Korean Aesthetic Consciousness and Colour Preference in Clothing Style

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This study examines the Korean aesthetic consciousness of colour by focusing on the preference for white in clothing culture. A nation's symbolic use of certain colours develops over time as a tradition representing the national sentiment and philosophy of life. In this way, traditional colours not only influence the senses but also evoke ideas about a country's social customs. For example, white clothes without bleaching, artificial processing, or fancy patterns have a simple and pure beauty. This paper discusses the Korean partiality toward such clothing as representative of the spiritual virtues of purity and holiness. A comparison is drawn with China and Japan, where traditional clothes feature other colours despite some shared concepts across the cultures, such as yin-yang and the five elements. | *Keywords: Korean Aesthetic Consciousness, Colour Preference, Clothing Style, the Yin-Yang (陰陽論), the Five Elements (五行論)*

1. Introduction

In today's global age, it is not easy to identify the collective sensibilities of the Korean public. Throughout the nation's thousands of years of history and contemporary culture, contradictory or conflicting characteristics have emerged. Nevertheless, by paying attention to trends, we may be able to draw an overview of Korean aesthetic preferences to some extent. This paper examines the Korean taste in colour, focusing on clothing culture.

Cultural preferences for colour are an important topic in examining Korean aesthetics. In any country, the symbolic use of colour develops over time as a tradition representing the national customs and philosophy of life. Thus, the choice of colour in clothing style holds cultural meaning beyond visual aesthetics. For this reason, the cultural and historical implications of colour are multi-layered. For example, purple is considered a noble colour in many countries, but in Brazil and India it represents sadness. Especially in Brazil,

purple and yellow are very unlucky colours. Then, green is a symbol of peace and youth in many countries, but in the eastern United States, green awnings represent a funeral service (Park, 2012, p. 54). Since ancient times, Koreans' preference for white has been much discussed, to the extent that Koreans have been called *Baekuiminjok*, or the "white-clad race" (白衣民族) because of their traditional white clothes.

To understand Korean colour preferences, it is helpful to compare the situation with neighbouring countries that share some elements of culture, namely, China and Japan. The three countries are geographically close, and they share histories of Confucianism and Chinese character culture. Yet despite such similarities, they have very different national cultures, including the use of colour for clothes. In this study of the Korean taste in colour as seen in clothing culture, we discuss the trend of wearing white as culturally representative of virtues such as purity and holiness in comparison with clothing styles found in China and Japan.

2. Obangsack (Five Colours) and Korean Culture

Koreans have long believed that one's life will be happy and the country prosperous by following the principles of yin-yang and the five elements, and all ceremonies at the centre of Korean life are carried out according to such principles. In this context, colour has a symbolic meaning and ideological significance.

The yin-yang and five elements (陰陽五行論) were developed around the 1st century B.C. in the Pre-Han period of China and prevailed in ancient China (Late Han). As its name suggests, the theory combines the concepts of yin-yang (陰陽論) and the five elements (五行論), where the yin-yang ideology explains the creation and development of all things based on the confrontation and interdependence of two opposite qualities, yin and yang, the basis of all existence in the world and the five elements theory sees all things in the world as Golden, Wood, Water, Fire or Earth (金,木,水,火,土).

The yin-yang and five elements were developed and inherited to exemplify a universal concept for recognizing nature and objects; it had a substantial influence on Korean thinking and cultural emotions, such as those involved in social systems and customs. Therefore, the Yin-Yang Five Events Awards have a crucial position at the centre of Korean traditional culture and are unconsciously internalized into the Korean system of perception.

Obangsaek is the Korean colour system that expresses the yin-yang and five elements. First, the East is the place where the sun rises, where there are many trees and it is always blue. Here blue signifies spring and a cheerful place of birth. Second, as there is a lot of iron in the West, white (i.e. the colour of iron) symbolises this direction as well as autumn. Third, in the South, the sun is always strong, so it is red. Here, everything is lush, so it is a place full of yang, or summer. Fourth, the North is considered to have water because there is a deep valley. It is symbolised by black, which also denotes winter. Lastly, the centre is the centre of the earth. As it is considered to be the closest to the sun, so it is expressed as yellow, which also symbolises light (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Obangsaek (five elements)

Fig. 2. Nokuihongsang
綠衣紅裳

Fig. 3. Jogakbo

Typical examples of the five colours used in a magical sense in everyday life are wearing a *saekdong jeogori* (rainbow-striped top) on stones or holidays to prevent bad energy and praying for longevity with a magical colour ritual. For *saekdong* clothes, pink and green were used instead of black to symbolize *yin*(=shade), and various colours of yellow, red, blue, yellow, white, pink, and green were used. Also, brides customarily wear a green *jeogori* and red skirt (綠 衣 紅 裳, *Nokuihongsang*) (Fig. 2) with the same meaning. To drive away evil spirits, brides may apply *gonji* (the red spot on a bride's brow) at the wedding ceremony. Other examples are building a house with reddish ocher, painting a red amulet on New Year's, painting *dancheong* (traditional multicoloured paintwork on wooden buildings) in palaces and temples, making crafts such as *jogakbo* (patchwork) (Fig. 3), and the construction of Goguryeo's tomb murals.

