

The People of White Clothes(白衣民族) from Modern Perspectives

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Abstract *There seems to have arisen a preference for wearing white clothes amongst Koreans from the long past, even tracing back to the ancient times in tradition of Shamanism worshipping the sun . This "preference" persevered throughout the passage of time, even with the numerous internal and external pressures to forbid or interrupt this tradition. The wearing of White Clothes by Koreans can also be often found in the various records made by foreign visitors recognized as a noticeable phenomenon, and representative of Korea which seems to have influences even until now in the impressions of the country. Despite of this tradition that seems to have lasted over the last 5000 years, all of a sudden it disappeared within the last 50years. In the contemporary modern fashion of Korea, it seems hard to say , Koreans enjoyably sporting White clothes, is a stand out trait anymore, thus the equation of Koreans equivalent to the people of white not a valid stamen anymore. it could not be said that this tradition is representative of the Korean cultural Identity. Why would this be the case? What happened to the long lasted pattern? In what form or shape has this tradition trasnsformed and reappears before us today? This paper seeks to find the answers to these questions.*

Key words *people of white Clothes(白衣民族), white clothes, HanBok, symbol of conformity, Korean beauty*

Introduction

In order for a culture to take root as a tradition of a nation, it must be based on the everyday lives of the people. Even foreign cultures that are introduced from neighboring countries in the historic context of an era can become part of a nation's tradition if the foreign cultures become assimilated and part of the nation's lifestyle.

Studies on the evolution of a nation's culture tell two different stories. One is about the nation's ruling class or leadership who tried to enrich their nation, promote happier lives of the people, and lead development of the nation's culture and economy. The other is about ordinary people who did not stand out, but shared the same history and culture with the ruling class and succeeded to tangible and intangible heritages of their ancestors, with having a cultural root at the center of their lifestyle and value. Even if the root had been changed, or at least affected, by foreign cultures or ruling class cultures, the

inherent nature had been kept almost intact. Here lies the core value and the root of a nation's culture, hence called "basic culture." A traditional dress that best represents a nation's culture and value takes root in the clothing culture, which is a core part of basic culture, and can become a national dress.

Basic components of the Korean dress that came from equestrian Mongolians are *Jeogori* (jacket) and pants. On top of that, skirts that came from China were added, along with *Po* (coat) that served both ritual and functional roles. As such, Korean dresses have been significantly influenced by the climate and rituals. Indeed, clothing was a symbol of the class society where different classes wear different materials, colors and patterns, in accordance with seasonal changes. In ancient murals, ordinary people wore simple pants and jackets suitable for physical work, while the noble class wore long and wide jackets and pants to show elegance and their status. In other words, not only dress materials, colors and patterns, but also the length and width and accessories represented one's class in the past.

Political and diplomatic relationships with China have influenced the Korean clothing culture since *Kim Chunchu* of the *Silla* Kingdom introduced official attires of the *Tang* Dynasty (then China), and thus court dresses or officials' attires have been under the influence of the Chinese culture. This shows that despite the spirit of a homogeneous nation, the Korean clothing culture has evolved through continuous interactions with other cultures over time. Among the diversified clothing styles, Korea has kept its unique dress "*Hanbok*" throughout its long history as its national dress that was established as a basic dress culture. This is attributable to the double structure of Korean clothing culture, but *Hanbok* has kept its original form to date as the clothes of ordinary people who sustained the basic culture of Korea amidst so many challenges. Therefore, Koreans' affection for white dresses, which has been regarded as a symbol of Koreans since the ancient times, should be discussed as a critical part of the folk culture.

Literature on White Dress Culture

Although many nations have pursued white dresses in the Asian culture, few countries have them as their national or traditional dresses. Among ethnic minorities in China, the *Daizu* (傣族) and the *Dai* (白族) tribes have maintained their culture of wearing white dresses. *Daizu* people's affection for white clothing originated in its primitive religions and Indian Buddhism, which is the national religion of the tribe. When Buddhism began to prosper in the *Daizu* area during the *Tang* Dynasty, history book *Xin Tang Shu* (New Book of Tang, 新唐書) referred the tribe as "white dresses." It seems that their affection for white clothes had greater impacts on the dress culture of the ruling class than that of ordinary people. From the *Yuan* Dynasty to the *Ming* Dynasty, Chinese history books recorded the *Daizu* tribe as 白衣, 百夷, 伯夷 and 白夷, meaning a tribe revering white dresses, but any hint of white clothing tribe is hardly left today. In contrast, the *Dai* tribe has maintained the "white" culture to date, from their houses to everyday items. From the entry of the tribe's village, white waves welcome visitors. In addition, *Dai* people routinely wear white dresses as their national and traditional clothing. However, their clothing is very different from Koreans'. While Koreans wear a pure white dress that does not allow any decoration on it, *Dai* people wear a white clothes as a basic item, with layering vivid-colored ac-

