

Articles



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Joseon in Color:
“Colored Clothes Campaign”
and the “White Clothes Discourse”

Kim Seok-hee

Introduction

This article examines the so-called “Colored Clothes Campaign”(saegeui jangryeo undong) promoted by the Japanese imperial authorities during Japan’s occupation of Korea (1910-45) and the “white color discourse” that prevailed at the time, in terms of the relationship that existed between symbolism (in this case, symbols of color) and power (both political and economic).

The “Colored Clothes Campaign” may have been the most controversial event related to color that ever occurred in Korean history. The most representative color of Korea—none other than the color white—was stigmatized and derided as a “symbol of weakness” through this campaign and was attacked by the Office of the Japanese Governor-General of Joseon (hereafter JGGJ Office), which argued that white clothing should be abolished and modernization should be pursued. According to newspaper reports, the campaign began around 1923, and refraining from white clothing became obligatory for Koreans thereafter.

This campaign was in fact related to Japan’s war effort, as we can confirm by the Japanese colonial policy that promoted cotton production and by the prosperity of textile manufacturers at the time. Eliminating a “symbol of weakness” and pursuing “modernization” were mere catchphrases cast at Koreans by the Japanese. The ultimate objective of this campaign was to boost and aid Japan’s general war effort.

Historical studies and studies of clothing in general that have attempted to focus on this particular issue (this campaign) have been introduced several times, yet most of them regarded this campaign simply as an event that oppressed the Korean people’s wearing of traditional white clothes, and that intended to annihilate the custom itself (Park 1998; Ha 2001; Go 2002; Yi 2007; and Gu 2003). Only a few of those studies have attempted a comprehensive analysis of the campaign itself. Recent research has begun to examine this campaign as a “social phenomenon” that occurred during the Japanese occupation period, including a study by Gong Je-Uk (2006). Gong examined exactly how Koreans were oppressed, vis-à-vis their white clothing, by analyzing traces of inducement, coercion and propaganda displayed in the campaign, and also by surveying several “attack points” that were selected and targeted by the Japanese authorities, such as the white clothes and so-called “*mompé*” attire (Gong 2006:154-56). Gong pointed out that the JGGJ Office

tried to control the everyday life of the Korean public by presenting certain statistics that would highlight the “efficient nature” of the colored clothes and the “inefficient nature” of the white clothes in terms of the time and energy that would be spent to clean them. Despite the achievements of Gong’s work, however, the meanings of the campaign in the context of colonial realities—not to mention the network it established—need further examination. Another researcher who tried to do this was Jo Hi-jin, whose work examined the characteristics of individual periods (Jo 2010:681-729).¹ Jo criticized earlier studies that examined Koreans’ white clothes from the exclusive perspective of the aesthetic consciousness of the Korean people.

Yet actually, those studies, in most cases, simply tried to explore the positive meaning of the white clothes within Korean history, and did not directly address either the “white clothes discourse” or the “colored clothes discourse” that prevailed at the time. The problem of those studies was that they merely presented such consciousness as a “given” sentiment, rather than concentrating on the issue of consciousness. “Symbols,” and their political and socio-cultural meaning, have thus far not gained the research attention that they deserve; so they should be further explored.

In order to ascertain the political meaning of the campaign, which heated up in the 1920s, we should examine Yanagi Muneyoshi’s “white color discourse,” which represented the color white as the symbol of the Joseon people’s sorrow and frustration.² His perspective on the consumption of color was quite influential and depicted Korea as an object rather than a subject.

1. This study mostly commented upon previous studies that had concentrated upon examining the Koreans’ white clothes, as the “colored clothes campaign” itself had hardly been dealt with in prior studies.

2. “Joseon” was the title of a premodern dynasty founded by Yi Seong-gye in 1392. Joseon lasted until 1910, when lost its sovereignty to Japan that year. But even before it met its final demise, the dynasty changed its name to “Daehan” in 1897, when King Gojong elevated himself to the status of emperor. So, strictly speaking, the term “Joseon” was used to refer to the state for total of 505 years. Yet, even after the “Daehan Empire” was annexed by Japan, the term “Joseon” continued to be used as a term referring to the Korean people who had lived as the “Joseon people” for over five centuries by that point. Moreover, Japan named its Governor-General office in Korea as the “*Chosen Sotoku*,” or “Governor-General of Chosen,” or, in Korean, the “Governor General of Jeoson,” which suggests that people at that time identified the Korean people as the “Chosen people,” or “Joseon people,” in Korean. As used here, “Joseon” therefore sometimes indicates the Korean people and sometimes the Korean nation, even during colonial times.

His assessment of the meaning of white, which was shared by many Korean people, was not by any means entirely positive, and even served the aims of the Japanese colonial authorities, as well.

So, what things went on with this campaign, and what was the Korean people's response? The novel entitled *Kusa-bukashi*, written by the Korean author Kim Sa-Ryang, seems to have been the only novel to describe the campaign in detail at the time. This novel was published after adherence to this campaign had already become quite obligatory and demanding, and after censorship of literature by Japanese officials in the colony had worsened significantly, so it was in fact authored in a very difficult atmosphere. Nevertheless, the novel portrays the campaign as a violent policy initiative promoting colored clothes and, interestingly enough, suggests that in some cases even the wearing of white clothes may have led to other forms of violence as well (in the aftermath of the "colored clothes campaign"). This novel shows us how the campaign became yet another form of oppression against the Korean people, and it serves as an invaluable record that forces us to contemplate how those who lived in this period would have internalized this particular experience. The details of this will be examined in following sections.

The Representative Color of the Korean People: White

A hundred years ago, a priest named Norbert Weber (1870-1956) first came to Korea in 1911 and came again in 1925. He is known to have created a lengthy black-and-white silent film entitled *Im Land der Morgenstille* (*From the Land of the Morning Calm*, 118 min. 1925), and in 1915 published a book of over four hundred pages by the same title of his own writing.³

3. Portions of his film, including the things that he heard and saw on his journey, were recently televised in a KBS Special, In a country with a calm morning (aired date: 2010. 1. 21). On this journey, Weber and his colleagues embarked from Marseilles, and visited the Suez Canal, Ceylon, Singapore, Osaka, and finally reached their destination at the port of Busan. According to the KBS special, the first scenes of Weber's film show him tracing the path they took to reach Busan, using a world map. It is interesting enough to watch him draw both the Italian and Korean peninsulas in chalk on a blackboard, and competently write the Chinese Characters 朝鮮 (Joseon). In the film, the sights of Seoul are captured in great detail. We can see people selling and buying things using an abacus, and see how the East

According to the records he left, priest Weber was particularly enchanted by the “colors” of the Korean people. His description of the children’s clothes is most interesting and even poetic.