The yin-yang and five elements explain Korean colour symbolism, and in this respect, it should be noted that the sense of colour is ideological. However, given that Korea, China, and Japan have developed different formative arts and cultural life, even if they are influenced by the same concepts of yin-yang and the five elements, it can be seen that the colour symbols of Korea are also more closely related to national emotions. Then, let us consider what colour Koreans prefer the most.

3. White Clothes

Although there are individual differences in preference, of course, in the case of China, it has been noted that red has been preferred since ancient times, and according to a research study conducted by Net Mile Research[1] in Japan in November 2011, even in modern times, Chinese people prefer red over other colours. Traditionally in China, red is associated with celebration or joy as well as good luck and wealth, as it generally represents the vigour of spirits or things, such as passion or vigour. Red is also thought to bring good luck and wealth. For this reason, red damask decorations and gifts wrapped in red are given to each house to the extent that it is said the whole area is dyed red on New Year's Day. Specifically in contemporary times, red is used in the logo of the Beijing Olympics and for the Shanghai Expo China Pavilion. Of note is that, in China, white has a very negative image as it is traditionally associated with death or bad luck. Even now, there is a tendency to avoid white in gift wrapping paper and gift envelopes.

Meanwhile, Japan has developed a variety of colours from an early age, causing the sensation of Japonism in Europe. Unlike in China and Korea, however, there is no known colour that is prominently preferred in the culture. For clothing, blue was the colour of the common people in the Edo period. This is because when the Luxury Ban Ordinance was implemented in the Edo period, dark blue and various other blue dyes were inexpensive, so they were not regulated by the luxury ban. Also, blue was recommended because of its excellent fastness and practicality, and thus it was a colour favoured by ordinary people and warriors. In particular, the *kimono* of colour dyed with indigo (監染) was said to have a colour that prevented pests and kept poisons away from the body, and it was used as a blanket for travellers. In the same period, a *noren* of indigo colour was hung at the boundary separating the inside and outside of the house, meant to prevent evil-causing diseases and the invasion of demons (Kobayashi, 2000, p. 15).

In contrast to China and Japan, Korea has a long-held preference for white clothes. Percival Lowell, who made Korea known to the West as the "Land of the Morning Calm," provides the following description in his book *Chosun: The Land of the Morning Calm: A Sketch of Korea* (2010, p. 83):

> Seoul is the most gloomy city I have ever seen, except for one thing. The one exception is the white clothes that people wear [...] A white robe with a bluish aura from a distance certainly brightens the street.

[1] Net Mile, which conducts online research ,was established in November 2000 as a subsidiary of Mitsui & Co., Ltd. The common point programme "Net Mile" on the Internet was started in April 2001, and currently has about 630 member sites and about 2.55 million members. This number makes it one of the largest point programme services on the Internet.

Also, Asson Grepst noted, "Coreas generally dress warmly regardless of the season. They wear a single layer of white, including vests, outerwear, and overcoats, layer by layer" (Grepst, 2005, p. 124). (Fig. 4).

During the Imjin War, Japanese soldiers disguised themselves in white clothes to confuse the Ming Dynasty soldiers. The following is what Jang Un-ik reported to Seonjo, the King of Korea at the time:

> A Chinese soldier who had just returned from the battlefield in Jiksan said, "Unexpectedly, between Cheonan and Jiksan, the Japanese soldiers all dressed in white and covered the fields, so the Chinese soldiers thought they were Koreans at first and didn't attack. But suddenly, the Japanese enemy fired their cannons first, so the Chinese soldiers ran out at once and killed each other, fighting for a long time."

There have been many different theories about why Koreans adore white or jade colour. Among them are four main theories: 1) the prevalent beliefs of an importance of character and moral of Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty, as well as an avoidance of colour, 2) wearing white mourning clothes for a long time, 3) dyes were not developed, and 4) idolisation of white colour.

