're forgetting the North Korean *juche*, the ethos of self-reliance that the country is founded on! But the youth tend to neglect it despite the potential consequences.



Many women still wear this colorful, traditional kimono-like dress known as the “choson-ot” on a daily basis. It is called “hanbok” in South Korea.



The cap is an integral part of the fashion in North Korea. Almost all the uniforms include it. Here, a tour guide can be seen wearing it. It is worn very high on the top of the head and gives a unique look!



A tailor makes a cap with the iconic communist red star. She told me that sometimes there are not enough red stars, so they cannot produce the foreseen amount each year. This cap is worn by both men and women from the Worker's party.



Thanks to Chinese knockoffs, people can wear fake Adidas and Puma hats.



A pioneer girl wears this uniform from the ages of nine to fifteen. Proud of this outfit, many children wear it outside of the school hours. They love to customize their look with unique hairstyles and jewelry. Students who refuse to wear the school uniform will be subject to punishment.



After graduating from the pioneers, the girls will become students and will have to wear these black suits.

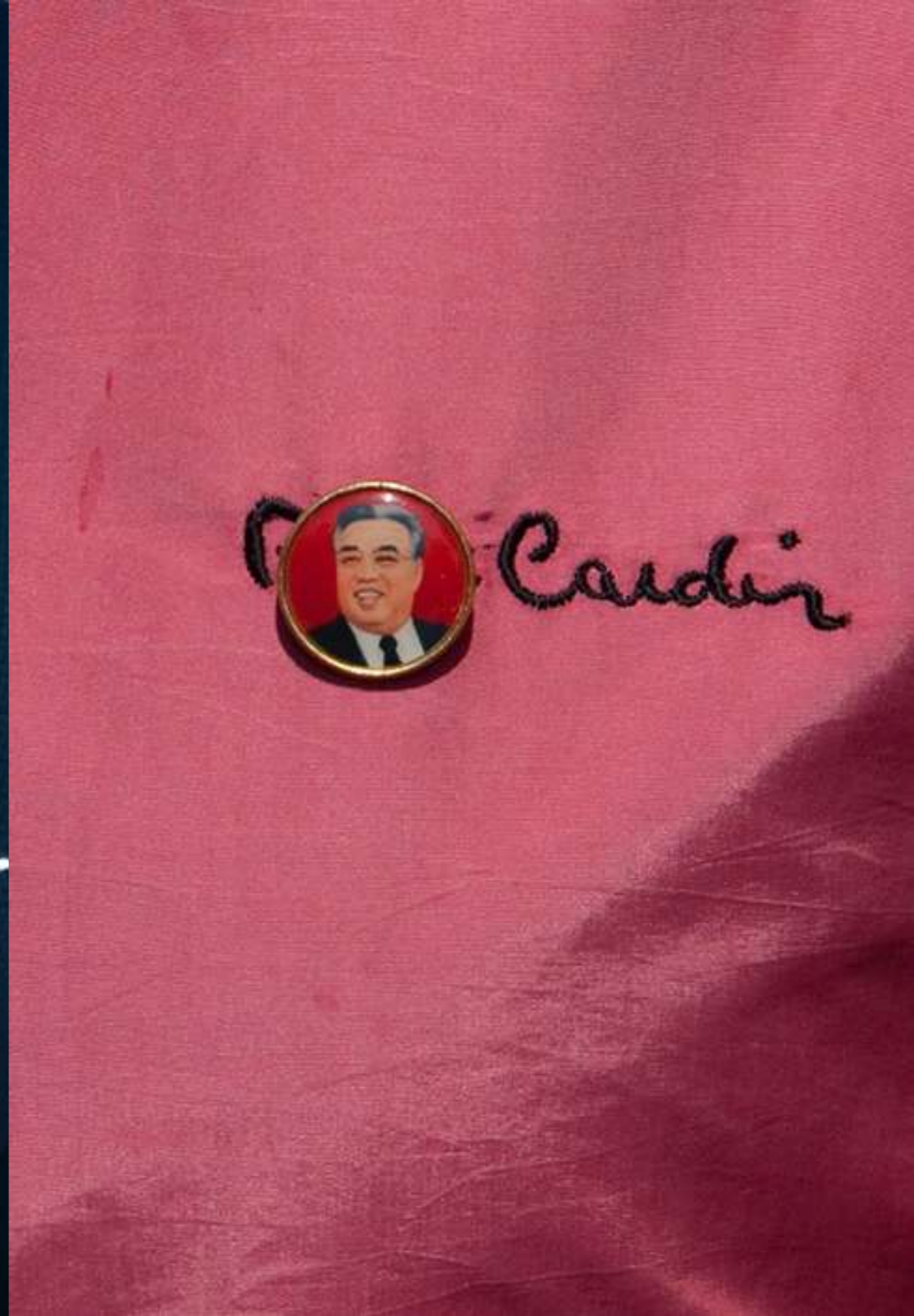




Fashion trends exist even in the military. As soon as the female soldiers are off duty, they like to wear their caps further back on their heads. Or wear plastic bracelets...