The Joseon people know how to translate the freshness of trees, grass and even nameless wild flowers, to the clothes of their own children. They are beautiful and they are attractive, just like flowers blooming in the spring. A white Anemone and a shy purple Violet all harmoniously blend into the Joseon customs. It is a feast of color that could only come from a magical sense, triggered by the freshness and joy of the spring.⁴

In fact, according to the film he shot, he seems to have come across a scene

Gate market (the Dongdae-mun market today) looked in those days (when the market was called the “Baegogae market”). At the time the Japanese merchants had already taken over the Korean market, and Weber openly discusses his frustrations over this fact as well. In this silent film, we can see many landmarks of the capitol Seoul that simply no longer exist today, such as the East Small Gate (“Dongso-mun”), and sites for which the audience may, for a moment, hesitate, such as the Jang-an-sa temple at the Geumgang-san Mountain. The film also features exquisite scenes from that time, such as people suspended from huge swings during the Dano-jeol festival, cows plowing fields, people hanging around at village wells, peasants dancing after their harvests, women sewing their clothes and pressing them by beating them with sticks, Buddhist nuns in hermitage training, potters firing pots, and people in a funeral procession. Scholars of Korean history and culture should find all of this material immensely significant.

4. The following are the author’s own translations of the KBS Special, *Im Land der Morgenstille*, which was originally written in German and has never been translated into either English or Japanese. According to the Benedictine Order, the task of translating the material into Korean is currently underway. Based on what was broadcast, Priest Weber’s accounts seem to be balanced, systemic, and meticulous, and obviously were so because of his deep understanding of Korea and affection for the Korean people. This film he shot and records he kept are undoubtedly invaluable materials for the Korean people, and would improve understanding of how Korean society looked in those days. Yet it is also true that it was Weber’s privileged status in Western society that made it possible for him to visit to Korea. Further, his visits and filming took place amidst an atmosphere of Western imperialism, whose aggression often relied on religion and archaeology. The word “quiet,” which was often used in representing Joseon was nothing but a shield that would prevent others from seeing right through the colonized reality in Korea, which was in fact anything but “quiet.” Weber was not the one who came up with this description, but a colonial period “Joseon discourse,” which perceived the country as the “land of the morning calm” was generally shared among the Western countries, within a perspective that we now call “Orientalism.” In the early half of the 19th century, Western countries tried to seize their desires in the “Orient,” and religion and archaeology facilitated those very intentions. Nonetheless, the personal inclinations and philosophy of Weber, who seems to have had a rather objective and reserved character, should be further analyzed, with the help of the highly anticipated Korean translation of his book.

where the women were dyeing some clothes. He was so amazed by such traditional process that he filmed it for the next couple of days. In the footage, the women sprayed the threads with ashes, then boiled them, and cooled them down and then dried them. Based on documentation from the contents of Weber's book, Webber's description of these scenes was so vivid and his film so focused on Weber's love for Joseon "colors" that the KBS special ended with a picture of the aforementioned children's clothes, digitally rendered in bright colors.

Such sentiment is shared by many Koreans today. The natural beauty of the color of *hanbok* (the clothing worn throughout Joseon times and continuing into the colonial period), and the Korean wrapping & paper arts, have all been introduced inside and outside of Korea through the media, which created the Korea image." Period films such as *Scandal* of 2003 (Directed by Yi Jae-yong) and TV dramas like KBS's *Hwang Jini* of 2006, all put tremendous effort into projecting the vibrant colors of the Korean *hanbok* onto the screen. In the meantime, scholars also attempted scientific analyses of the Korean color, and tried to explore the philosophical nature of the traditional colors that the Koreans have been so fond of in the past (An 1973; Yi 2003; Noh 2006; Kim 2007; and An 2008). Such recent efforts have much to do with Korean pride in their own traditions. And the recent atmosphere generated by the campaign of "acquiring a proper understanding of our history" (Yi 2001; Noh 2006; Kim J.Y. 2007; and An 2008), which suggested that we create a positive national identity of our own, also turned out to be beneficial as well.

Yet, contemporary attention to color variety should not make us forget that the primary color worn by Koreans in the past was in fact white. Actually, the dyeing scene in Weber's film mentioned above only lasts a little over ten minutes. All the people in these scenes, and all of those who appeared in the film in general, such as the women who were dyeing the clothes, the peasants who were plowing the fields, the females at the well, and the potters firing pottery, were in fact all wearing white. During the Japanese occupation, the colonial government even oppressed the Koreans' custom of "wearing white," and forced them to wear "colored attire" instead. In the face of such pressure, the Koreans considered wearing white to be a gesture of resistance.

Percival Lowell's *Chosun, The Land of Morning Calm* (1888) and Lillias Horton Underwood's *Fifteen Years Among the Top-Knots* (1904), among many other accounts by Western sources, confirm that the Joseon people primarily

wore white. And most importantly of all, we should remember that the Japanese authorities actually promoted the aforementioned “Colored Clothes Campaign”. It began around 1905 when the so-called Eulsa-year treaty was signed and Joseon became a protectorate of Japan, and later the promotion of this campaign intensified around 1923.

And around 1932, the campaign was forcibly implemented, as will be discussed later.

The “White Color Discourse” and Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889-1961)

One of the most notable outsiders who was attracted to Korea’s “whiteness,” was a Japanese scholar named Yanagi Muneyoshi. Yanagi, who was generally opposed war and violence, had deep sympathy for Korea’s situation and a deep interest in Korean culture, as we should know. He was also very fond of Joseon porcelains, and “Joseon white porcelains” in particular. In them, he saw the image of “beauty” and “loneliness.”

To him, the elegant lines of the Joseon dynasty’s white porcelains symbolized a “Joseon heart that was hungry for love” and hundreds of “tearful, appealing voices”. Yanagi imagined the Joseon people to be making the following appeals: “We Koreans have endured pains for a long, long time. Yet no one tries to look into our wounded, fallen hearts.” Or, “Japan—our not too distant neighbor by bloodline—why have you no intention of bonding to us with the love of a sibling?” And in response to them, Yanagi said “Such sorrowful voices emanate from the depths of these porcelains; so how can one not touch and nurture that.”(Yanagi 1934:184-97).