Fig. 4. Slash burn farms of Jeju Island, by Chijun Minmurayama, during the Japanese Occupation

In fact, Confucianism, which dominated the spiritual domain and lifestyle during the Joseon Dynasty, taught Koreans to keep away from human emotions and instead value character, formality, and morals. As a result, even the palace could not be painted in splendid colours and was built with minimal decorations. Also, there were many restrictions on clothing colours based on class, so many commoners simply wore white. Confucianism further required people to wear mourning clothes, which were white, for an extended time. Colour culture could not be developed actively during the Joseon Dynasty due to this background.

However, this is not enough to explain why Koreans have held on to white clothes for so long. If anything, white clothes require much more labour to keep them clean, in comparison to dyed clothes. The record says that even government officials, who could have easily bought luxurious clothes of

different colours, preferred white clothes. If they really wanted to, they could have made natural dyes just like nowadays with modernised *hanboks* (Koran traditional clothes). So, it is probably more accurate to say that they simply did not prefer coloured clothes rather than to assume that colour dyes were not developed. Moreover, the fact that government officials have tried changing their "white clothes" to a different colour in the past and have failed solidifies the argument.

For example, in the 39th year of King Seonjo's reign (1606) in the Joseon Dynasty, there was a proposal to change the white clothes worn by Korean envoys dispatched to Japan to a Chinese style. In addition, during the reign of King Hyeonjong, people were formally banned from wearing white clothes, but the ban was not implemented due to the people's longstanding habits and preference for white clothes (Song, 2010, p. 157).

Confirmation of Koreans' national preference for white clothes also appeared during the Japanese colonial period. *The Manners and Customs of Koreans* compiled by the Japanese Government-General of Korea says, "Koreans seem to like white clothes enough to call themselves white-clothed people" (J.G.K, 1937, p. 33). The Japanese Government-General of Korea demanded that Koreans wear black instead of white because white clothes symbolise Korean nationality, become dirty easily, and need to be washed frequently. To enforce this, on market days, Japanese officials sprayed paint on people who wore white at the market or banned them from entering. In addition, as a tough measure, they did not stop at spraying paint, but also banned people wearing white clothes from entering government offices or excluded them from jobs as field workers (Koh, 2001, p. 121). According to Cho Hee-jin's *Seonbi (Scholar) and Piercing* (Cho, 2003, pp. 127-129), the Japanese forbade Koreans from wearing white robes for two reasons. One was that the white coat symbolised the spirit of Korean resistance, so it was judged as a code for unity. The other reason was to convert the labour force of women who washed white clothes into social production activities for modernisation.

However, we can tell that the white clothes culture did not disappear easily by looking at a photograph of the March 1st Movement, in which everyone is wearing white during the Japanese colonial era. The anecdotes above illustrate that Koreans held on to white clothes by their own will, not someone else's.

Moreover, Koreans love for white is not limited to clothing preference. For instance, Korean customs include sharing *baekseolgi* (steamed white rice cake) with neighbours on a baby's 21st day of life or 100th day of life and eating white noodles on a wedding day, where white represents the sacredness of birth and a bright future. Also, even though many coloured ceramic methods, such as Goryeo celadon and Inlaid technique, were developed early, white porcelain was the most loved by both royals and commoners in Joseon. White was favoured for women's clothing as well as *beoseon*, (traditional Korean socks), and even Koreans' favourite alcoholic drink was *makgeolli* (white rice wine).

4. Sosaek (素色) and Gyeol (결)

Why do Koreans love white so much? The egret, which appears frequently in Korean literature, is known for its white feathers and elegance, in contrast to the black crow. The egret is used as a metaphor for a person who is clean and noble, while the crow represents a person who is dirty, disgraceful, and low. Therefore, the white egret symbolises a man of virtue. Furthermore, Koreans value integrity, innocence, contentedness, and honest poverty – virtues that are part of the spirit of *seonbi*, a noble man. The common characteristics of these virtues are purity and innocence, and the fact that the spirit of *seonbi* found pure and innocence as noble probably affected Korea's high government officials' *baekeuihosang* (白衣好尙), preference for white clothing). Therefore, it seems that the white colour preference originated from a willingness to limit decorations and artifice and move toward the spiritual values of nobility and goodness, even as white symbolised cleanliness and sacredness in ancient East.

White includes various shades. In the case of fabrics, white may be obtained by bleaching, or it may be the fabric's *sosaek* (素色, original colour). In the past, Koreans used various bleaching methods to make original white fabrics even whiter. They preferred wearing a snow-white coloured clothes, sometimes described as "white as jade." (This phrase likely originated from the common characteristics of white and jade, which are clearness and pureness. Therefore, white was valued and idolised for its pureness.)

