

Changing Traditions in Colour Symbolism

by
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Introduction

This paper discusses how tradition in colour symbolism is formed, reinvented and transformed over time according to the prevailing ideology and ethos of society. In human society, colours are concerned with aesthetics, but also carry symbolism through representation or association. There are broadly two different ways that colours convey meanings; by direct representation of colours occurring in nature, and by association with ideas, concepts or emotions that colours recall in a particular group of people. The former is universal, timeless and invariable in all human societies; thus red is linked to blood and fire, blue to the sky or water, green to trees and other vegetation, yellow to the sun, lemon and gold, black to night and coal, and white to snow and milk, etc. However, the latter is more complex and culturally patterned, so varies spatially and also temporally. The colour symbolism in this paper is concerned with the latter.

‘Tradition’ is a complicated term, which has generated much academic literature, and its detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is a need to examine briefly how and why a tradition begins and evolves in a particular society.

I will begin with the traditional colour symbolism in pre-modern Korean society, focusing on ‘*ohaeng* (the Five Elements)’, which had a profound influence on Korean art and culture in general. It is based on the ancient Chinese cosmology, and according to it, the universe consists of five elements which are believed to be linked to the ‘five’ directions, each direction representing a colour and an animal. The tombs dating as far back as to the Three Kingdoms Period, contain murals depicting some or all of the five animals representing the five directions in the five colours linked to them. It is also reflected in many aspects of culture during the Chosŏn period (1392 – 1910).

In contemporary Korean society, colour symbolism based on *ohaeng* is no longer dominant, but it is still well represented in *kut*, the Korean shamanistic ritual, and various other ‘traditional’ folk performances, such as (*obang*) *Ch’ŏyongmu*, *o kwangdae* masked dance dramas, etc. In *kut*, it is directly shown as *obanggi* (the Five Directional flags), which *mudang* (the Korean shamans) use as a prop for fortune-telling, predicting the future according to the colour of the flag picked by the sponsors of the *kut*. However, although the basic concept remains the same, the colour symbolism in *kut* has also undergone changes, as traditions are modified and invented by *mudang* themselves. In mainstream Korean society, certain aspects of traditional colour symbolism remain while new ‘traditions’ are invented. Globalization and the strong influence of Christianity and western culture have had a significant effect on this process in contemporary Korean society. Therefore it is necessary to examine the colour symbolism in Christianity and in western societies to understand these changes, through analyzing the Bible, clerical vestments, and the popular English idioms and proverbs.

In summary, this paper discusses changing traditions in colour symbolism in Korean society through examining and comparing colours represented in tomb murals, ‘traditional’ folk performances, *kut*, the Bible, and contemporary western and Korean popular cultures.

Changing Meanings of ‘tradition’

The term ‘tradition’ generally refers to “a custom, opinion, or belief handed down to posterity esp. orally or by practice (the Oxford English dictionary).” In archaeology, it refers to “a set of interrelated cultural elements or traits which persists over a relatively long time span (Seymour-Smith 1986: 279)” In

anthropology, it carries plural meanings and “can mean ‘culture’ as a whole, but generally refers to conventionally recognized customs, practices, ideas, or values handed down inter-generationally (Levinson & Ember eds. 1996: 888).”

All the above definitions imply a long time span, and traditions are often thought to be ‘age-old’ and to have been in existence from antiquity. However, as Hobsbawm has said (1983: 1), ‘traditions’ which claim to be or are regarded as ancient often have recent traceable origins and sometimes invented for a specific purpose. For example, the kilt, the well-known traditional Scottish costume, was in fact invented by an English industrialist from Lancashire, called Thomas Rawlinson in the eighteenth century (Trevor-Roper 1983: 21), for his workers for no other reason than practicality and convenience. Also it was many years after the Union that tartans which originally were a matter of taste or status, came to represent different ‘clans’ according to the colour combinations used in the cloth (ibid.: 29). Another surprise is that the elaborate ceremonials of the British monarchy, which the commentators and journalists sometimes like to describe as ‘a thousand-year-old tradition’ and having ‘all the precision that comes from centuries of precedent’, are the ‘inventions’ of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries for the purpose of perpetuating the anachronistic institution in the transitional period when monarchy was threatened to become obsolete (Cannadine 1983).