cessories (hat, vest and apron) on it.

From *Samgooksagi* (The Chronicles of the Three States) to *Gaoli Tujing* (Illustrated Account of Goryeo, 高麗圖經)¹⁾, the Korean culture of wearing white dresses may have given a strange but special impression to visitors from abroad, and served as a symbolic and representative subject for their articles about Korean people. Westerners who visited Korea at the end of the *Joseon* Dynasty were also impressed by the image of white clothing, and thus described the image in writing or painting of Korean villages (see Figure 1, 2). In addition, propaganda videos made by the Imperialistic Japan from 1921 about its policies to encourage Koreans to be assimilated with Japan and to expand its territory, and documentaries made by anthropologists to record local folk customs and traditions show people who wore white clothes, like young and old women wearing white clothes in markets, at station or on the rice paddies, farmers wearing white pants and jackets, and gentlemen wearing white coats with fedoras. The white dress wave, which was a prominent scene of *Joseon*, was a unique symbol of Korean beauty conforming to the characteristics of Koreans who lived in and loved the clean and beautiful peninsula. Some, on the other hand, considered it a symbol of sorrow and solitude.



Figure 1.
Early 1900s from the *Dong-a Ilbo* (1991)



Figure 2.
Gwang-Ju in 1933 from the *Dong-a Ilbo* (1991)

Yanagi Muneyosi (柳宗悅), who is said to be the only Japanese that tried to positively view Korea and loved Korean art, consistently expressed sorrow and grief about the white dress and the white image of colonized *Joseon*. Yanagi (1995) referred that when evaluating an art work by its shape, color and silhouette, the color shows joy and the silhouette shows solitude. If one's destiny is not allowed for power and joy, but accompanied by sorrow and grief, an art from the destiny will be represented by its silhouette, rather than colors. The prime example is the porcelains of *Joseon*. In other words, China

1) Xuanhe Fengshi Gaoli Tujing Volume 19 (宣和奉使 高麗圖經 卷第 十九)

Farmers and businessmen wear white ramie jackets, regardless of how rich they are. The only difference among them is how soft the ramie cloth is. Former public officials also wear similar dresses after they retire. What distinguish them are two strands of hatbands on the headscarf.

Engineers (工技) usually wear white ramie jackets and black headscarves, but blackish red jackets when working for the government.

chose power (shape), Japan chose joy (color) and *Joseon* chose solitude (silhouette).

Yanagi's emotions about the white dress and the sad image of *Joseon* people, and how common it was to wear white clothes in *Joseon* are clearly described in the following excerpt.

While China and especially Japan are using so many different colors in their dresses, there is no such trend in the neighboring country, Joseon. They wear no color, but white. Even when they use a color, that's almost colorless jade. What makes everyone, regardless of gender or age, wear a white dress? There are many countries and nations in the world, but no country or nation is like Joseon.

French painter Joseph de Lanaigiere beautifully described the white dress wave of *Joseon* as a music festival (Baek & Lee, 2001)²⁾, and French traveler Georges Ducrocq also wrote in his book, "Pauvre et douce Corée," published in 1904 that *Joseon* people always wear white dresses even when they are living in a completely different environment outside the country, and this creates a festival mood; and if they are not allowed to wear white dresses, their joyful mood will be halved. In addition, British historian Angus Hamilton described in his book, "Korea," published in 1910 that *Joseon* people wear white pants and jackets, and even white socks, and the white wave created by strolling people is fascinating (Bishop, 2000). A news magazine, *Le Monde Illustré's* feature articles titled, "the Iron Curtain – the Land of the Morning Calm, Korea," stated that it was recalled that people in Seoul liked to wear white clothes and rubber shoes in our memory (see Figure 3).