The Korean method of bleaching consisted of boiling and beating the fabric numerous times to make it whiter. Furthermore, there was a manufacturing process called *pussae* that involved starching fabrics and mending the strands. *pussae* was effective at stabilising the fabric form with starch and it making the fabric appear whiter because of the light reflecting off the white starch. After the *pussae* process was complete, the fabric was made smooth and glossy through *dadeumijil*, a pounding process. *Dadeumijil* was an important task for women during the Joseon Dynasty because it created a luxurious gloss to the fabric, as if a light were beaming from the inside, and emphasised the elegant texture of the fabric. Clothes made with the *pussae* process looked very neat, tidy, and crisp and did not sag or cling to one's body.

In Korean dress aesthetics, the beauty of *pussae* is called *tae* (態), and it is a beauty that harmonises with Korean manners. Wearing such clothing gives one the appearance of being clean and elegant. *Tae* which makes men look charismatic and strong while women look disciplined and elegant (Kim, 2009, p. 91).

According to the yin-yang and five elements, blue and white, and red and white are incompatible. However, Koreans' preference for white is also partially based on Taoist shamanism, which shows a strong preference for white in the application of primary colours, with a combination of white and blue, and white and red, which can be called the five colour applications.

Fig. 5. Hyewon, Yeondapcheong (年少踏青)

In addition, evidence of white colour preferences is found in the genre paintings of Kim Hong-do and Shin Yoon-bok of the late Joseon Dynasty. In Hye-won's paintings, more than half of all clothes are white. White is the most frequently seen colour for men's clothing, and white and blue are the most common for women's clothing (see Fig. 5).

Moreover, white is used in *dongjeong* (a thin white cloth-covered paper collar for Korean traditional clothes) or *geodeulji* (a thin layer of fabric attached to the sleeves of Korean traditional clothes) to create a pure and clean look through a similar or contrast effect.

Hanbok (Korean traditional clothes) are modest and simple in comparison to the Mandarin gown, which is decorated with various patterns, and the Japanese *kimono*, which is modern and uses *gansaek* (間色, a combination of five cardinal colours) (see Figs. 6-8). Of course, in the case of court costumes or ceremonial clothes such as *hwarot* (bridal wear) and *jeokui* (a red coloured clothing), the wearer's status and dignity were emphasised by decorating the entire outfit, but everyday clothing was relatively simple and modest with minimal decoration.

The important part of *hanbok* was its texture, called *gyeol*, which means something that has been sharpened and shaped over a long period of time, also seen in words like *soom-gyeol* (breath), *namoot-gyeol* (wood), *mool-gyeol* (water), *meorit-gyeol* (hair), *dol-gyeol* (stone), *baram-gyeol* (wind), *kum-gyeol* (dream) and *bidan-gyeol* (silk) (Cho, 2004, p. 612).

Fig. 6. China's Mandarin gown (qi-pao dress), 19c.

Fig. 7. Japan's kimono

Fig. 8. Traditional hanbok by Lee Young-hee

5. Conclusion

As noted previously, in Korea, the use of colour has undergone development through a natural philosophy involving Yin and Yang events. The use of these colours had a crucial influence on various forms in Korean life even in modern times.

The use of five colours is inherited in traditional costumes, such as *saaekdongjeogori*, and in food, other clothing, crafts, and the decoration of buildings prepared at events, such as events, weddings, and New Year's celebrations. Further, modern Koreans may have inherited these customary

traditions without knowing the customary use of colours and their ideological correlation in detail. However, if the period of unconscious inheritance of traditional customs is long and if you use a certain type and colour in your life, this tends to influence the identity of the people.

Of course, white clothes that have traditionally been favoured by Koreans will not have the same strong charm or ideological meaning as before for modern Koreans. In contrast to the past, modern people can have various options for numerous colours when living in the global era. Nevertheless, some recent studies on the preference of modern Koreans still show that young Koreans tend to prefer white and achromatic colours. For example, as per a study on purchase preferences in fashionable Korean markets over the three-year period during 2005–2007, the most preferred colour by far during the spring and summer was white, whereas dark achromatic colours were generally preferred in autumn and winter (Ryu, 2008, pp. 66–67).

Furthermore, Jung Ji Won's investigation also finds that Koreans' preference for white is higher in spring and summer (Jung, 2013, pp. 39–40).

These research results have limitations, in that the timing and space are limited but the colours and characteristics of traditional clothing have a partial influence on modern fashion, and collective thinking on ethnically embedded clothing still appears in modern times. Therefore, the ideology of traditional color will continue to have a significant effect on the national identity long into the future. Subsequently, more in-depth research on the relationship between national preferences and ideology is needed.

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