However, for whatever reasons traditions are invented, their meanings change over time. In the case of the Scottish kilt, it was originally intended for the ease of movement of the working class people, but became a symbol of the Scottish national identity after the Union, and the elite Scotsmen also adopted it. Nowadays, even the senior male British royals, including the Duke of Edinburgh and Prince Charles, sport them on many occasions. By making the kilt a part of their working wardrobe, they are displaying solidarity and unity towards the Scottish people, many of whom have a strong sense of Scottish national identity. In contemporary Britain, the kilt, clan tartans and the anachronistic ceremonials of the British monarchy, etc. have acquired another dimension to their meanings, viz., boosting tourism, thus contributing to the national economy.

Nationalism, which has been such a powerful force in the lives of people globally in recent years that Nairn (1977:359) calls it the incurable ‘pathology of modern developmental history’, is also a relatively new (and sometimes even ‘invented’) phenomenon. In fact, Kemiläinen (1964:10, 33) points out that the term nationalism was not generally used until the end of the nineteenth century. The late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries saw the most frenetic development of these newly-invented sentiments; in fact most of the national anthems which invariably bring tears to today’s Olympic medallists were officially ‘created’ during this period. The British national anthem only became known as the national anthem in the nineteenth century, although it was first performed in London in 1745. ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ was officially made the American national anthem by a US congressional resolution as recently as on 3 March, 1931. The Korean national anthem, *aekukka*, was composed by An Ikt’ae (1906 – 1965) in 1935, although the verses had been written earlier.

Traditions are constantly invented, sometimes through modification, introduction of new elements and amalgamation of existing ones, as society evolves and changes. Tradition in colour symbolism in Korea likewise has undergone changes over time, especially since the modernization of the country began.

Colour symbolism in pre-modern Korea and *Ohaeng* (the Five Elements)

In pre-modern Korean society colour symbolism was mainly based on the ancient Chinese cosmology called *ohaeng*, according to which there are five basic elements in the universe, namely water, fire, wood, metal and earth. They are linked to the five directions, i.e. north, south, east, west and centre. There existed five directions in the ancient Chinese cosmology, the centre being the fifth. The centre is deemed to be the ‘heart’, controlling the other four directions. That is the reason why the ruler of the earth, the Chinese emperor is called *hwangje*, literally meaning ‘the yellow emperor’, and his costumes were in yellow, the colour which represents the centre. The five directions are represented by black, red, blue, white and yellow respectively, and also by five divine animals, namely black turtle, red phoenix, white tiger, blue dragon and yellow dragon. It is also linked to the four seasons, i.e. east=spring, south=summer, west=autumn, and north=winter. *Ohaeng* was thought to be a symbolic fusion of ethics and philosophy, which controls the everyday life of human beings in society.

When exactly *ohaeng* was introduced to Korea is unknown, but its concept was already present in ancient arts dating back to the Three Kingdoms Period. Some extant ancient Koguryŏ tombs which were built from the fourth to the seventh century contain paintings of the five directional animals, generally called ‘*sashindo* (pictures of the four divine animals)’. What is interesting is that later tombs contain proportionately more *sashindo* paintings than earlier ones, where murals tend to depict proportionately more decorative patterns, objects and activities of everyday life, etc. So generally speaking the older a tomb, the more *sashindo* paintings it contains (Ch’oe & Im eds, 1990:136). There was an exhibition of Koguryŏ tomb murals in 1993 in Seoul, organized by the Chosun Ilbo (a major daily newspaper), which showed a comprehensive collection of photographs taken just before the exhibition. The book I bought at the exhibition contains the pictures of murals depicting the five animals representing the five directions. For examples, in ‘Ohoebun Tomb No. 4’, dating back to around the seventh century, on the ceiling (centre) is a picture of a yellow dragon (see Chosun Ilbosa 1993: 73), on the eastern side, that of a blue dragon (ibid.: 44-45), on the western side, that of a white tiger which looks similar to the blue dragon, but has no scale and has four legs (ibid.: 47). In ‘Ohoebun Tomb No. 5’, at the south-facing entrance, there are pictures of a pair of red phoenixes (ibid.: 81), on the western wall there is a picture a white tiger (ibid.: 83), on the north side, that of a black turtle entwined with a snake (ibid.: 86). *Sashin ch’ong* (Tomb with Murals of Four Divine Animals) also contains similar murals to those in Ohoebun Tombs Nos. 4 & 5, albeit more damaged being older. On the ceiling which represents the centre a yellow dragon (ibid.: 194) is painted, and on the northern wall, a black turtle (ibid.:195). There are also other tombs containing similar murals. For example, a tomb dating back to the Paekche period, which is located in Sŭngsan-ri, Puyŏ-ŭp, in Ch’ungh’ŏng-nam-do, also contains a mural depicting a white tiger on the western side.