Figure 3.
The iron curtain – the land of the morning calm, Korea from *Le Monde Illustré*

2) Joseph de Lanaigiere visited *Joseon* in 1902, and painted the official portrait of King Gojong. He said, "While blue is China's color, white is *Joseon's*. The traditional *Joseon* dresses utilize different white colors, from vivid jade-white to rough and crude white. The wave of white dresses seen on every street in *Joseon* is just like a music festival. Whatever happens in the future, *Joseon* will remain as a Kingdom of white forever."

From 1860 *Joseon* people began to move to the Maritime Province of Siberia, and by 1910 many Koreans living in Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and Nikolsk-Ussuriysk held Russian citizenship. This means a new class system appeared in the Korean society (Goh, 1984): Russian citizenship-holding Koreans in these area were called “*Er Maoojae*,” and the other Koreans were called “lebed”³⁾ (Lee, 1971).

Koreans’ assimilation into the Russian community seemed to begin not long after they moved to Russia. However, up until the 1910s Korean had routinely worn white clothes, and the white clothing was a symbol of Koreans who lived in a foreign country, and a differentiator that distinguished Koreans from other nations. Accordingly, the term “lebed,” meaning a herd of swans, may be interpreted as a representation of Koreans’ affection for the traditional white dress.

Isabella Bishop (2000) described her first impression about *Joseon* as below.

*On the coast, a white object looking like a penguin or a sea bird was sitting on a rock.
(omitted) The white dress makes them look full, and the tall crown-like hat makes them
look taller.*

In addition, social status of the *Joseon* women, particularly low class women who took care of all the house chores, were frequently introduced. She had a keen interest in the way Joseon women did the laundry, and observed the laundry process which took up the majority of their time. Then, she rendered detail descriptions about how white dresses became shining white after washing and beating (the way of ironing), and emphasized clean white dresses when she explained the everyday lives of *Joseon* people.

As such, different people developed different images about the white wave from the ancient times, and the wave defined *Joseon* people and never seemed to cease. However, over the last 50 years, the 5,000-year-old tradition has almost disappeared. Thus, for those who study the clothing culture and folk culture, it is an imperative to identify what made white dresses that overcame numerous challenges and crises over the long history suddenly disappear, and in what form they appear in the modern society.

Motives for White Dress Culture

Analysis on the Factors of White Dress Culture

There are many records from the old days about Koreans’ affection for white dresses and reverence for the white color, not to mention “*Samgookji Wiji Dong-i-jeon* (a history book about the Buyeo Kingdom),” “*Booksa* (a history book about the Silla Kingdom)” and “*Sooseo* (a history book about the Silla Kingdom).” It is notable that the culture continued through the Goryeo Dynasty, the Joseon Dynasty and the Port Opening period to the Japanese Colonial period.

What was the driver to maintain white dresses as the national and traditional dress of Korea ever

3) *Hamgyeong* people called Russians as “*Maoojae*” at that time, and Christian Chinese as “*Er Maoojae*” or “the second *Maoojae*” Lebed means a swan in Russian, and satirize a line of Koreans walking in white dresses.

since the ancient society has been discussed on different aspects. In particular, many studies were conducted on the reasons why Koreans loved to wear white dresses, and why Koreans began to be called a “white clothing nation.”

Koreans’ affection for white dresses and their white-clothing culture have been explained by six different perspectives: 1) Koreans loved and wore white dresses due to the geographic and environmental factors, 2) Koreans loved and wore white dresses because they revered the Sun and white dresses due to historical and religious reasons, 3) Koreans’ affection for the white color and white dresses represented their emotions and color senses related to the anthropological factors, 4) Koreans wore white dresses because they were not affluent in the past and thus not able to dye cloth in many colors, 5) Koreans’ wearing white dresses represented their sorrow history and was a legacy of achromatic-colored funeral dresses, and 6) Koreans’ white dresses symbolized their resistance and protest against the political and social condition. Regardless of the reason, it is true that Koreans loved wearing white dresses and the culture continued for a long time.

Although each of the six perspectives has reasonable grounds on its own, none can explain how Koreans were able to maintain the white-clothing culture for about 5,000 years, or how and why they wore white dresses under different Kingdoms, Dynasties, or even the colonial rule. Therefore, this study is adding another factor, an expression of empathy, in an attempt to explain the aforementioned matters.