Whatever the choice of attire, the Dear Leaders badge must be worn over the heart.



Sometimes the Dear Leaders badges are pinned over brand names like on this fake Pierre Cardin pictured on the right. My fashion magazines were confiscated at the airport by the police.



Clash of civilization... Kil Il Sung Vs Prada...



The clothing floor in one of the biggest malls in Pyongyang. This kind of store is reserved for the elite, but still the selection remains very limited. Many North Korean students can watch movies from the west when they study English, but they all told me it was impossible to find the clothes from the films in their country. I found some Adidas shoes in this store, at the high price of 100 US dollars.



In a shop of a luxury hotel in Pyongyang, high end perfumes can be bought with euros. Most of these products however are made in China.



Every north korean woman will tell you she dreams to buy a perfume from Paris... They'll have to wait a little bit...



Very white skin is seen as an attractive trait in North Korea. Darker skin signifies that you work in the fields and are part of a lower cast. Girls use rice powder to make themselves more pale.





Pale must be maintained, in any situation!



Using UV tanning beds to look like you were out in the sun is not yet a trend in North Korea. They only use them for women who have just given birth in the Pyongyang hospital. It is part of the treatment they receive.



North Korean women do not use a lot of make up. This is primarily because they do not have a large choice of products. The men say that they prefer their women “natural”. The women with make up on, are mostly artists, or women who work in a public space (e.g. waitresses).



Many say that with the influence of the South Korean culture through the media, many women have started to undergo surgery to widen their eyes. The surgery includes an incision on the upper lid of skin, removing excess skin or adjusting tissue and muscles to get the desired look.



North Koreans do not decorate their businesses. This sign only indicates that it is a tailor.



In a village near Hamhung, this shop shows the few clothing options available to the people. Their choice of footwear is limited to boots and simple shoes.



On the left: cosmetics in a village shop. On the right: the cosmetics section in Kungang, the zone created by South and North Koreans where divided families were supposed to meet. Only a few people go as the intermingling has been stopped.



An upper class family leaving an expensive restaurant in Pyongyang. The bright colors from the Chinese clothes are easy to spot on the teenager while her sister proudly wears her Pioneer uniform. The mother has kept her boots.





A hair salon in Pyongyang. Kim Jong Un launched a new style: slicked-back hair with the sides cut high at around an inch above the ears. Some say his grandfather had the same haircut in his younger years.



Even the haircuts are regulated in North Korea. This started with Kim Jong Il's utterances: 'Let us trim our hair in accordance with Socialist lifestyle'. Female students must keep their hair short or plaited.



The mother here can be seen wearing some brand new shoes that could not be found just a few years ago in North Korea. These platform boots are Chinese and have started to change the way North Korean women look. They love to dress like this when they are on vacation or at amusement parks.



For the women living in the north of the country, dog fur coats are the best option to fight off the cold temperatures. In Paektu, it gets as cold as minus 30!



Advertising does not exist in North Korea, but the propaganda billboards sometimes promote fashion by depicting the latest shoes produced in a government factory.



The elite can travel in North Korea. Many go to China or Europe and return with new trendy clothes. This lady with Christian Dior glasses may be part of this upper echelon. The clothes North Koreans wear signify their economic status.



The Kim Jong Il sunglasses model is still very popular in Pyongyang. Every new arrival in the shops is shown on state television.



The Korean Central News Agency said of this style:  
“Spring Fashion for Women’s Formal Wear” features clothing that is “bright, with daring colors appropriate for the overall mood of spring.”





Sometimes fashion is dictated by the government. In the countryside, women are not allowed to ride a bike with a dress. So they have to wear trousers. In the towns, it is better to wear a dress. I did not see any blue jeans at all. When I told my guides that in France we pay for new blue jeans that look worn with holes, they did not believe me! Clothes must be clean and perfectly washed in North Korea.



These girls are the daughters of North Koreans who live in Japan. They came back for a visit in Pyongyang but were asked by the officials to have a traditional hairstyle - nothing crazy like the Japanese girls like to have!



Most of the people wear clothes made of the vinalon, a synthetic fiber created in the 50s which is the pride of North Korea. The Dear Leaders wear this very same material. It has become the national fibre of North Korea and is used for the majority of textiles. It is very stiff, uncomfortable, and makes people look like robots. A big problem with vinalon is that there aren't many colors to choose from. This added to the dull look of DPRK in the past.



These shoes belong to the extras on a movie set. Since there is no changing room, I could see what they wear.



North Korean beauty standards say that a woman should have big eyes, a high nose, a small mouth and white skin, and that she should not be skinny. Women in North Korea are truly “beautiful flowers” according to the men.

A proverb says:

“The strong men are in the south and the beautiful women are in the north!”



Teens love high heels and brightly colored clothing which comes primarily from China. But people need to be careful as too much color and eccentricity will get them noticed. They may be accused of trying to mimic the western way of life. Punishment will ensue.

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