Ohaeng is also represented in various traditional masked dance plays, some of which have been designated Important Intangible Cultural Treasures (IICT from now on) by the Korean government. IICT No. 39¹, *Chŏyong mu* (Chŏyong Dance), or *obang Chŏyong mu* (Five Directional Chŏyong Dance), is based on the legend of Ch’ŏyong, which appears in Iryŏn’s *Samguk yusa*. According to it, he was the seventh son of the Dragon King, who settled in the court of the 49th Shilla King Hŏn’gang (r. 875-886). He was given a high office and a beautiful wife by King Hŏn’gang. The Plague Spirit coveted her beauty, and violated her at night. One night on his return Ch’ŏyong found them in bed, but instead of showing his fury, he went away singing² and dancing. Surprised at his magnanimity, the Plague Spirit promised never to set foot into a household which even displayed a portrait of him. Since then the custom of hanging Ch’ŏyong’s portraits became popular to ward off the Plague Spirit, and a masked dance, called *Ch’ŏyong mu* (Ch’ŏyong Dance) began to be performed. It is described in *Yongjae ch’onghwa* (Miscellaneous Writings of Yongjae)³ by Sŏng Hyŏn (1439-1504; pen name:Yongjae) as a one-man performance (*Han’guk minjok tae paekkwajajŏn v. 21* 1991:773), but later evolved into the five-man dance, called *obang Ch’ŏyong mu* (Five Directional Ch’ŏyong Dance).

The inclusion of *ohaeng* and *obangsaek* then is a clear invention of tradition by a person or persons unknown in the early sixteenth century, with a view to adding more drama, entertainment and meaning to the existing dance. The ancient concept of five colours representing the five directions was ideal for the purpose of further developing the dance, since its corporation included another dimension to the meaning, i.e. the performance can prevent the misfortune coming from all five directions. The increase in the number of performers is in keeping with the Korean groupism, i.e. the idea of ‘the more, the merrier.’ Koreans have generally associated entertainment with large company of people, as opposed to solitary enjoyment. It is well reflected in *Taegam t’aryŏng* (Song of Government Official Spirit), as sung by a veteran male *mudang* from Seoul, Pak In-o, at his *chaesu kut*.⁴

Watch our Taegam’s behaviour.
 What is he drinking? . . .
 Worry wine, if brewed by one alone,

¹ It was designated Important Intangible Cultural Treasure No. 39 in January 1971.

² For the full English translation of this famous song called, ‘*Chŏyongga* (The Song of Ch’ŏyong)’, see Hogarth (1998:28).

³ It is a collection of Sŏng Hyŏn’s writings over a period of time, c. 1499-1504, published posthumously by his son in 1525 (20th year of King Chungjong’s reign)

⁴ *Kut* to pray for good luck.

Harmony wine, if brewed by two together,
Triple-harmony wine, if brewed by three.
(My translation)

This ‘groupism’ has always been a characteristic of Korean entertainment culture, which interestingly is also reflected in the contemporary Korean pop music scene. As I have shown elsewhere, K-pop, one of the important components of the Korean Wave, is dominated by groups, rather than solo singers, although some of them are highly successful individually as well (Hogarth 2012).

Ohaeng is also represented in other traditional performances, such as *o kwangdae* (Five Performers/Clowns) masked dance dramas, in some of which five ‘generals’ representing the five directions, dressed in the five directional colours appear. *O kwangdae* (Five Performers/Clowns) masked dance dramas, some of which are designated IICT, are performed various parts of Kyöngsang-nam-do, with slight variations. In the performances from Chinju and Kasan, Five Directional Generals appear dressed in the five ‘directional’ colours, as are the Five Leper Players in the former. *O kwangdae* masked dance dramas from T’ongyöng, Kosöng and Kasan, have been designated IICT No. 6, 7 and 73 respectively.

