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**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TOILETRIES DESIGN**  
**IN KOREA, CHINA, AND JAPAN**  
- FROM LATE 17TH TO 19TH CENTURY -

**주저자 : 정의철**

연세대학교 생활과학대학 생활디자인학과

**Jung eui-chul**

Dep. of Human Environment & Design, College of Human Ecology,  
Yonsei University

**공동저자 : 박영순**

연세대학교 생활과학대학 생활디자인학과

**Park young-soon**

Dep. of Human Environment & Design, College of Human Ecology,  
Yonsei University

**공동저자 : 신지혜**

연세대학교 생활과학대학 생활디자인학과

**Shin ji-hye**

Dep. of Human Environment & Design, College of Human Ecology,  
Yonsei University

**교신저자 : 김은정**

연세대학교 생활과학대학 생활디자인학과

**Kim eun-jeong**

Dep. of Human Environment & Design, College of Human Ecology,  
Yonsei University

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## Abstract

This research describes the design characteristics in Korea, China, and Japan by investigating makeup culture and toiletries. To find unique design characteristics, the toiletries of upper class women from the late 17th to 19th centuries were compared. The research methods included both reviewing previous publications and field studies.

The three countries developed their own forms, proportions, materials and surfaces. Korean toiletries could be diverse and stable in forms and proportions, because they had various shapes and lower centroid. Korean women thought the symbolic meanings significant for their daily necessities, and preferred planar painting and engraving to decorate the patterns. The materials and surfaces of Korean toiletries were practical, soft, and gave less artificial process to reveal their natural material texture. Chinese toiletries had complex forms and were tall. For the patterns, symbolic meanings were significant as Korea. The patterns were carved in three-dimensional forms. Chinese women preferred rare materials. Japanese toiletries had simple lines and were easily stackable. Japanese women often used patterns for decorative purposes instead of symbolic meanings, and the patterns were mostly decorated with planar paintings. For the materials and surfaces, the Japanese preferred wood with lacquers and luxurious materials such as gold.

In summary, the design characteristics of Korean toiletries had diverse forms, flexible proportions, painted patterns with symbolic meanings, practical materials and soft surface, while those of China had a complicated structure and carved patterns. Japan had simple forms, sharp edges, and layered structure with colorful lacquers.

## Keyword

**Traditional makeup, Toiletries design, Asian aesthetic sense**

## 1. Introduction

According to Jeong Bok-Hee(2003), the makeup culture is developed in the complex consequences of physical condition, historic background, and the aesthetics of the period. To understand the makeup culture and the aesthetic of the toiletries of a particular period, it is important to learn how the effects of their social background. For better insight into women’s makeup culture, it is helpful to examine their life styles.

This research is intended to understand the makeup culture by discovering the design characteristics of traditional toiletries in Korea, China, and Japan. To identify the unique design characteristics of the three countries, the women’s toiletries developed from late 17th to 19th centuries, flourished with social and economic stability, and also developed high level of aesthetic, were compared among Joseon dynasty in Korea, Qing dynasty in China and Edo shogunate in Japan. During this period, artifacts developed their own unique styles without changes due to the social stability. The toiletries collected for this research belonged to women of the ruling classes who left many artifacts and writings for posterity.

Nation	Date	Location
Korea	2010.06.30	National Museum of Korea
	2010.07.29	Onyang Folk Museum
	2010.08.06	The National Folk Museum of Korea
	2010.08.07	National Palace Museum of Korea
	2010.08.13	Amore Pacific Museum
	2010.08.18	Koreana Makeup Museum
China	2010.06.24~26	Museum of the Forbidden City
		Capital Museum
		Lao-she house (sa-hap-won)
		Hu-guang Guildhall
Japan	2010.07.22~24	Edo Tokyo Museum
		Tokyo National Museum
		I-se-han Cosmetic Museum
		Edo Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum

[Table 1] Field Research Plan

The research methods included both reviewing

previous publications and field studies. The previous publications research included various theoretical studies such as aesthetic, thought, politics, and cultural life styles including women’s makeup and toiletries. The field studies were conducted by visiting more than two museums, in which watching and collecting representative materials of each country from June to August in 2010. To improve the validity and reliability of the research about China and Japan, two advisory professors were appointed from each country (Tsinghua University in China and Musashino Art University in Japan). The research was validated in the course of emails, questionnaires, and face-to-face meetings.