What should be noted is the fact that Yanagi used to compare the Joseon white porcelain to a beautiful woman, and even treated Joseon as a female persona. He characterized “female” as “submissive,” “passive” and “quiet.” So, as Park Yu-ha once pointed out, we can see from this characterization the nature of Yanagi’s own imperialist attitude, which must have considered Japan as the aggressive male character (Yanagi 1934:218-31).

To Yanagi, “color” symbolized “fun and pleasantness;” and in his eyes the absence or lack of color indicated “an unpleasant life.” In short, he considered white a symbol of a “void.” His overall description of the color white, and the

quality of the Korean culture in general, which depicted and regarded them as weak and feminine, could be labeled a “white color discourse.”

Naturally enough, this perspective was mirrored in his perception of the “white Joseon clothes” as well. In his “Travel to Joseon”(Yanagi 1934:198-217), he once confessed that he was enchanted by the white clothes of the Chosen people, and he also made an interesting “observation,” referring to a “permanent mourning period” that was supposedly being observed by the Joseon people for their entire lives.⁵

Peasants who wear white, are practically serving a mourning period that would never end at all. All the pains and horror that the Koreans had been suffering, and the fact that they now have nowhere else to turn to, must have made them pretty much accustomed to wearing such attire. (Yanagi 1934:231)

Considering the probable influences of the aforementioned “white color discourse,” Yanagi’s comment above and his evaluation of the clothes of the Korean people could be labeled as a “white clothes discourse.” Many Koreans at that time shared this view and were led to believe that white clothes were the symbol of the Joseon people. As he was the first to bring this up, we can consider Yanagi Muneyoshi’s aesthetic arguments to have started this kind of thinking.

During the occupation period, the discovery of the “meaning of white clothes” reinforced local resistance to the colonial authorities. Yet the conflicting images of “sorrow” and “beauty” within the discourse itself led people in subsequent periods to explore the meaning of such discourse mostly in terms of the “symbolic nature” of white clothes. It should be noted that the image of sorrow somehow definitely served the overall sentiment behind the “Colored

5. Park gives insight into the fact that Yanagi’s concept of Joseon, as based on the color white, in fact, referred to “absence.” She also pointed out that articles such as “Our ancestors’ craftsmanship” (Yu Hong-ryeol) or “Beauty of Korea” (Kim Weon-ryong), by authors who shared Yanagi’s perspective, continued to be inserted in Korean middle and high school Korean Language textbooks up until 1989. Most of the Yanagi Muneyoshi quotes presented here had also been once quoted by Park Yu-ha in her works, yet all the quotes presented in this article were newly searched and found by this author from the official Yanagi Collection and re-translated.

Clothes Campaign” of the JGGJ Office, regardless of Yanagi’s intentions. In fact, the campaign became much more aggressive and demanding after Yanagi’s articles were published. And the authorities began to argue not only for the “economic merits of colored clothes,” but also the importance of “eliminating the symbols of weakness.”

The “Colored Clothes Campaign”

The “Colored Clothes Campaign” was a campaign designed to urge the Korean people to wear colored clothes, as white clothes supposedly got dirty quickly, and people supposedly would have to spend so much time and energy cleaning them. After Joseon became Japan’s protectorate and a colony, a new agenda of “modernization” was forced upon the people. In this case, “modernization” referred to the process of reaching a “civilized” state, and the driving force behind such argument was nothing but imperialism, as has been addressed by many scholars including Edward W. Said in *Culture and Imperialism*. The “Colored Clothes Campaign” was a typical attempt to reproach and denounce the indigenous culture of a colonized region as “inefficient and unsanitary,” thereby generating ways to oppress and obliterate it.

On November 2nd of 1905, at which time the Eulsa-year treaty (a.k.a. the “Protectorate Treaty”) was signed, the Japanese legation issued a document entitled “Proclamation of Prohibition upon wearing either white or plain clothes” (kankoku seihu kanmin-ni hakutan chyakuyou kinsi yukoku haturei, Ilbon Gongsakwan 1905), to every consulate inside Korea. From this proclamation we can see that the “Colored Clothes Campaign” was already in its infant stage at the time. Yet the Koreans turned out to be non-responsive to this order, even after their homeland was completely colonized in 1910. So around the year 1923 new efforts emerged, such as the authorities’ promoting the superiority of dyed products (*Joseon Ilbo* 1923), or rewarding regions where people were willfully wearing colored attire, or even staging lecture tours to encourage people to wear colored clothes (*Joseon Ilbo* 1926; *Donga Ilbo* 1928). And as the Joseon people still remained passive, the “Colored Clothes Campaign” turned into an executive order that was forcefully implemented.

The *Monthly Bulletin of Monitoring Publication in Chosen* No.76, issued on December 9, 1934, contained a document entitled “Summary of

a newspaper report that was asked to be deleted.” According to the title, it seems like a summary of a report that was caught in the censoring process and ordered to be either deleted or changed. Censorship was already firmly established at this point and Korean objections colonial policy agenda would have been very difficult. As it was censored, the report was evidently excluded from the actual newspaper issue. But we can still see the contents, thanks to this document.

In the Pyeongsan region of the Hwanghae-do province, there was an incident in which a policeman decided to paint the words “Jo-Hakja” (趙學者) in large letters on the back of a Yangban gentleman who was wearing white attire. After being humiliated in such manner, that individual committed suicide out of frustration of suffering such shameful treatment. The *Joseon Ilbo* tried to file a report that argued two points: first, the spirit of the “Colored Clothes Campaign” was to address so-called cost problems (of having to wash and clean “easily soiled” white clothes), which was understandable, while also promoting a “civilized” outlook; and second, the oppressive methods employed by the authorities that urged Koreans to wear colored clothes bordered on a violation of basic human rights. This report only criticized the oppressive and forceful nature of the policy. But, in essence, it conceded to the objective and the “spirit” of the campaign.