In contemporary Korean society, the five directional colours are represented in popular cloth called *saektong*, which is made into *tol-bim* (babies’ first birthday outfit), *chögori* (blouse), *durumagi* (long coat), cushions, money bags, etc. In some Buddhist temples, the main Buddha is seated on a *saektong* cushion, the purpose of which is to prevent misfortune coming from all five directions through his divine intervention, according to a Buddhist monk I spoke to.

Apart from the *ohaeng*-related colour symbolism, colours in pre-modern Korean society, as in many other societies, have contradictory symbolism, as follows:

<Black>

1. Evil, bad: e.g. *hükshim* (black heart). *hükhaeng* (‘black deed’=wrongdoing). *hügöp* (‘black karma’ =bad karma). *hügün* (‘black clouds’ = bad circumstances).
2. Wrong: *hükpaek punmyöng* (‘clarifying black or white’=clearly distinguishing wrong from right). *hükchöm* (‘black mark’ = penalty point).
3. Under-handed: *hükmak* (‘black plot’). *hüksu* (‘black hands’).
4. Misfortune, failure: In geomancy if a gravesite has black earth, it is inauspicious since it retains water, and the descendants will suffer misfortune and failure.
5. Darkness, fear, hell: e.g. *hüksüng chiok* (Buddhist hell)
6. Fierce: e.g. *hükp’ung* (black wind).
7. Death: Death messenger wears black, so if you see a spirit dressed in black in a dream, you or a close family member will die.
8. Youth, with reference to hair: Black hair symbolizes youth. *hüktu* (‘black head’ =youth). *hüktae chaesang* (young minister).
9. Dark, not necessarily black: e.g. *hük chinju* (black pearl), *hük changmi* (black rose),
10. Authority: Chosön dynasty judges’ formal costumes consisted of black robes and hats.
11. Talisman to prevent fire was written in black ink, black representing north and water.
12. Profit: *hükcha* (in the black)

<White>

White has been loved by Koreans, and has mostly positive connotations. It is often used as black/white dualism as in many other societies, i.e. black (*üm*/dark) symbolizes night, evil, misfortune, failure, wrong, etc., while white (*yang*/light), day, goodness, luck, success, right, etc.

1. Heaven: In myths, things associated with heaven are described as white, e.g. white birds, animals, and mountains. Mountains called ‘*Paeksan* (White Mountain)’ exist everywhere in Korea, and are considered sacred. Koreans traditionally like to wear white clothes, and are described themselves as *paek-üi minjok* (people in white)⁵, since they believe they are descendants of Hwanung, a son of Hwanin (Heavenly God).
2. Purity, clarity, clean: in Buddhism, *paek shim* (‘white mind’ = clear/clean mind). *Paegöp* (‘white

⁵ See also ‘Colour symbolism in *kut*’ in this paper under ‘white’.

karma' = 'good karma').

3. Nobility, loftiness, loyalty: upright incorruptible scholars with integrity are likened to white cranes.
4. Good luck: e.g. Seeing a white deer, a white bear, a white snake, a white seagull in a dream brings you luck; a white horse in a dream means money; white rice symbolizes long life; white clothes, invitation; a white monkey in a dream means a high office; white costume in a dream means respect.
5. Empty: *paeksu* (no official hat) means unemployed, *paeksu kōndal* (empty handed, i.e. poor, ne'er-do-well man)

<Red>

Its traditional symbolism is mostly positive.

1. Good luck with powers to ward off evil spirits: Talismans were generally written in red. Red costumes were worn in rituals. The king wore red robes. Bridal makeup included three circles of rouge, one on the forehead, and the other two on the cheeks. Red peppers and charcoal were hung outside the gate after a baby boy's birth. Red earth was scattered in front of the house after a baby's birth. *P'atchuk* (sweet red bean porridge) was eaten in the winter.
2. Beauty: *tongkka hongsang* (Get a red skirt if the price is the same)
3. Blood, life: Putting red earth in graves means wishing for eternal life.
4. Light and beginning: e.g. The *pulgūn pojagi* (red wrapping cloth) in the foundation myth of Karak Kingdom. The future queen of King Kim Suro, Hō Hwangok, sailed in a ship with red sails and a red flag.
5. Loyal, true: *chōkshim/tanshim* ('red mind' = loyalty and constancy)
6. Empty: *chōksu sōngsa* ('success with empty hands' = self made man). *chōksu tanshin* ('empty-handed and single bodied' = poor and lonely person).
7. Deficit: *chōkcha*: (in the red).