## 2. Women’s life styles and adornments

From the late 17th to 19th century, northeast Asian countries not only earned political stability but also economic wealth. The new governing classes emerged by accumulating wealth and began to develop a high level of culture.

The three countries also developed their own life styles under the influence of Confucianism. Both Korea and China developed a strict Confucian culture, which resulted in putting men and women at different social statuses. Confucianism also had a huge influence on housing and life styles. In Japan, however, Shinto and Buddhism were more influential than Confucianism. Accordingly, there were fewer social distinctions between men and women(Kim Kook-Sun, 2004).

### 2.1. Women’s social status and the aesthetic

In China and Korea, women’s social activities were getting limited against men. Women of all classes were unable to go out and also responsible for household tasks and childrearing(Lee Suk-In, 2010, pp.108-111.). In China, inequality even resulted in foot-binding to prevent wives from escaping their husbands(Jin Dong-Won, 2005).

In Japan, upper-class women were not able to participate in politics. Women from the working classes shared housework with men. However, the most important jobs for women were to take care

of children and to make clothes. In the late Edo period, women began to participate in politics. They were also able to go out after sunset. They took care of the housework during the day, and went out with their neighbors in the evening. The marriages were usually arranged in Edo period, but choosing a wife by appearance was also allowed. Accordingly, several women from the lower level classes frequently used their beauty to attract wealthy husbands(Institute of Japanese Woman's History, 2006).

Women's aesthetics were well illustrated in paintings. In Korea and China, there was a strict boundary between the wife and mother and the geisha. Both Korea and China regarded the real beauty of women was in their behavior(Jang Jing, 2004). In Japan, meanwhile, women's appearance and their minds were equally valued.

## **2.2. The makeup culture in Korea, china, and japan**

The three countries all thought highly of women's beauty, followed by wearing the makeup to look natural. Women preferred using white facial powder as a base for their makeup. Both Korean and Chinese women applied pale and peach-colored powder to their faces. Japanese women in early Edo period used pale pink blush. In the late Edo period, however, they preferred making their faces all white.

For eyebrows, Korean women preferred a natural style with slightly lowered tips. Chinese women kept their eyebrows thin and symmetrical. In Japan, women had their eyebrows thicker with tips raised. Women in China and Japan used black eyebrow pencils; Korean women preferred using brown pencils to give natural and soft looks. Japanese women penciled in their eyebrows after removing their hair to reveal their social and marital status.

Women in all three countries tried to make their lips look smaller. Chinese women put on rouge in a dot on the center of lower lip. Japanese women also used rouge. Most Japanese women applied a red color on their lips, but geishas

preferred brighter and darker red color. Under the feudal system it was believed that if women had larger lips, they would speak out(Park Bo-Young, 1997).

## **2.3. Place for women's adornment**

Under Confucianism, both Korea and China separated men and women's living quarters. Women had to remain in restricted areas. Japanese women shared sleeping and living quarters with men.

In Korea, the relationship between men and women, and governing and working classes was significant to the Confucian system. This idea of creating relations applied to everything in the society including the organization of housing space. Spaces for upper level class and servants were divided, and men and women had their separate spaces for living. Korean women were not allowed to go out and forced to stay in their area called 'an-chaе'. Due to the four distinct seasons, Korea developed a sedentary life style, followed by furniture with short legs. Women usually kept their makeup tools in the corner of the room, and washed their faces and hair in a basin on the floor(Park Myung-Hee et al., 2003).

China also separated living spaces for men and women. Women stayed in the area called 'yi-bang', which was usually located in the south-west corner of the house. They had to do their housework and grooming in this area. China developed furniture with long legs so that people could sit and stand(Interview Source from Liu Tie-Jun, 2010). Accordingly, Chinese women wore their makeup sitting on the chair, and washed their faces and hair in a wash stand.

In Japan, there were two types of housing for the upper classes, one for samurai, and the other for merchants, called 'cho-nin.' The 'cho-nin' was restricted for housing decoration and women's adornment than samurai, but developed their own luxurious and worldly life styles(Kim Tae-Young, 2002). Japan did not separate spaces for men and women in a house, and married couple shared a bedroom. Women put on makeup and got dressed

in their bedrooms(Kanzaki Noridake, 2003, pp. 137-147.). However, they had separate washrooms close to the entrance. The floor had long and thin slits for drainage, and women poured water on their bodies from basins. Japan also developed a sedentary life style. However, the furniture had no legs so that the pieces could be stacked.