On the other hand, a Korean author named Kim Sa-Ryang, who had announced a series of literary works in Japanese, chose to describe in his novel *Kusa-bukashi* just how this policy was forcefully implemented in the colony. Kim was born in Pyeongyang in 1914, and graduated from the Pyeongyang Middle and High School and later Tokyo Imperial University. Working inside the Japanese literary society, he tried hard to convey the reality on the peninsula to readers. In 1940, his *Hikarino-nakani* received the second-place prize of the Akutagawa Award, and earned him quite a reputation. Unfortunately, some of his later works happened to promote Korean collaboration with the Japanese. In the end, he escaped to Yennan, and served in the Korean resistance to the Japanese Military there. After Korea was liberated, he returned to Pyeongyang, and when the Korean War broke out, he started to serve as a war correspondent, only to die of a heart attack as he was retreating (An 1973:17-65).

An opening scene from *Kusa-bukashi* goes like this:

Deep inside the mountain ranges, in this remote, isolated hall, Park In-

sik never imagined that he would meet his old teacher, “the nose-blower,” again. When his uncle, the county headman, called the residents to gather around, he rose to the stage to address them to “encourage the wearing of colored clothes.” Then a person with an unusually long neck came out bobbing his head and started translating. That fiftyish person was without doubt his old teacher...Uncle, as a leader of the county, figured that using the Korean language was “below” him, so the “nose-blower” was translating his Japanese words into Korean.

“Err, so in essence we should abolish the wearing of white clothes, and wear colored ones instead.”

Uncle was giving that speech rather proudly, puffing his chest, with his hands folded behind his back.

“The reason the Joseon people got poor is because they continued to wear white clothes. It is a waste of time and energy. White clothes get dirty fast, and it takes time to clean them.” (Kim 1973:149)

The county headman was telling the public that the white attire that the Joseon people had worn should be given up, and colored clothes should be worn instead. This was the so-called “Colored Clothes Campaign.” Page 26 of the January 24th, 1932 issue of the *Joseon Ilbo* carried the following commentary on the campaign:

The authorities have been strongly arguing for the wearing of colored clothes as an issue that should deserve the attention of the ordinary people. Now this argument has spread to other regions, and they are urging all the people living there to do as asked without exception. It goes without saying that *colored clothes have many merits and benefits in the life of today, in terms of outlook and mobility (economic) and durability. People who are accustomed to the old ways seem to [be content with wearing white clothes and] believe that they [white clothes] are pure and clean.* Surely it would look good on females beautiful as fairies who represent the shiny spring and summer, yet upon men and women who have to work hard day and night in autumn and winter, *they just look awkward and helpless.* We have always encouraged our brethren Joseon people, at this critical point of emergency regarding our destiny, to embark upon a new way of life, and choose to uniformly wear colored clothes. *This is not a political agenda,* it is an issue for the ordinary lives of people.

The Joseon people seem to have had only a simple sense in color, but they

also have beautiful air, and gorgeous rivers and mountains. It seems that they have soaked themselves up in all kinds of sensibility and sentimentality writing their music, *yet in the area of drawing and illustration, the realm of color itself, they seem to have been content to remain pretty much monotonous. That kind of attitude is reflected in their clothes and utensils*, and it seems to have led to the custom of wearing white clothes. *Such white clothes and the helpless customs represented by it should be abandoned*, and it is good that they are now [abandoning it]. Such choice should be encouraged in autumn; but now is fine as well. I say do not wait for the urgings of the authorities; choose to do so ourselves, at this very moment. As taking a bold new step toward a new way of life, we the Joseon people should all wear colored clothes.

This commentary was more like an editorial. It essentially argued that the new colored attire were practical and cost-effective in terms of its appearance, flexibility and durability, and that the Joseon people should stop wearing white clothes. According to the editorial, colored clothes belonged to “today,” while the white clothes belonged to the “past.” The former was “with merit,” while the latter was a symbol of “helplessness” and “weakness.” Yet there was no clarification as to why white clothes should be construed as a symbol of “helplessness,” while it was asserted with conviction that “colored clothes were with merits that did not require any explanation.”

Symbolism represents a specific perception toward a specific object, yet when such symbolism grows strong enough, the perception itself completely replaces objective observation of the object. The object itself would be gone, and only the perception in the form of symbolism would remain as the supposedly legitimate representation of that object. All kinds of other possibilities for different perception or interpretation of it would be lost, and the object itself would even internalize such symbolism and make it part of its own identity. This kind of process always involves the agendas of a political power or the media (including rumors and gossip that float around). The above editorial encourages the usage of colored clothes, by turning the symbolism behind white clothes into what it had never been before. As mentioned above, rather than in the area of “music,” the political power of Imperial Japan was using the media to “reverse (or radically change)” the identity Koreans themselves recognized into something entirely different, in the area of “colors.” The editorial did not blame Koreans for having monotonous music, although

their attitude generally perceived monotonousness as an inferior quality. White clothes were something that should never have been labeled as “monotonous.” Yet even if they were, monotonousness was not a quality that should ever have been construed as a symbol of inferiority in the first place. In some cases it could symbolize conciseness. In Joseon, the color white symbolized integrity, innocence and principle. In ancient religions of the Korean peninsula, white was adored and worshipped as the color of the sun, and was believed to symbolize cleanness, purity and light. Such perspective could be seen in foundation myths, like that of Dangun. As we see from many elements of such tales, such as the white light (in the Tale of Go Ju-mong), the white horse (in the Tale of Park Hyeok-geo-se), the white hen (in the Tale of Kim Al-ji), they all link the birth of a divine figure to the color white. Yet the Japanese twisted the image of white.

The reason that the people of the Joseon dynasty mainly wore white clothes was because materials used in dyeing were simply too expensive for them to afford. Yet the Japanese authorities during the Occupation period who promoted the “Colored Clothes Campaign” argued that the Joseon people “got poor because they have been wearing white.” Their logic was deeply flawed. Meanwhile, things that were happening in the colony seem to indicate that the Japanese authorities were actually more interested in “appropriating” all the raw cotton, as source material needed for their war efforts. This will be explained later.

Even though white clothes have had various levels of meaning and symbolism to Koreans in the past, the “White Clothes Discourse” condemned white clothes as a legacy created by the weak and helpless past of the Koreans, and therefore as part of the Korean past that had to be abolished. The authorities argued that this campaign had no immediate links to any political agenda, but there is more than a little evidence to show that the “Colored Clothes Campaign” was anything but “a-political.”