<Blue>

In traditional Korean language *p'aran saek* is used for both blue and green.⁶

1. Hope, regeneration, birth: often when it is used for 'green'
2. High, lofty: *ch'ōngun* ('blue clouds'=high office)
3. Youth: *ch'ōngnyōn* (young man), *ch'ōngch'un* (youth), *ch'ōngsonyōn* (young men and boys), *ch'ōngsang kwabu* (young widow).
4. Lowly status: *ch'ōngūi* ('blue clothes' = lowly people). *ch'ōngūi tongja/tongnyō* (boy/girl servant). Low grade officials wore blue uniforms.
5. Pleasure quarters, house of ill fame ('Red-light district'): *ch'ōngdŭng hongga* (literally 'blue lamp red street'). *chōngnu* (house with blue tiled roof = brothel/*kisaeng* house).
6. Fresh: *ch'ōnggwa* (literally 'blue' fruit and vegetables).
7. Immature: *ch'ongmae* (unripe plum).
8. Powerful, authoritative: *p'urūn yangban* ('blue aristocrat' = powerful aristocrat). *sōsūri p'urūda* (very powerful).

<yellow>

Linked to gold, it has mostly positive symbolism.

1. Authority, wealth, fame, advancement: *kūmgu* ('the golden words' =Buddha's words), *kūmshin* ('the golden body'=Buddha's body). *kūmgol* ('the golden bones'=Buddha's bones).
2. Mellow/maturity, courage, purity, integrity, peace, generosity
3. Auspicious: In geomancy if a gravesite has yellows soil, it is auspicious, and the descendants will prosper.

⁶ As in Korean, many languages do not have separate terms for blue and green, e.g. Vietnamese, Thai, Chinese, Japanese, some Bantu language, also in Scottish Gaelic 'gorm' is used for both and green.

Colour Symbolism in *Kut*

One of the most immediately apparent characteristics of *kut* is the use of piercingly bright colours, dark or sombre colours being avoided as far as possible. Eliade (1951) interprets the abundant use of primary colours, also found in many other similar rituals, as man symbolically creating a rainbow, which is believed to provide the bridge between man and the spirits. In *kut* colours also carry special symbols, which are clearly understood and intentionally manipulated by the shamans. The symbols, although based on *ohaeng*, are also highly idiosyncratic, and are not absolute in that they can change over time, or according to the area and the shamans themselves. *Ohaeng* is directly represented in *obanggi* (the directional five flags), which are carried by Obang Shinjang, the Five Directional General. In *kut*, the idea has been developed further so that each colour represents a spirit (or a group of spirits) who will help bring the sponsor of *kut* good fortune. 1) White represents the Heavenly Spirit, 2) red, the Mountain Spirit, 3) blue, the General, 4) yellow, the ‘ancestors’ and 5) green, the sundry ghosts. According to several shaman informants, it was originally black, but has been replaced with green, since traditionally Korean people do not like black, which is associated with dark/night/evil. Some told me that in *kut* dark or sombre colours are avoided as far as possible. In the folk museum founded by the late Prof. Kim T’aegon at Kyunghee University, the black flag is present in *obanggi* instead of the currently prevalent green one. The *mudang* asks the sponsor(s) to pick a flag, while holding out the five flags all rolled up. White or red ones are supposed to be lucky, i.e. with the help of the Heavenly Spirit or the Mountain Spirit, respectively, good fortune will come soon, since they are powerful gods. A green flag signals trouble, since they represent sundry ghosts, which are blocking the way of good fortune. In the former case, the shaman looks happy and contented, waving the red or white flag high up in the air with a broad smile, while in the latter case, the worried shaman always asks him/her to choose again. Blue and yellow ones seem to be indifferent. When these ideas were introduced to Korean shamanism is more or less impossible to know, in the absence of detailed records of the ritual. However, the reason why different colours have come to represent different spirits can be understood through analysis of various traditional beliefs.