### 3. Design Characteristics of women's toiletries

The toiletries for the research analysis were categorized into three types: bathing and washing instruments, color makeup tools in white, black and red, and dressing stands and mirrors.

No.	types of toiletries	
1	bathing and washing instruments	
2	color makeup tools	white
		black
		red
3	dressing stands and mirrors	

[Table 2] Types of Toiletries

For analyzing design characteristics, three criteria had been made: 1) forms and proportions for understanding visual silhouettes, 2) meanings and expressions of patterns for symbolic decorations, and 3) materials and surfaces for textures.

No.	design characteristics
1	forms and proportions
2	meanings and expressions of patterns
3	materials and surfaces

[Table 3] Design Characteristics for the Analysis

For the analysis, 81 images from Korea, 40 images from China, 80 images from Japan were collected. To find the essential items, the images were validated by advisory professors of China and Japan in the course of emails, questionnaires, and face-to-face meetings.

#### 3.1. Types of toiletries

For bathing and washing, basins were used. In

Korea and Japan the basin was placed on the floor when in use, while in China the basin was placed on a washstand which also had a towel rack, soap holders, and mirrors. Japanese homes had a kettle made of wood as a set with wooden basin to carry hot water. There was also a separate towel rack which could also be used to hang a kimono. Koreans used a gargle bowl.

Types	Images	
Korea		
	basin	Gargle bowl
China		
	basin	Wash stand
Japan		
	basin	Kettle

[Table 4] Bathing and washing tools in Korea, China, and Japan

For white color makeup, women used powder cases. Korean women preferred a small ampulla with a lid to contain powder, while Japanese women used compact portable cases and three-tiered cases. Chinese powder cases had a small cylindrical shape with a flat lid on the top. Women in Korea and China developed powder cases to be used indoors instead of making portable containers.

They used ink stones to mix rouge, and brushes to apply rouge to their lips. The Japanese preferred ready-to-use rouge. They applied a thin layer inside of the small rouge bowl with pre-mixed rouge using brushes. These rouge bowls did not have lids on the top, so they were kept upside down. Women used wet brushes to melt the rouge applied inside of the bowl.

[Table 5] White color makeup tools in Korea, China, and Japan

Types	Images	
Korea		
	Powder cases	
China		
	Powder cases	
Japan		
	Tiered containers	Portable case


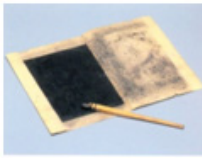

[Table 6] Red color makeup tools in Korea, China, and Japan

Types	Images	
Korea		
	Rouge container	Rouge stamp
China		
	Rouge container	
Japan		
	Rouge bowls	Portable case






For black makeup, there were eyebrow ink sticks, ink stones, and brushes. Korean and Chinese women used burnt wood sticks to draw their eyebrows. Chinese women preferred color, while

Korean women liked brown. Japan had a special tool set for dying teeth. Japanese women used these tools every two to three days to blacken their teeth. These tools were a basin, a kettle, a kettle stand, a gargle bowl, a few teeth brushes, and a dying powder container.

[Table 7] Black color makeup tools in Korea, China, and Japan

Types	Images	
Korea and China		
	Ink stones	
Japan		
	Portable ink paper	Teeth dying tools

[Table 8] Dressing stands and mirrors in Korea, China, and Japan

Types	Images	
Korea		
	Dressing stand	Mirror
China		
	Dressing stand	Mirror stand
Japan		
	Dressing stand	Mirror stand

For a dressing stand and a mirror, Korean had a box-shaped storage with a foldable mirror

attached inside of the lid. Both Chinese and Japanese women not only used a dressing stand including a storage and a mirror as Korean style, but also a mirror stand which has only a frame to hold a mirror. Chinese women could separate a mirror stand from the storage box, while Koreans could not. The Japanese developed a mirror stand to hold a round mirror with a handle. Japanese women regarded this mirror stand a decorative object in the room, so they preferred exquisitely painted with patterns on the stand frame. Korean women usually kept their dressing stands with the mirror folded in the corner of the room when it was not in use.