Each nation or each region has different folk cultures, and that is why folk cultures constitute common values and identities of regions or nations. Accordingly, common but diverse traditions in one country guarantees originality and prosperity of the nation. In addition, folk cultures differ from country to country, and at the same time have a universal value. In other words, all folk cultures pursue co-existence and co-prosperity as unique, critical but creative and nature-friendly culture and tradition of individual nations.

Without respect to questions like why Koreans loved white dresses or why they had to wear white dresses, if wearing white dresses is regarded as a spontaneous custom, the white dress has remained an unchanged tradition beloved by every Korean while all circumstantial factors (including political, economic, social and geographic) have influenced, and sometimes changed, every aspect of Koreans’ daily lives.

Thus, the white dress culture has evolved together with the Korean tradition, provided the foundation for the clothing of ordinary people, and taken root as a national identity in the course of the Korean history. Although the fact that Koreans love to wear white dresses throughout their history has always been true, the reasons for such culture have been varied from period to period. This means that in the modern dress culture centered on western suits, the white dress is no longer regarded as a national dress. However, it can definitely be said that Koreans will be willing to wear white dresses again someday when the right living environment is established for Koreans to choose white dresses.

Discussion on the Psychological Dimension

A trend is not just a dress style, but a social expression of contemporary values and life styles of a

specific period. In other words, a trend reflects the key ideology and value that are represented by paintings, sculptures, architectures, literatures and music. It is also influenced by landmark events and new technologies, and sometimes by policies and social changes including life styles.

Causes for the changes in dress trends are divided into social, economic and cultural factors, and a dress of a certain period, regardless of where it came from, had a unique silhouette and shape that represents the era. This is deeply related to the zeitgeist. In addition, inventions of new textiles and new dyeing technologies cannot be overlooked in the examination of the trend changes. New and diverse textiles have been invented and rapidly developed since the Industrial Revolution has directly influenced the pace of trend changes. Korean's affection for white dresses throughout the history can also be discussed from the perspective that it was a trend representing the zeitgeist of each era.

Socialists see the trend-following psychology as a clothing behavior to embrace new social phenomena, while economists interpret it as a spending psychology resulting from income growth. Psychologist Sherif mentioned that the trend-following psychology can be understood as self-expansion, self-strengthening and self-actualization, and a trend is a symbol of one's self. A trend is created when two different desires, like longing for new experiences, compensating one's complex, pursuing beauty and expanding one's self, meet and coexist. However, the most important motivation for a trend is ironically a combination of conflicting desires: to identify oneself with others and to express one's unique characteristics (Lee et al, 2000).

From the trend-following perspective, Koreans' affection for white dresses can be understood as an assimilating tendency in response to group pressure, because people normally conform to social norms of the society to which they belong so that they can find comfort. In other words, people tend to like what their friends like, and to feel comfortable and confident when they wear similar styles to others'. Regardless of compensation or punishment, people can identify themselves with other people in the society by wearing similar dresses which others, particularly those who they respect or revere, wear. That is why a trend is sometimes practical and simple, but in other times ridiculous and absurd.

An assimilating tendency in clothing behavior means conforming to the clothing norm. Clothing norm refers to an established dress style that has been embraced by member of the society. In clothing behavior, desires for assimilation can be divided into two cases. One is to wear appropriate and suitable dresses. In this case, the assimilating behavior is used as a tool to achieve goals, under informational and social influences. This is attributable to the desire to be accepted by the group to which they belong by observing the virtual or actual clothing norm of the group. The other reason is normative and social influences that see assimilating behavior itself as a goal. However, an assimilating tendency in clothing cannot be explained by one of the two concepts. In some situations, both influences have similar impact, while, in others, one is much greater than the other. When a society and psychological status of individuals becomes more complicated and unstable, the assimilating tendency gets stronger, resulting in trend-following psychology to find comfort in it (Lee et al, 2000).