First of all, white symbolizes ‘nothingness’ or ‘emptiness’, being ‘no colour’, so heaven with its vast emptiness is represented by white. In *ohaeng* the west is represented as white; the dead are believed to go to the west where the sun sets, and since the dead also go to heaven, it stands to reason that both heaven and the west are represented by white. This is the reason why Koreans in mourning wear white, which symbolizes heaven/the west, where the dead go. This is why at the ritual table, sticklers for ‘tradition’ still insist on putting white fruits, e.g. pears, melons, etc. on the western side, while red ones are placed on the eastern side. It also accounts for the fact that the spirits associated with Heaven, such as Ch’ilsöng (The Seven Stars Spirit), Chesök, etc. are ‘played’ by shamans in white costumes.

Buddhist-derived spirits are also personified in white costumes, which, apart from their ‘heavenly’ origin, can be interpreted in another way. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is transcending *samsara* (the Eternal Wheel of Death and Rebirth), which starts with emptying one’s mind of all worldly desires, etc. White represents the Buddhist ideals, i.e. ‘emptiness’, which is why the Buddhist elements are often expressed in white in *musok*, the costumes and even the fan carried by the Buddhist spirits being sometimes white. When a potential shaman picks a white flag, it is interpreted as her tutelary spirit being Pulsa Halmöni (The Buddhist Guru Grandmother), i.e. among her/his kinsmen, affinal or consanguineal, there has been a female member with a shamanistic propensity, in the past, whether she be a practising shaman or not (Hogarth 1998:30).

The Korean people have always practised the worship of Heaven, as clearly shown in countless myths and folk tales (Yi Nünghwa 1927/1991; Yu 1975; Kim Yölgü 1977; Kim T’aegon 1981; Kim Hönsön 1994, etc.). The most famous Korean creation myth, the Tan’gun Myth, manifests the pride that the Koreans feel for being the descendants of the Heavenly Lord (Hogarth 1998:241-242, 1999). For this reason, white has most frequently been worn as the favourite colour for most Koreans. Many early western travellers to Korea, who were puzzled by the virtually universal wearing of white costumes on all occasions, were clearly ignorant of this deep-rooted worship of heaven, represented in white. Mrs. Bishop (1897/1970) pities the women who had to work so hard to keep their menfolk’s clothes pure white.

Red has always been considered the luckiest (as well as the prettiest) colour in Korea, which is clearly reflected in an old Korean saying, ‘*tongkka hongsang*’, meaning ‘If the price is the same, get a red

skirt'. A similar concept is prevalent in many parts of the world; for example, in Samoa, red is considered not only beautiful, but also powerful.⁷ In China, red is also considered lucky and holy, the temples being often decorated entirely in red. Red, as one of the vital colours for a wedding in China (Freedman 1967), and many Far Eastern countries does not need elaborating. In Korea, large parts of the traditional bridal costumes are red, and moreover, three round circles of bright red rouge are applied on the bride's brow and cheeks. Since this particular cosmetic application is never made on any other person than a bride, it must carry a special symbolism, possibly for warding off the malignant spirits and wishing her good fortune, which she will need in abundance in her new life as a daughter-in-law⁸.

Red generally symbolizes life, because it is the colour of blood. Life begins with birth which is accompanied by blood. It is easy to see why on a *kut* table (and also on the *chesa* table) red fruits are placed on the eastern side, since the east is where the sun rises and life symbolically begins. As stated earlier, white (or yellow or other pale coloured) fruits are put on the western side, while in between assorted brightly-coloured sweetmeats are placed. If the east represents this world, and the west the other world, then the two are said to be symbolically linked with a rainbow, created out of rainbow-coloured sweetmeats, which are placed in between. However, these days, only sticklers for 'tradition' will abide by the strict code of table-setting, most younger shamans being totally ignorant of this symbolism and 'decorating' the table to suit their individual aesthetic sense.

Why red has come to represent the Mountain Spirit needs more imaginative interpretation. My own would be that since it is the colour of blood, it also represents blood ancestors. The first progenitor of the Korean nation is generally believed to be Tan'gun, who according to *Samguk yusa* (Iryŏn), eventually became the Mountain Spirit (Hogarth 1998: 241) Thus Tan'gun/the Mountain Spirit symbolizes the Korean people's bloodline, which is represented in red.