### **3.2. Forms and Proportions of the Toiletries**

Korean toiletries were round, tetrahedrons, hexahedrons, and octahedron. Koreans divided the surface of the container into planes. They kept the edges soft at all times, and sometimes showed planar transition from round surface to polyhedron. Due to the round edges and planar transition, most Korean toiletries were soft and natural. They had the centroid in the lower body, so they could stay stabilized.

The Chinese used curves and straight lines in women's toiletries. For the small containers and tools for makeup, people used either vertical or horizontal cylindrical shapes. For large structures such as storage boxes and dressing stands, they developed a closed structure surrounded on the four sides with more than two layers just like the traditional housing style called 'sa-hap-won.' They also stressed vertical direction and visual depth on the surface.

Japan developed cumulating structure for women's toiletries. The containers seldom had legs so that they could easily be stacked. These containers were usually made in three tiers. Japan also developed decorative objects such as mirror stands and decoration shelves called 'kuro-dana.' The mirror stands were not foldable, so Japanese women always kept the mirror stands next to them for both decorative and practical use. The decorative shelves usually had three to four tiers

without solid walls on the side. Women kept all their toiletries on the shelf in each container boxes with exquisite decoration on the surface so that these boxes on the shelf could be a part of the decoration of the room. Japanese toiletries had bowl shapes and cylindrical shapes together keeping the edges sharp. They sometimes gave angles to the round surface to create slight tension.

For the proportion, Korean toiletries put their centroid in the lower part for stability. Chinese toiletries developed a long vertical proportion corresponding to their stand-up furniture and housing style. Japanese toiletries showed flexible proportion because of the tiered structure. Each toiletry had a low and stable proportion when deconstructed, but the tiered structure broke the low and stable proportion revealing vertical and dynamic proportion instead.

### **3.3. Symbolic Meanings and Expressions of Patterns**

The three countries used patterns for both decoration and wishes for luck. Most of patterns had good symbolic meanings such as wealth, health, long life, many children, love, and power. Women preferred the patterns meaning fecundity, happiness, longevity, good luck, wealth, and honor. The meanings of the patterns usually reflected the women's wishes, and their wishes were mostly about good luck for their family instead of for themselves.





For the patterns used for women's toiletries reflecting good meanings, there were turtles, cranes, clouds, peonies, arabesques, chrysanthemums, bats, jewels, butterflies, love birds, and Japanese apricot flowers. They were used either separately or together revealing women's earnest wishes.

The upper class women especially liked to use peonies, dragons, chrysanthemums with arabesque as a background. These patterns had symbolized wealth and honor, and power and dignity. Dragon motif was originally used only for men, but it soon became one of the governing women's favorites, especially in China. The dragon was either painted on the surface or carved on the edges of dressing



stands, wash stands and mirror stands. The peony was often used with arabesque pattern in women's toiletries, which had the meanings of wealth and dignity. Chrysanthemum was not only one of women's favorite patterns but also used as the crest for the imperial family.

[Table 9] Representative patterns in Korea, China, and Japan

Representative patterns	
	
Dragon	Peony
	
chrysanthemum	arabesque

Women also used fish for fecundity because fish laid many eggs, and grapes for longevity because of the thick vines. In addition, flowers and butterflies for women's beauty, bats and several jewels for happiness, and geometric forms were used to bring luck.

Korean patterns were mostly hand painted, but Chinese patterns were usually carved. Both Koreans and Chinese thought the symbolic meaning of the pattern was more significant than the decorative shapes.

However, the Japanese preferred brightly painted patterns to symbols. Japanese illustrated scenes from folk tales or the famous kabuki actresses in the women's toiletries for decoration without symbolic meanings.

### 3.4. Materials and surfaces

In choosing and processing materials, the three countries mainly used natural woods and clays. They also used metal, ivory, jewel, and turtle





shells. The three countries developed their own material processing methods to create unique surfaces and textures even though they used similar materials to make the toiletries.