The “Promotion of Cotton Production” and the Obligatory Nature of the “Colored Clothes Campaign”

It should be noted that the above-mentioned commentary in the January 24, 1932 issue of the *Joseon Ilbo* emphasized the “mobility” and “durability” of colored clothes. It lets us know that the campaign was not simply dealing

with the issue of “color,” but also with the issue of materials and formats. The Korean people under colonial rule usually wore white cotton-based clothes, and the reason they wore white all the time was because it was rather expensive to either dye them or acquire dyed material. And at the time, the Japanese authorities were in desperate need of cotton materials, to be used in their production of army uniforms. Naturally, Korean consumption of the textile resources, which the Japanese were in dire need of, had to be suppressed.

Around July 1937 when the war between China and Japan broke out, Office of the JGGJ prohibited cotton products (either exported or to be exported) from entering the Korean market, and implemented a “Control policy” over cotton production, in order to restrict the Korean consumption of cotton. First the Office of the JGGJ issued in March 1938 the Order No.22 “regarding the use of staple fiber in Chosen together with other products.” Then it issued other orders as well, such as “restrictions in fiber production facilities” in January 1939, “regulations regarding fiber production facility restrictions” in March 1940, and then “control over standard size of products” in November 1942. Such efforts were to ultimately strengthen the authorities’ control over fiber production in colonial Korea (Jeong 2002:132). And that was not all. The authorities also announced the “Fiber Production Increase Plan,” and ordered all peasant households to engage in cotton production. This Fiber Production Increase Plan seems to have continued all the way through to the end of the occupation, as we can see from many critical opinions that surfaced, especially around 1938 complaining of the fact that the authorities were forcing people to produce cotton when there was not even enough food to sustain the population (*Donga Ilbo* 1933; *Joseon Ilbo* 1938).

The staple fiber mentioned in Order No.22 refers to a special fiber which was made of artificial fiber cut in short pieces and then recreated and fabricated in the form of wool or cotton wool, or threads and cloth made of such material. The Japanese were issuing orders regarding it for good reason. According to the newspaper reports at the time, the Office of the JGGJ announced the “national uniform” design, and they advertised it as a very “cost-effective, mixed-fiber product.”⁶

6. According to accounts made by people who actually lived in those days, the “National uniform” was not favored, and was only worn by public servants and people who worked for the

....the Governor General came to the office with a newly made, fancy uniform. A good-looking collar, gold buttons, and the band fastened around his waist, all made him seem like some sort of defense squadron leader. According to his secretary (Kindou), the price of the clothes were no more than 16 weon. It was made of fur and staple fiber at a ratio of 6 to 4, resulting in a very economic mixed-fiber uniform. (*Joseon Ilbo* 1938).

With its intentions in place, the Japanese authorities continued to promote substantial increases in fiber production. The Gyeongseong Fiber Production Co. Ltd. massively produced cotton threads and cloth for the military, and delivered cloth to be used in uniform production for the Japanese army in particular on an unprecedented scale from 1937 to 1945. Imported cotton from abroad, as well as Joseon cotton, seems to have been used. Gyeongseong Fiber Production Company displayed a gigantic level of growth. The net profit of the company in 1936 and 1937 only exceeded 60,000-70,000 yen for a 6-month period, yet jumped to 220,000 yen in the first half of 1938 (the year after the Chinese-Japanese war broke out). It rose to 600,000 yen by the latter half of 1938, 700,000 yen by the latter half of 1940, and 800,000 yen by May 1941. This was all achieved with the Joseon Governor General office overseeing this production (Eckhart 2008:160-91).

In retrospect, we can see that the colonial rulers indeed wished to hide their real political agenda (i.e. making war and recruiting soldiers) behind a cleverly staged act of symbolism: the “Colored Clothes Campaign,” which in fact was a form of exploitation designed to manipulate the people’s sentiments and customs, in order for those authorities to obtain what they needed.

As we have seen, the “Colored Clothes Campaign” that, it was argued, was non-political, was indeed part of a very political agenda designed by the Japanese imperialists, and served as a device that provided Japan with their much needed war materiel. The recommendations of the Governor General’s Office to wear clothes made of “mixed fiber,” and the production of “national uniforms,” all coincided with the reinforcement of “obligatory wearing of colored clothes.” The campaign was destined to be a political and economic campaign, tied to the Japanese war efforts, and nothing else. And in the

process, such colonial policies were de-valuing the normal, sentimental images previously shared by the residents of the colony. Such devaluation was a very oppressive, and a very violent blow to Koreans, on a sentimental level and also in their everyday lives.

Kim Sa-Ryang fiercely criticized such problems of the “Colored Clothes Campaign” in his *Kusa-bukashi*. The reason the ordinary people have been wearing white was because those white clothes were usually made of cotton, and dyed clothes were too costly for them to purchase (An 2008:109, 115). They were not poor because of the earlier habit of wearing white, they wore white because they were poor. Kim raised this objection through the narrator in his novel, as we can see in the scene where the authorities are urging people not to wear white clothes, where there are no people who are actually wearing white. The attire of the poor had already lost its original white color, and mostly looked like dirt-like colors. The only person who was wearing white at the gathering was the Japanese monitor working for Internal Affairs. This scene truly depicted the irony of the “Colored Clothes Campaign”.

One might assume that the “Colored Clothes Discourse,” which criticized the monotonous nature of white clothes, suggested the use of “colorful” clothes displaying a variety of colors. Yet in reality, the “colored clothes” being promoted were only “black attire”, or “dark colored attire” (Yi 2004:174-97). So even under such a campaign, the streets of occupied Korea were still full of people wearing quite monotonous colors. The “dirt-like colors just like those of the prison uniforms” mentioned in *Kusa-bukashi* may as well be interpreted as another critical jab by the author against the “Colored Clothes Campaign”, which demanded people wear attire that resembled prison uniforms.

The violent nature of the “Colored Clothes Campaign” can be clearly seen from scenes in which the authorities threw black paint upon the clothes of the residents who were going home after the gathering was over.

“Look at that, look at that!”

Outside, quite surprisingly, several men and women who had just been gathered inside the hall, were passing by the window on their way home, yet not without all kinds of signs of ○, △, □ marked on their back, in black, by paint. Uncle, seemingly disturbed by the sight himself, kept jerking around.

“What the hell are you doing to those people?...”

