

## Exploring Joseon-Era Korean Attire Through the Novel 'Kingdom of a Thousand Years'



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**ABSTRACT:** Every culture has its own way of dressing, so clothes become symbols of their culture. Clothes, along with food and shelter, are important when studying a country's culture. This research looks at the book "*The Kingdom of a Thousand Years*" by Kim Kyung-uk to learn about how people in Korea dressed during the Joseon period (1392-1910). The goal is to understand how Koreans lived with nature back then through their clothes.

**KEYWORDS:** attire, cultural adaptation to the natural environment, *The Kingdom of a Thousand Years*, Kim Kyung-uk, Joseon era.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is a broad concept which has many researchers worldwide, including those in Vietnam, define in various ways. In Vietnam, a notable definition comes from Tran Ngoc Them, who describes culture as "*an organic system of material and spiritual values created and accumulated by humans through practical activities, in the interaction between humans and the natural and social environment*" (Tran Ngoc Them, 1999:10). He also breaks down culture into four basic components: cognitive culture, community organizational culture, culture interacts with the natural environment, and culture interacts with the social environment. This makes interacting with the natural environment the third important aspect of any cultural system. When people interact with the natural environment, they usually use what benefits them and deal with what could be harmful. Wearing clothes is one way people cope with the natural environment. Now, let's explore how Koreans in the 17th century coped with their natural surroundings through their attire, as described by Kim Kyung-uk in the novel "*The Kingdom of a Thousand Years*" (2007).

### 2. KIM KYUNG-UK AND THE KINGDOM OF A THOUSAND YEARS

Born in 1971 in Gwangju, Kim Kyung-uk graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Seoul National University and pursued a Ph.D. in Korean Literature there. He entered the world of literature in 1993 while still a student, winning the "World Author" Young Writer Award for his novel "The Solitary Person." Since then, he has written extensively and received numerous other awards, including the Han-kuk Il-bo Literary Award, Modern Literature Award, the 40th Dong-in Literary Award, etc.

While "*The Kingdom of a Thousand Years*" by Kim Kyung-uk didn't secure awards in the Korean literary circles, it stands as both a historical novel and a contemporary tale that reflects the emotions and responses of those facing loneliness. The work becomes even more distinctive as it's narrated through the perspective of a foreigner present in Joseon-era Korea. Through Weltevree's descriptions, the Joseon culture comes alive, with intricate detailing of Korean attire, highlighting the intriguing differences between an Eastern culture where it is considered more barbaric, compared to the western civilization of the Netherlands – a maritime power in the 17th century. The article draws its primary material from excerpts describing Joseon-era attire in Kim Kyung-uk's "*The Kingdom of a Thousand Years*," published by Moonji Publishing House in 2007. This material serves to illustrate the traditional attire worn by the Korean people. Furthermore, the author utilizes the fabric and colors of this attire to partly explain the thoughts and culture of the Korean people.

### 3. ATTIRE OF JOSEON PEOPLE IN "THE KINGDOM OF A THOUSAND YEARS"

According to Microsoft Encarta 2003 Encyclopedia, attire is defined as "clothing, covering for the body, worn to protect it from outside harm. The words fabric and attire have a connection, the former meaning woven or spun fabric, and the latter meaning fabric used to cover the human body. The first attire made by people was from tree bark, animal skins...". Attire includes: pants, shirts, dresses, ...; hats, caps, scarves; shoes, sandals, boots; gloves, socks; belts, handbags, wallets,...; jewelry,... Among the mentioned attire, the most important are pants, shirts, dresses... - these terms refer to woven products cut and sewn into items that cover the human body. In this article, the author focuses on analyzing straw sandals, hair ties made of straw, everyday clothing, and mourning attire of the Joseon people around the 17th century.

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### 3.1 Straw Sandals and Hair Ties: Reflecting Agricultural Elements in Natural Environment Interaction.