[Table 10] Korean traditional materials and surfaces

	
Metal with consistent beating	Silver with engraving and peking
	
Wood with acquires and metal decoration	Clays with glaze and painted pattern

Koreans tried to keep the natural texture of the materials, and avoided using artificial colors. For the powder and rouge containers, light blue glazes were applied on the white surface to create patterns, still keeping the most of the surface white. The basin was made of metal, and the surface had the natural texture created by consistent beating with hammers, which was a Korean traditional technique. Most of Korean toiletries were hardly processed to keep their original material surface and texture. The patterns were even painted in small sizes instead of carving.

[Table 11] Chinese traditional materials and surfaces

	
wood with red lacquer and gold painted patterns	Metal with enamel glaze
	
Ivory with bratticing	Wood with lacquer and painted patterns



China used unique materials such as ivory and red enamel painting. Chinese processed the materials with various and vivid colored glazes and lacquers to cover the original colors and textures. After the surface process, they preferred carvings on the surface, and the patterns mostly covered the whole surface.

Japan created a special technique called 'maki-e', which was to make a very smooth artificial surface with lacquers and draw exquisite patterns and images on the surface using gold or silver powder. The original material would be hidden by the thick layers of lacquers and decorative patterns.

[Table 12] Japanese traditional materials and surfaces

	
wood with black lacquer and gold painted patterns	clay with colorful glazes
	
Wood and metal with lacquer and engraving	Wood with lacquer and painted patterns

The Japanese preferred black colors with gold or red to give contrast, while Chinese preferred red or dark red. They thought the tools should be beautiful themselves for decoration, so they covered the whole surfaces of the tools with vivid colors hiding their original material colors and textures. Japanese usually used wood for the toiletries even including basins and kettles. They gave several layers of lacquer on the surface to make the tools water-proof.

### 3.5. Findings

These three countries developed their own design for women's toiletries.

In bathing and washing goods, Koreans rarely decorated the items and mostly used metal. The Chinese also used metal for the main body, but decorated the surface with carving. The Japanese have used wood instead of metal, and also painted the surface with various colors and special lacquers called maki-e.

In makeup goods, Koreans preferred shapes and soft edges emphasizing the relations between the planes. The Chinese used ivory and enamel, carving with traditional patterns all over the surface for decoration. Japan produced items such as rouge bowls, eyebrow ink papers, tiered containers, and portable small items.

Korean dressing stand had a mirror attached to the top lid, and was foldable. Chinese stands had both a complicated structure with layers and surface decoration with traditional carving patterns such as animals and flowers. The Japanese separated the mirror stand from dressing stand which was a storage box without a mirror, emphasizing simplicity. The representative design characteristics of the toiletries in the three countries are as follows.

[Table 13] Design characteristics summary of toiletries in Korea, China, and Japan

	Tool types	Design characteristics
Korea	Bathing and washing tools	Practical in both material use and decoration
	Color makeup tools	Polyhedron and soft silhouette
	Dressing stands and mirrors	Folding structure and flat surface decoration (painting)
China	Bathing and washing tools	Practical material use and decorative pattern
	Color makeup tools	Rare material use and three-dimensional or bratticing
	Dressing stands and mirrors	Complex and layered structure and bratticing
Japan	Bathing and washing tools	Decoration in both material use and pattern
	Color makeup tools	Portable size in various shapes and vivid color use
	Dressing stands and mirrors	thin framed structure and highly processed surface

Korean toiletries could be diverse and stable in forms and proportions, because they had various shapes and lower centroid. For symbolic meaning

and expression of patterns, Korean women thought the symbolic meanings significant for their daily necessities. To decorate the symbolic patterns on the toiletries, Koreans preferred planar painting and engraving rather than three-dimensional carving and bratticing. The materials and surfaces of Korean toiletries were practical and soft, and gave less artificial process to reveal their natural material texture.

[Table 14] Design characteristics of Korean toiletries




	Image	Design characteristics
Forms and proportions		Diversity and stability
Symbolic meaning and expression of patterns		Symbolic use and planar expression
Materials and surfaces		Practical use and soft surface

Chinese toiletries had complex forms and were tall. The closed structure with several layers on the four sides in the toiletries corresponded to the housing style, and vertical proportion could be related to the stand-up life style and development of the vertical furniture. For the patterns, symbolic meanings were significant as Korea. Chinese women often used patterns with symbol meanings to their toiletries, and the patterns were carved in three-dimensional forms instead of paintings, if possible. The materials and surfaces of Chinese toiletries could be summarized as rare material use and intensity, because Chinese often used ivory and enamel for the tools with vivid and strong colors and patterns on the surface.