Impaled, In-sik had to stand up. Enraged, he shouted. And he angrily

stared at this uncle (Kim 1973:154)

Depictions of the act of pouring black paint on people who were wearing white clothes, or the act of drawing black letters or marks on them, were no mere exaggerations. It seems that such events occurred all the time. People poured ink upon women wearing mourning attire, and even dared to pull up their skirts and pour ink on their undergarments. (*Joseon Ilbo* 1934; *Donga Ilbo* 1938)

The county headman's subordinate associate, who was introduced as the novel's central character In-sik's Middle school teacher, is described as a character who had earlier painted ink upon his own wife's last remaining white skirt, and then was punched by his wife and kicked out of his own house. He happened to encounter In-sik when he was being kicked out, and later his blind devotion to the campaign apparently embarrassed In-sik very much.

Women who had ink poured on them when they were observing mourning, or having ones clothes marked with '○, △, □' must have been humiliating for those were forced to endure such treatment. In that regard we can say that the Colored Clothes Campaign was indeed a policy designed to embarrass and humiliate the colonial subjects and any vestiges of Joseon tradition.

In the novel, In-sik and his "nose-blower" teacher reminisce together the "Moon song" contained in the 4th grade "Joseon Language textbook," as they sit together near the lake and watch the moonlight. This song actually appeared in the "4th grade Joseon Language Reader" that was published around 1930.⁷ The characters also reminisce the "Students strike" that happened at the Pyeongyang Middle & High School. Considering all these details, this "nose-blower" teacher character was likely based upon a real person.⁸

7. Moon, moon, the brightest Moon/ The Moon where Yi Tae-baek used to hang around/ In the Moon, there is there is/ There's a Chinese cinnamon tree stuck on the surface/ So we shall cut it out with a jade-made axe/ Build a three-roomed cottage with it/ And live for thousands of years/ Live for thousands of years. (On the other side of the page where this poem was printed, there was an article urging the wearing of colored clothes.)

8. This "nose-blower" teacher apparently reminded In-sik of the past, which must have been the "Student strike." As mentioned in Kim Sa-Ryang's *Noma Malli*, which chronicled his own escape from Yennan, there were newspaper reports that reported a "Student strike," which was actually coordinated by the students of Haeju, Sineuiju and Pyeongyang high schools, as a major

Yun Dae-seok once suggested that, considering the fact that this character was introduced as a Joseon Language teacher and that he later served as a translator for the county headman, the “nose-blower” teacher might symbolize the Korean language at the time, forced into a colonized status (Yun 2006:22-7). But this does not seem to be the only thing that the character symbolizes. One of the “nose blowers” characteristics is that he was not only an aggressor promoting policies, but also a victim and a scapegoat.

After witnessing the violent nature of the “Colored Clothes Campaign”, In-sik departed for the mountains to conduct a pre-scheduled survey of the “Slash-and-burn” farmers, which was ordered by the Japanese authorities. The objective was to survey the economic status of those mountain residents, their religious beliefs, their level of literacy, and their medical condition. Yet this mission, although it was labeled a merciful mission designed to bring enlightenment to the unenlightened, was essentially a survey of people who were slated to be eventually “removed” from their habitats.⁹ Even though he believed he was embarking upon a mission to help and provide for people, In-sik served as yet another pawn in the authorities’ colonial policies. His dilemma reached its peak at the slash-and-burn village he visited. While staying at a Buddhist temple for one night, he encountered a scene that he had never

event that had huge implications later. Articles regarding the Pyeongyang High School where Kim had earlier attended also reported that a student who was expelled from the school for joining the strike “attempted suicide” (*Joseon Ilbo* 1931). The Pyeongyang High School students demanded that a eleven teachers and the headmaster be shunned [condemned, boycotted]” (*Joseon Ilbo* 1931). It should be noted that the Korean name “Im Bong-hyeon” is in that list. Maybe this person was the model for the nose-blower teacher. Kim himself was also expelled for joining the strike. According to the November 14th issue of the *Jeoson Ilbo*, “5th grade student Kim and Choi were expelled,” and “attempted suicide out of extreme frustration.” Of course we cannot be sure whether this “Kim” figure actually referred to Kim Sa-Ryang or not, yet with the student strike saturating press headlines and a police investigation already impending, it became certain that Kim could not stay in Korea any longer. In December the same year, he left for Japan, stowing away on a vessel, after bidding farewell to his mother on a desolate train station selected to evade people’s notice, and leaving everything behind including his school uniform and his hat. Kim and other students must have shared the sentiments of In-sik, embarrassed by the actions of the nose-blower teacher. As we can see from the quoted section, in *Kusa-bukashi*, Kim described the student strike which occurred when he was in the 5th grade with great details for no apparent reason, and uttered that he “could not stand a day watching a coward and mean Joseon teacher.”

9. At the time, college students were summoned by the authorities to survey the slash-and-burn farmers, and Kim himself is known to have joined such surveys, as he also announced a report entitled Visited a slash-and-burn farmers zone. The quote is from *Kusa-bukashi*

imagined he might witness.

"We the *white-wearing Joseon people* cannot be saved without the power of *Jeong-gam-rok*. That book foretells, it's not difficult to understand it at all. According to *Jeong-gam-rok*, if one wears white clothes and chants a spell ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○, *he or she could be saved...*"

"Jeong-gam-rok?"

...In the front yard, under a pale moonlight, dozens of men and women squatting down like bags of rice, were chanting charms. At the end of the hall, the man from before, being accompanied by an old priest, was seated and preaching in a weird, almost gratified gesture. At his side, there were bundles full of grain, seemingly provided by all the male and female participants. *Our future, and the destiny of this white-wearing race.* (Kim 1973:166)

After witnessing the preaching of the head of the Baekbaek-gyo order, who was essentially exploiting the slash-and-burn farmers, In-sik had to escape the scene in quite a hurry. In the meantime, he met with his uncle who was kicked out of office after being implicated in a bribery case. In-sik asked him whether he had recently heard of any news regarding the nose-blower teacher. From his uncle, In-sik learned that his teacher left for the mountain as a promoter for the Colored Clothes Campaign, in the fall of the same year that he and In-sik met for the first time in a long while. He learned that the teacher never came back, and later, while reading a magazine he came across a newspaper article reporting the trial opening for the Baekbaek-gyo case, which was rumored to have been more cruel and brutal than any other criminal cases. The report said that the leaders of this wicked religion not only robbed all the poor peasants and mountain residents of their properties--not to mention food that they worked so hard to acquire--but also raped their wives and daughters and even murdered a total of 234 people who refused to follow the demands of the order. Reportedly such murders continued over four years in 109 different occasions after 1937.¹⁰

10. Please see the Baekbaek-gyo special reports that were printed in the *Donga Ilbo* from March 20 to 28, 1940. This Baekbaek-gyo incident was a real scandal that truly horrified the public. It was a false cult that existed from the early 1920s through the early 1940s, and it did terrible things, as described above. From countless reports regarding this cult during the 1920s, 1930s

In-sik was shocked, literally electrified, while reading the report. One of the crime scenes reported was actually one of the places he had visited earlier. The novel ends with In-sik shedding tears, believing that the nose-blower teacher who reportedly went off for a business trip to the Jowun-ryeong mountain that In-sik had also visited once before, might have quite possibly fallen victim to the atrocity committed by the cult members.