Footwear, much like attire, offers insights into a culture's clothing customs. In "The Kingdom of a Thousand Years," Weltevree, a Dutchman stranded in Joseon during the 17th century, provides a glimpse into the clothing of Koreans from that period. "They wore intricately woven straw sandals" (Kim Kyung-uk, 2007:37). Through Weltevree's account, it becomes evident that during the 17th century, when technologies for creating shoes from materials like leather or fabric were not as developed, the people of Joseon turned to straw – the dried stems of cereal plants after harvesting – to fashion footwear for their travels. This approach to interacting with the natural environment reflects their resourcefulness and ability to adapt to their agricultural diet centered around rice and grains. In the Joseon era, as grains formed a major part of their diet, Koreans utilized the abundant dried stems of cereal plants from their surroundings to create footwear that protected their feet during walks. In an era when walking was the primary mode of transportation for the majority of Joseon's commoners, straw sandals helped alleviate foot discomfort on rocky terrain. Straw sandals provided cooling relief in the summer and insulation in the winter. Straw- The symbolizing agriculture, was deeply embedded in the straw sandals worn by Koreans in the 17th century. According to South Korea's Doopedia dictionary, the history of Korean straw sandals dates back about two thousand years, during the Ma Han period (1st century BC - 3rd century AD). Even ceramics from the Silla period exhibited forms resembling modern straw sandals. Crafted by weaving straw strands and sewn together using straw threads, women's straw sandals boasted delicate intricacies. At times, Koreans even dyed the straps of their straw sandals before weaving them into footwear. In the past, both aristocrats and commoners relied on straw sandals for daily mobility. During leisure farming seasons, families would gather to weave dozens of straw sandals, keeping them in their living rooms for gradual use or selling them at markets to earn extra income. Today, Koreans continue to uphold the tradition of wearing straw sandals, particularly during mourning periods

Furthermore, straw wasn't only employed for crafting sandals; the people of Joseon also utilized it as a means to tie their hair. This practice becomes even more evident in Weltevree's descriptions as he observes Joseon children playing on the streets.

"The group of children ran after the crowd with curious eyes. Their foreheads were high, and their hair was tied with a strand resembling straw. Most of them wore plain white clothes, while some boys ran around bare-chested. They faced us and made buzzing sounds like mosquitoes" (Kim Kyung-uk, 2007:44).

The strand of straw used as hair ties was woven by twisting two pieces of straw together, making it both soft and resilient, resistant to breaking. This versatility of straw ties had many applications in agriculture, packaging, and more. As Weltevree reveals, Koreans of the Joseon era also used straw ties to secure their hair. Thus, straw played a significant role in the daily lives of ancient Koreans, serving as both functional footwear and practical hair fasteners for their convenience. It also provided a cooling effect during scorching summer days.

### 3.2 Attire

#### 3.2.1 Colour: Reverence for White

As Weltevree laid eyes upon the straw sandals of the Joseon people, it was also the moment he glimpsed their attire. He noted this impression: "Perhaps to make their petite figures appear larger or to ward off evil spirits, every one of them dressed in **white attire**, without exception. They resembled an army of snowmen on the march" (Kim Kyung-uk, 2007:37). Upon observing the foreigner closely, he remarked: "The outer garments of this foreigner extended down to the knees like a cloak, while the pants were tied at the ankle. The clothing was fashioned from **hemp fabric**" (Kim Kyung-uk, 2007:40). The preference for white clothing wasn't limited to adults; even Joseon children commonly wore white garments: "The group of children ran after the crowd with curious eyes. Their foreheads were high, and their hair was tied with a strand resembling straw. Most of them wore **plain white clothes**, while some boys ran around bare-chested. They faced us and made buzzing sounds like mosquitoes" (Kim Kyung-uk, 2007:44).

White wasn't only favored during the summer; even in the cold winter, the people of Joseon still favored it. "The governor provided us with padded attire. Still, it's **white**. (...) The padded clothes offered warmth and protection to our torn and worn-out souls. Evoken and Denison looked like snowmen in their white padded attire" (Kim Kyung-uk, 2007:64).

Foreigners like the three Dutchmen who stepped onto Joseon's soil, as portrayed in this novel, couldn't help but be struck by the Joseon people's love for the white colour. To such an extent that when Evoken donned the outfit provided by the governor and exclaimed, "Captain, slipping into this white attire, it's as if I've become a missionary," it was evident that merely a glance at the attire could immediately evoke thoughts of a specific ethnicity. This white attire stood as a symbol, a representation that invoked recollections of the Korean people.

The funerary attire of the Joseon people also retained the theme of white. When Weltevree found himself washed ashore in Joseon, he was utterly astounded when he beheld a peculiar procession – a parade that he later came to know as the "funeral procession." He described this Joseon funeral procession as somber and peculiar..