Such assimilation in clothing behavior is frequently expressed by the information flow in the Korean society, like mobile phone and internet uses. Information about Paris, Milan and New York fash-

ion shows is delivered to the Korean public faster than any other people in the world, thus affecting ready-made suit styles. In addition, once a style becomes popular, it sweeps the country within a few days, and women on the street, whether in Seoul or in rural areas, wear the same style. Such unique tendency may be a good example of Koreans' character. The assimilation tendency for white dresses is also found in the Koreans who lived in the Central Asia in the 1900s. Although they were living in a foreign land far away from their hometowns, they wore white dresses as everyday clothes. Other nations may interpret such tendency as an emotional expression and white dresses as a symbol of Koreans (see Figure 4, 5).



Figure 4.

Korean husband and wife in Central Asia from Goh A (1984)



Figure 5.

Folklore Perspectives on White Dress Culture

Discussing what happened in the past is much more persuasive than predicting the future, because it is possible to provide logical explanations about the past by systematically organizing legacies like literatures, records and videos. Every culture, not to mention the folk culture, must be discussed from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives. All cultures have common values that transcend time or place, while some components are changed and transformed over time. Such continuity and changes are called tradition. Accordingly, a folk culture, which is a subset of tradition, maintains common values and, simultaneously secures diversity through historical changes (Lim, 2001a). All cultures differ by geographic location and environmental conditions, and at the same time have common traits. Some sees this commonality as a result of transfer while others believe that common nature of humans led to common cultural traits despite of independent cultural development (Lim, 2001b).

Therefore, the transfer theory of anthropology and the geography and history theory of folklore focus on the physical move of a culture, whereas independent and multi-development theory embraces individual creativity and distributional uniformity. Diachronically and synchronically looking at Koreans' af-

fection for white dresses from the perspective of traditional dress culture, Koreans had no resistance against the white color, but embrace it as the most natural and comfortable color. Due to their surroundings and their aesthetic sense, Koreans, regardless of age, gender or class, wore natural achromatic colors or white colors for every occasion, from everyday chores and working to official ritual purposes. Even a series of prohibitions on wearing white dresses in the class societies of the *Goryeo* and *Joseon* dynasties failed to stop the culture. This demonstrates the white-clothing culture lasted for thousands years and sustained the solidarity of Koreans. Since young, they became accustomed to their families, relatives and most people in the village wearing white dresses. For ordinary people, wearing whites is a reminder of

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Table 1.
Prohibitions on Wearing White Dresses

Period	Kings	Year	Details
<i>Goryeo</i> Dynasty	Chungnyeol	1 st year (1275)	Inappropriate to the theory of Yin-Yang School
	Gongmin	6 th year (1357)	
	U	8 th year (1382)	
<i>Joseon</i> Dynasty	Taejo	6 th month of the 7 th year (1398)	
	Taejong	5 th month of the 1 st year (1400)	
	Sejong the Great	10 th month of the 7 th year (1424)	Prohibition on worker from wearing white dresses
		2 nd month of the 11 th year (1428)	
	Sejo	3 rd month of the 2 nd year (1456)	Prohibition on wearing white dresses to distinguish the classes Prohibition on wearing white hats Prohibition on wearing white hats
		3 rd month of the 12 th year (1466)	
		3 rd month (leap month) of the 12 th year (1466)	
	Seongjong	2 nd month of the 2 nd year (1471)	Prohibition on wearing white or white grey coats
	Yeonsangun	4 th month of the 11 th year (1504)	Prohibition on women from wearing headscarves and white skirts
	Jungjong	8 th month of the 17 th year (1516)	Prohibition on the lowest class people from wearing white ramie clothes
	Seonjo	6 th month of the 39 th year (1605)	Prohibition on low-ranking officials from wearing white silk dresses
	Injo	10 th month of the 26 th year (1648)	Prohibition wearing white dresses except for funerals
	Hyeonjong	5 th month of the 11 th year (1669)	Inappropriate to the theory of Yin-Yang School
		7 th month of the 11 th year (1669)	
		1 st month of the 12 th year (1670)	
Sukjong	11 th month of the 2 nd year (1675)		
	3 rd month of the 17 th year (1692)		
Yeongjo	10 th month of the 2 nd year (1725)	Inappropriate to the theory of Yin-Yang School	
	8 th month of the 14 th year (1737)		
	6 th month of the 43 rd year (1766)		
Jeongjo	5 th month of the 2 nd year (1777)	Prohibition on wearing white shoes Inappropriate to the theory of Yin-Yang School	
	10 th month of the 17 th year (1792)		

being a member of the society and a medium through which they felt comfortable.