Needless to say, the teachings of the Baekbaek-gyo order, which urged people to wear white clothes as an act to boycott the “Colored Clothes Campaign,” and as an act that would ensure that the Korean race would endure, was ultimately another form of violence, probably even more so than the “Colored Clothes Campaign” they boycotted in the first place. We can see that from the personal tragedy of the nose-blower teacher, who had been serving the “Colored Clothes Campaign” at the bottom of the food chain and later being sacrificed by this cult which urged people to wear white clothes in the end.

The push to wear colored clothes was indeed a violent demand placed upon Korean society, and the nose-blower character who was forced to oppress his own brethren just to ensure his own survival, was actually a “new” character that was born out of the colonized environment. His being sacrificed by the Baekbaek-gyo Order was only speculation on In-sik’s part; yet the uncle’s testimony that he went off to the place of the campaign, magazine reports regarding a temple in the mountain near the Jowun-ryeong range, and the fact that the nose-blower teacher never came back, all lead us to presume that the author, meant the character to die at the hands of people who were promoting something entirely different from what he had been promoting. The death of

and the 1940s, through 91 reports on *Joseon Ilbo* and 86 reports on *Donga Ilbo*, we can see the devastating impact this cult had on the public. This cult was a branch of the Donghak order, but when Jeon Hae-ryong became the cult leader its criminal nature became more than apparent. One believer was reported to have offered not only his property but also his own daughter. His son reported the crimes of the Baekbaek-gyo order, and the world came to know all the horrible things it had committed. When its leader was to be exposed as the perpetrator of all these heinous crimes, the cult members dragged all the people who could potentially spill their dirty secrets to the mountains and ruthlessly killed them. This Baekbaek-gyo incident was finally ended when Jeon Hae-ryong committed a suicide as he was being chased by the police. Forty eight corpses of people who were murdered by the order were found, and it was presumed that many more people would have been murdered, if it has gone on. Jeon’s skull is currently in the custody of the Crime Science Laboratory in Korea, as an example of a “criminal’s skull.”

such a character indeed seems like a real possibility back then. We may not be able to attribute all the violence perpetrated by the Baekbaek-gyo cult, which was even harsher than the Japanese overlords, to the colonial occupation. Yet, it seems certain that the Baekbaek-gyo Order, its philosophy, and its violent nature, were in some ways inspired and triggered by the “Colored Clothes Campaign.”

Epilogue - Choosing a Color to Symbolize Something

Throughout world history, color was always used as a strong political device to symbolize something. The racial discrimination of the West was also based upon symbolism behind colors; white and black. In Stendhal’s *Red and Black*, the former symbolized people in power and the latter symbolize people in religious robes. The colors also had something to do with the primary character in Julien Sorell’s passions. The color of one’s clothing often indicated the owner’s social status, or his or her ascribed status. As we all know, the uniforms of the Silla dynasty’s *golpum* system indicated various social ranks. The Joseon kings wore wine-tinged red, like a Gonryong-po uniform,¹¹ because they were not allowed to wear yellow, which was reserved for the Chinese emperor (Geum 2008:160). People who lost their family members and were observing mourning periods had to wear white, but the level of brightness, or decoration, and the specific rules on how to wear them, differed according to the person’s social status (Yi 2008:1595-607).

Symbols tend to shift and change when people designate them to represent something. And regardless of the intentions of the person who initiated such designations, the symbol itself represents the desires of the society that imposed that symbol on that person. And in that respect, symbols are always political in nature. The “Colored Clothes Campaign” presented the social category “colored” as a virtue, a positive thing to be pursued—while the Baekbaek-gyo religious order worshipped white clothes and urged others

11. We can see this from the fact that, at the time of the declaration of the Daehan Empire, Emperor Gojong immediately changed the color of his Gollyong-po uniform after his enthronement from red to yellow, just like the Emperor of China.

to wear them. Both sides had ulterior motives behind their positions, which ultimately served their political interests.

During the Joseon dynasty certain colors were either banned (An 2008:115)¹² or encouraged (Song 2007:107-8),¹³ and the colors of attire represented ranks in a hierarchical structure. But it was only during the Japanese occupation that color was used as a device that led to violent oppression against the Korean people through the “Colored Clothes Campaign”. As we can see from Kim Sa-Ryang’s *Kusa-bukashi*, where he portrayed the irony of common people being encouraged not to wear white when they were wearing clothes which were so dirty that could not possibly be considered white, the “Colored Clothes Campaign” was nothing but a campaign of violence, which was realized through the strongest use of “color.”

Painting black on a person wearing white clothes was a means of inflicting shame and humiliation to be sure. Yet the range of emotions depicted in *Kusa-bukashi* included not only rage and humiliation among victims but also a sense of embarrassment, which In-sik felt when he witnessed his own nose-blower teacher, a fellow Korean, serving the Japanese invaders and offenders. This means that Kim perceived not only the campaign itself but also the fact that a new type of Korean was born out of the colonial condition, both as results of the “violence of the time.” We see this again in the fact that Kim’s character dies at the hands of the *Baekbaek-gyo* order.

Yet we should also not forget that the aforementioned newspaper report—which was never printed because it criticized the “Colored Clothes Campaign” as an oppression of human rights—basically went along with the principal intentions of colonial policy itself, which presented colored clothes as “the attire of civilized beings.” It should also be remembered that Kim Sa-Ryang, who strongly condemned the violent nature of the “Colored Clothes Campaign”, also depicted colored clothes as “preferable economically and in terms of sanitation,”¹⁴ in his own novel.