"As I passed by a sizable village, I witnessed a peculiar procession. Men adorned in garments woven from **hemp fabric**, wearing hats and with **straw ropes** coiled around their heads, stood at the forefront of the procession, wielding stout staffs. There are also men who clad in similar **hemp fabric**, lifting two stretchers and following behind. These stretchers were adorned with vibrant paper flowers, and the rear stretchers was larger than the front one. Beyond the stretchers, men dressed in the same attire

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walked while shaking small bells. Some even danced and sang. A group of women suddenly burst into wailing, trailing behind. Chinese characters were inscribed on flags that followed. Yet more individuals held lanterns adorned with green and red paper. These lanterns depicted images of the sun, crescent moons, and lotus blossoms" (Kim Kyung-uk, 2007:64).

The descriptions of the funeral procession of the Joseon people as mentioned above reveal that their mourning attire was white. The Korean people are renowned for their fondness for wearing white clothes to the extent that they are referred to as the "white-clothed people" (baekeui minjok). The book "101 Questions about Society that Even Social Studies Teachers Are Curious About" (2011) surveyed the origin, since when do Koreans like to wear white attire: No ancient documents within Korean records contain such information, but the Chinese "Records of the Three Kingdoms: Eastern Expedition" has a passage stating that people from Buyeo and Silla liked to wear white attire. This inclination towards white attire continued throughout the Goryeo era (918-1392) and the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910). During the Goryeo period, even kings preferred to wear garments made of white coarse fabric, and after the introduction of white cotton fabric in the late Goryeo period, the practice of wearing white attire became common among Koreans, using either white cotton fabric, coarse fabric or linen..

When delving into the reasons why the Korean people have a fondness for white attire, the book "Question and Answer about Joseon" (1946) by Choi Nam Seon sheds light on this tradition in the following manner.

*"In general, the people of Joseon, since ancient times, have regarded the sun as a divine force and held the belief that they are descendants of the divine. Hence, they view the white radiance as something sacred, symbolizing the brilliance of the sun. This led them to wear white clothing as a symbol of pride. Over time, this practice became a customary tradition for the entire community. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Korea alone, but rather it is found worldwide wherever people revere the sun. For example, cultures like those of Egypt or Babylon also consider the white radiance as sacred and have a preference for white attire."*

Perhaps due to the reverence for the color white, the Korean people also have an affinity for white horses and white tigers. The affinity for white is also evident in place names like Mount Baekdu-san (White Head Mountain) and Baekrokdam on Mount Hallasan.

Moreover, the presence of white in attire reflects the life and spirit of the Korean people. During the Joseon era, Koreans do not distinguish between white attire and mourning clothing. They wore white attire in everyday life and also during funeral. Kings of the Joseon dynasty, such as King Taejo, King Sejong, King Yeonsan-gun, King Jungjong, and King Seonjo, repeatedly recommended the wearing of blue attire, but these efforts did not yield results. The Korean people continued to prefer and wear white clothing in their daily lives. This spirit persisted even during the Japanese colonial period. The Japanese authorities mandated that Koreans wear black clothing instead of white due to economic reasons – white clothes were believed to require frequent washing and were susceptible to stains. However, the vast majority did not heed this encouragement, the suppression of white clothing was so severe that the Japanese intentionally smeared ink on the clothes of the people on the street, so wearing white clothes was somewhat blocked. Nonetheless, the Korean people persisted in wearing their white clothing, and it became a symbol of resistance against Japan. The patriotic Korean armed forces also donned white uniforms. During the *March 1st Movement* and also the mourning day of King Gojong, the entire Korean peninsula was draped in white attire. The endurance of white attire as both everyday wear for commoners and a symbol of resistance remains steadfast.

Recently, a scholar has discovered the reason behind the cultural preference for white attire is because of the "Ash water". Ash water is the water that emerges after soaking the burned ash from rice straw or peanut shells in water, which is a natural alkaline solution. The Korean people used this ash water method to launder clothes, effectively removing germs and bacteria while whitening the fabric, thus maintaining the whiteness and cleanliness of their clothes. Additionally, ash water made cotton garments soft and white, even those soaked in mud while working in the fields. With the use of ash water, even older clothes could retain a pristine white appearance. Perhaps it's due to the combination of this effective cleaning method, along with the deep reverence for the sacred white color, that the Korean people's determination to preserve the purity of white attire is so steadfast.