The solidarity was strong enough to overcome the prohibitions on white dresses. The first recorded prohibition was imposed in the 1st year (1275) by King *Chungnyeol* of Goryeo. This was based on the theory of Yin-Yang, which said East (to which Korea belongs) is a *Mok* (tree) location and goes well with blue, while white is for West; and thus wearing white dresses invites bad luck (see Table 1). Even though ordinary people had no power to go against the policy, it seems that they had unwavering commitment to the white dress, and thus were able to keep white dresses as part of their basic culture.

Conclusion

Forsythias and azaleas are found everywhere on the Korean peninsula. Likewise, people wearing white dresses were seen everywhere on the peninsula and regarded as a familiar and natural landscape. It is hard to believe that so many kings prohibited their people from wearing white dresses based on religious or philosophical grounds.

A trend that is popular in one period and disappears in the next is just a custom, not folklore. Therefore, folklore is passed down generation after generation, and has both diachronic and historic values. A cultural bridge that links Korea and its neighbors shows that even though they share similar natural environment, they have developed significantly different cultures based on different historical situations, resulting in different characters of each nations. A nation's custom may be represented in different forms according to different demands of different periods. In addition, a new folk culture may arise out of social needs, and an existing folk culture may disappear if it loses social support. Therefore, folklore should be examined from three different perspectives. First, people are constantly influenced by the natural environment and the climate. Accordingly, the process of forming folklore in a natural condition must be valued. Another is historical conditions. People have created culture based on extensive experiences and rich wisdom, and thought and lived in it. Thus, there should not be any process to form and decide folklore in the historical environment. The other is social conditions. Folklore cannot be possessed by an individual, but collectively and universally belongs to a group. Hence, social conditions are inevitable to folklore. As such, nature, history and society are critical factors in developing folklore, and should comprehensively be examined.

The textile industry was the main export driver of Korea in the 1980s. In addition, new styles showcased in Paris, Milan and New York appear in the Korean fashion circles faster than in any other countries. Once a style becomes popular, (almost) every woman on the street wears the style for some reasons. No other nation may catch up with the speed at which Koreans respond to new styles. It is hard to imagine that such trendy Koreans were wearing white dresses all the time up until less than a century ago.

Historically, not a single dress style was popular for a long time. In fact, *Hanbok* has also been changed over time. Notably, ordinary Koreans wore white dresses over thousands years. People wear special dresses with intentional decorations for special occasions and rituals, whereas they choose comfort-

able and familiar clothes for everyday purposes. In addition, an individual's unique character is better assessed by others than her/himself. In this regard, it cannot be said that Koreans intentionally wore white dresses to present themselves as a white-clothing nation for such a long time. This is because wearing white was the most familiar and natural looks to ordinary people. Thus, national policies or religious influences could not stop them from wearing white dresses. This clothing culture is also attributable to the characteristics of Korean people, and the strong assimilating tendency of the homogeneous nation. Koreans' affection for white cell phones, white home appliances and white cars is another representation of Koreans' assimilating tendency.

The preferential manners of Korean people wearing white clothes have a history of 5000 years disappeared in only 50 years. Why did the tradition of white clothes suddenly disappear and what will make it reappear? There were various kinds of discussion about cause of why the Korean people were symbolized as a nation of white clothes.

In previous discussions on the reason behind the cause of why Korea and the Korean people were symbolized as "the People in White" or "the nation of white clothes," there were various hypotheses. In the purpose of a brief introduction, The arguments were mainly divided by the following six view points of Sun Worship , Funeral rituals, Poverty and Lack of die material, apathy to color and Resistance to political influence.

One factor I'd like to add, is that Korean's preference of white clothes and its ornaments are a symbol of conformity and is a special quality of the nation's character. The factors mentioned above did have effects on the traditions of Koreans wearing white clothes. When Koreans ware white clothes and ornaments they did it without any purpose. So why was it seen as a phenomenon and not just as wearing white clothes? Each of these factors of our nation's history caused a feeling of apathy in Korean politics, economy, society and geographical environment. Korea naturally selects a head member of the family and by wearing white clothes causes an equal feeling among people. The reason why white clothes are loved by Koreans was because it was the most suitable clothing chosen naturally by common people.

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