Japanese toiletries had simple lines and were easily stackable. The Japanese preferred decorative

to symbolic meanings. The patterns were mostly decorated with planar paintings instead of carving. For the materials and surfaces, the Japanese used wood, even for basins and kettles. Instead of using unpractical material, they developed the high quality surface technique using lacquers and luxurious materials such as gold. They also used contrasting colors.

[Table 15] Design characteristics of Chinese toiletries

	Image	Design characteristics
Forms and proportions		Complexity and vertical proportion
Symbolic meaning and expression of patterns		Symbolic use and three-dimensional expression
Materials and surfaces		Rare materials and intensity

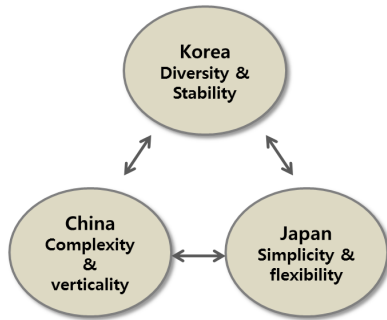
[Table 16] Design characteristics of Japanese toiletries

	Image	Design characteristics
Forms and proportions		Simplicity and flexible proportion
Symbolic meaning and expression of patterns		Decorative use and planar expression
Materials and surfaces		Unpractical material use and luxury

In summary, Korea revealed its unique aesthetic

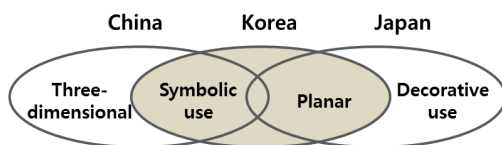
sense in women's toiletries as 'diversity and stability' in forms and proportions, and 'practicality and softness' in materials and surfaces compared to China and Japan.

[Figure 1] Forms and proportions of women's toiletries in Korea, China, and Japan



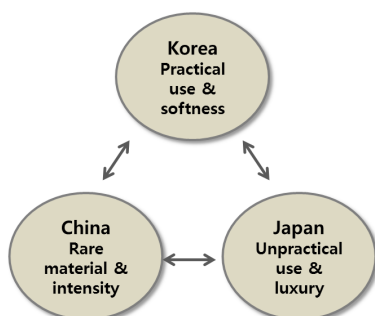
For the use of patterns, Koreans and Chinese shared 'symbolism', and 'planar painted surface' with Japan.

[Figure 2] Symbolic meaning and expression of patterns of women's toiletries in Korea, China, and Japan



China had 'complexity and verticality' in forms and proportions, and 'rare material use and intensity' in materials and surfaces. For the patterns, China only had 'three-dimensional' expression among the three countries, while sharing 'symbolic use' with Korea.

[Figure 3] Materials and surfaces of women's toiletries in Korea, China, and Japan



Japan showed 'simplicity and flexibility' in forms and proportions. They had 'unpractical material use and luxury' in materials and surfaces, because most of bathing and washing tools were made of wood with lacquers and luxurious maki-e techniques. For patterns, Japan shared 'planar painted surface' with Korea, having 'decorative use' as a unique design element.

#### 4. Conclusion

From this research, Korea, China, and Japan not only had similar design elements, but also revealed their own uniqueness. Chinese design was with 'three-dimensional' and Japan's was 'decorative.'

The design characteristics in each country were developed by associating them with their aesthetics and culture. For example, Asian women had to draw their lips smaller because men regarded women's lips stood for their rights to speak. Chinese and Korean women preferred natural look because they were forced to manage households staying home. Japanese women had to blacken their teeth to reveal their married statuses.

It is critical to develop and keep the valuable cultural society in the long term, better understanding of the design culture by comparing adjacent or similar culture looking for both similarities and differences between them. The different elements could be a foundation to develop more unique and rich cultural society, yet keeping the similarities to make the solid and firm cultural area.

This research was limited to Asian women's toiletries. Therefore, to validate the outcomes from the research, the regional coverage and items to be analyzed should be expanded. This should be the next step for the researchers, and it is expected that this research would reveal some design principles that can be used for culture-based services, contents, and products.

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