### 3.2.2 Material: Hemp fabric

In the previous section, the author analyzed the reverence for the color white as demonstrated through the attire of the Joseon Koreans. Now, the author delves into exploring the materials used in their clothing. A prominent feature of the Joseon era's social structure was the four-class system, comprising: Yangban (scholar-officials and military officials), Jungin (local officials and individuals with specialized knowledge such as doctors and scholars), commoners (farmers, artisans, merchants, and fishermen), and slaves (servants, entertainers, priests, etc.). This article is based on the descriptions provided by Weltevrete, the protagonist in the novel "The Kingdom of a thousand years," and therefore focuses on examining the clothing of the commoners and slaves, the individuals Weltevrete readily encountered.

Weltevrete observed, "*The attire of these foreigners extended down to their knees like a cloak, and their pants were fastened at the ankle. Their attire was made from **Hemp fabric***" (Kim Kyung-uk, 2007:40). As for funeral clothing, "*Passing through a large village, I witnessed a peculiar procession. Men wore clothing made of **Hemp fabric**, (...)*" (Kim Kyung-uk, 2007:71).

According to the Doopedia Encyclopedia, "hemp fabric" is a type of fabric woven from hemp fibers. People use the fibrous inner layer found within the hemp plant's stalk to weave this fabric. Hemp fabric is known for its ability to quickly absorb and release moisture, as well as its resistance to UV rays and its antimicrobial and antifungal properties. Additionally, it is durable and

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strong, making it suitable not only for textile production but also for various other uses such as ropes, nets, and even vehicle tires. Hemp is a short-season plant that grows in temperate and tropical climates. It has been cultivated for textile use since ancient times, and its versatility has led to its utilization worldwide, even dating back to the Stone Age. In Korea, hemp cloth has been used as a material for making clothes and pillows since the Gojoseon period (? - 108 BC)..

Therefore, it is evident that the people of Korea have been using hemp fabric since ancient times, spanning continuously from the Gojoseon period to the later era of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) they still love this fabric. This enduring affinity for hemp fabric led to the observation made by Weltevrete when he drifted in Joseon in 1626. At that time, he noted that the inhabitants of Joseon commonly only wore white attire that were sewn from hemp fabric. Their attire typically consisted of long robes that reached their knees, resembling coats, while the trousers were tied at the ankle. This traditional attire was distinctive of the commoners and lower classes during the Joseon era. The choice of fabric for this attire reflects their adaptation to the natural environment. The people of Korea leveraged hemp- a plant abundant in the temperate climate of Korea, to weave garments suited for coping with the sweltering heat of summer. Hemp fabric's rapid moisture absorption and release, combined with its UV protection and antimicrobial properties, made it well-suited for individuals who endured arduous labor in challenging conditions, particularly the lowest-ranking segments of society. This utilization of hemp fabric served as a tool to help them effectively navigate their natural surroundings, especially in demanding tasks like agricultural work during the scorching days of summer.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Attire stands as one of the most vivid expressions of a nation's cultural identity. This article has delved into the clothing of the Korean people during the Joseon era, as portrayed through the descriptions of the main character, Weltevrete, in the novel "The kingdom of a thousand years" by the author Kim Kyung-uk. In this exploration, the author utilized the implicit content within a literary work to illustrate the fashion preferences of 17th-century Koreans. They often wore clothing crafted from hemp fabric, with a majority of the population opting for white attire. Hemp fabric exemplified the astute use of locally available materials to combat the natural heat of the environment. The strong inclination towards white attire was apparent in their everyday clothing. This penchant is rooted in the Korean people's historical reverence for the sun, causing them to regard white—the light of the sun—as a sacred symbol that must be preserved. As a result, they cherished wearing white garments and maintained their pristine appearance daily. Beyond attire, the article also explored the footwear worn by the Joseon people in their daily lives. They utilized straw sandals— another natural resource. These straw sandals were a testament to their resourcefulness in utilizing the environment to make their daily lives more practical. Through attire, and more broadly, the dressing habits of the Joseon Koreans, we glimpse the profound agricultural imprint on their cultural identity. This imprint shares a resemblance with the dressing culture of the Vietnamese people. Within the confines of the article, the author has hinted at a forthcoming comparative study, where the cultural interactions with the natural environment of both the Korean and Vietnamese people will be further analyzed.

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