12. The white clothes that were known to have been favored by the Goryeo people were actually banned in the early years of the Joseon dynasty.

13. King Yeongjo tried to ban white clothes and issued orders urging people to wear blue clothes, but this did not succeed.

14. It is flawed reasoning to think colored clothes would be more “sanitary” than white clothes. The color itself surely has nothing to do with the cleanliness of clothes. The color only affects

New-age intellectuals of colonized Korea opposed the violent nature of the policy that clearly oppressed human rights, yet they seem to have agreed at least with the general intentions of that policy. The trend set by campaign did not go away with the end of Japanese occupation. It continued even after the foundation of the South Korean government. There was an article printed in the *Seoul Sinmun*, on August 27, 1949, entitled "Ministry of Culture and Education, enacted regulations to enhance the people's eating habits and clothing." These regulations said, "Our clothes in particular leave much to be desired in terms of economics and sanitation," so "male public servants" should wear "foundation uniforms (which looked like national uniforms)," and made it very clear that the first thing that "either a male or female should do to enhance their clothing" was to "wear colored clothes." Of course, these "colored clothes" referred to clothes with "achromatic colors." The government encouraged middle and high school students and also the university students to wear "white for upper garments" and "black (or similar colors) for pants." Even after the occupation was over, wearing white clothes was still "frowned upon," and "colored clothes" were still the symbol of "modernization and civilization."

To the people of the world today, white clothes no longer represent or symbolize the Korean nation and culture. The Korean people, who supposedly are already "a civilized race," wear clothes of many colors in all public places. Many books that introduce Korea to the world feature beautiful Korean females wearing traditional Korean attire (*hanbok*) featuring a variety of bright colors.

Interestingly enough, since the 2002 FIFA World Cup, the global society remembers Koreans dawning the image of "Red Devils." Since the Korean War, and up until the year 2002, the color "red" represented "communists" or the "enemy" in South Korea.¹⁵ Yet since 2002 the color "red" has come

how the clothing appears to the eye. Doctors and cooks, whose success in occupation largely depends on how clean their work environments are maintained, usually wear white. This shows why white clothes should, in reality, be considered more sanitary. Yet the belief that colored clothes are "cleaner," has prevailed for some time. For example, the 1984's Middle school textbook for the "Home Economics" class contained a section claiming "colored clothes are cleaner than white clothes."

15. According to the *Joseon Ilbo* special report on the "Red Devils," June 12, 2002, spectators who came to the stadium to watch the soccer game wearing red clothing for the first time were actually held for questioning by detectives from the intelligence department.

to symbolize the new energy and cohesion the Koreans. The so-called “Red wave,” which literally engulfed the entire country, became the very color to represent Korea. The “Red Devils,” who until then were merely fans who loved soccer, grew to become an organization of more than 300,000 members in 2002 when South Korea took the fourth place in the 2002 World Cup. The cheering and rooting on the streets immensely startled the world. That “red” represents the energy of the Korean people is surely not something that dominates every aspect of our lives, and no one forced us to use the color of red for that purpose. Yet in order to protect their spirit of amateurism, the “Red Devils” are equipped with a social footing and awareness to decline requests that might come from politicians and evade demands from entrepreneurs who might use their mascot for their own commercial and political purposes. This spirit of volunteerism clearly sets their efforts apart from the attempts of the authorities during the Japanese occupation. Koreans today “chose” this color and the symbolism behind it, and that is what makes their choice completely different from the one that the Koreans were forced to make according to the “White Clothes Discourse” during the early 20th century.

Yet we should also be aware of the fact that symbolism of oneself always tends to lean toward power and that a self-tailored symbolism leaning toward power always needs an opponent, an antagonist. This trend never changes, even with the passage of time. That was why the color of clothing, the most basic part of Korean life suddenly turned into a vessel of violence against the Korean people in the colonial past. Whenever we forget to be cognizant of this chain of events, which could always happen again, any of the symbols of Korean life can become dreadful tools of violence against us.

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Kim Seok-hee (slverfox@naver.com) is a post-doctoral researcher at Inha University’s “Brain Korea 21” focusing on education, research and network in Korean Studies. Her field of interest is in Literature of Korea during colonization period. She received Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Integrated Studies in Language and Society at Osaka University of Foreign Studies. She has been engaged in a comprehensive study of Kim Sa-Ryang’s writings and has also been examining the structures of power and rule and how its often reflected in the social life of the people.

Abstract

Foreigners who visit Korea today usually associate Korea with traditional Korean clothing (*hanbok*), and with all the colors usually featured in that clothing. Koreans in general want foreigners to associate all those beautiful and gorgeous colors with Korea, and the power of mass media have been employed toward that end. Yet only a century ago, most Koreans living in colonized Joseon wore nothing but “white *hanbok*.” Remarks made by visitors from foreign countries confirm this fact. Then, the Japanese colonial authorities promoted a policy that banned the wearing of all white clothing and encouraged (and enforced) the wearing of “colored clothes.” The justification behind this campaign can be seen from all the press materials released at the time, containing many comments that cast “white” as a “weak” and “helpless” color. This so-called “Colored Clothes Campaign” became quite oppressive and violent beginning in 1932 and encountered significant resistance by the Korean people. The Japanese authorities promoted this policy based on the notion that white clothes were not “economic” and therefore had to be transformed through a process of “modernization.” Yet in retrospect, it is clear that this notion was intended to aid the Japanese themselves and Japan’s war efforts. Colonial authorities debased white as a color, and cast it as a symbol of “weak Korea,” then forced Koreans to wear “dyed attire” made from “artificial fiber,” while extracting all the cotton produced in on the peninsula for use in making Japanese army uniforms. The campaign itself is detailed in a novel entitled *Deep in the Bush*, by a Korean writer named Kim Sa-Ryang. This novel not only portrays the campaign with great details, but also shows us the plight of the Joseon people who were coerced and forced to abandon their existing way of life. And quite ironically, the novel also portrays a situation in which the Koreans were harassed by a false cult that exploited the people’s very resentment toward the campaign. Kim not only criticized the reality of a colonized society, but also depicted how a mere image could be turned into a deadly weapon.

Keywords: Colored Clothes Campaign, White Clothes Discourse, Kusa-bukashi, Kim Sa-Ryang, Yanagi Muneyoshi, symbolism