Why yellow represents ancestors can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, according to Ms. Kwŏn Mallye, a veteran *mudang* from Kangwŏn-do, yellow symbolizes the ancestors' flesh, which is represented in yellow artificial flowers used in her *kut*. Secondly, according to *ohaeng*, yellow represent the centre, the fifth and the most important direction, since it acts as a pivot for the other four directions. Gold, the symbol of wealth and the most precious, being also yellow, it is understandable why the most important centre is represented in that colour. Similarly, ancestors can be said to be represented by yellow, in the sense of being 'precious', since with the introduction of Confucianism, ancestors a pivotal role in Korean people's lives. The importance of ancestors is visually emphasized in many shamanistic shrines. For example, in the private shrine of Mr. Pang Ch'anghwan, prominently hung a large calligraphy, which read, 'First My Ancestors, and then I' (as of 1993/1994).

Blue represents the General Spirit, possibly because blue is generally associated with 'masculinity'. It is thought of as a cold colour, which is also possibly linked with 'brutality' and 'mercilessness' as in 'cold murder'. In traditional Korea, it also symbolized power and authority as in *sŏsŭri p'urŭda* (very powerful) and *p'urŭn yangban* ('blue aristocrat' = powerful aristocrat). Likewise the General Spirit is believed to powerful and attack the malignant spirits/ghosts relentlessly and mercilessly, on behalf of the sponsors.

Black is all the colours, thus it represents all the sundry, formless, miscellaneous ghosts and wandering spirits, which are also often represented with *osaek ch'ŏn* (five different coloured pieces of cloth combined). Black, symbolizing death, darkness and unknown evil forces, is generally shunned by Far Eastern peoples. Jordan (1972), for example, mentions how black is abhorred by the Taiwanese people. Likewise, the Korean people traditionally avoid using black as far as possible, particularly in *kut*. I have heard a *mudnag*, possessed by the spirit of one of the sponsor's 'ancestors', who died young, complaining that the costume offered to her contained a bit of black at the tips of the sleeves. She whined, 'Next time, I want mine all in pretty colours, and remember, no black anywhere!' According to my shaman informants, this is why black flag has been replaced by green. Interestingly enough 'green' does not exist in the traditional Korean language. Although *ch'orok saek* (the colour of grass i.e. green) exists in modern Korean,

⁷ In 'Nomads of the Wind', Radio 4, 16 January, 1994. Also also Lewis (1980).

⁸ The maltreatment that a woman traditionally receives from her mother-in-law in Korea is well-known (Yi Nŭnghwa 1927/1990: 157; Lee Kwang Kyu 1975: 146-153). A similar phenomenon also exists in a traditional Chinese household (Wolf 1972; Hsu 1948; Freedman 1966).

grass is often described as *p'aran saek*, which, strictly speaking, means blue. Why this relative new-comer in the Korean vocabulary, has replaced the loathed black, is a mystery. One possible explanation may be that in the minds of the Korean people, it is a non-colour, like black, and another would be that it completes the colours of the rainbow.

The above shows how traditions in colour symbolism in *kut* are influenced by the prevailing ideology in mainstream Korean society, but undergoes changes over time incorporating inventions by resourceful *mudang* themselves for the purpose of adding drama and piquancy to their performance.

Colour symbolism in western culture and in contemporary Korean society

'Western culture' is too broad a term, since it includes many variations, so I must point out that by it I mean that of the English-speaking region and Western Europe. Christianity having had strong influence on western culture, I have based the following symbolism on the colour symbolism in the Bible as well as that shown in English idioms, phrases and contemporary popular western culture. As in most cultures, colours often have contradictory symbolism.

<Black>

In western culture, black has mostly negative connotations with a few exceptions, and is often used in black/white dualism, representing the dark/evil aspects of life while white represents the opposite.

1. Death, mourning: The Bible (Isaiah 50:3, 'I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering.'; Revelation 6:12, '...the sun turned black as a sackcloth of hair...' ; Jeremiah 14:2, 'Judah mourneth...; they are black unto the ground;...'). For funerals people wear black, and objects used at funerals are predominantly black. In Victorian England women in mourning wore black jewellery as well as black clothes.
2. Sin, evil, crime, bad, illegal: The Bible: (Job 6: 15-16, 'My brethren have dealt deceitfully as a brook... which are blackish by reason of the ice, and wherein the snow is hid:'). Black-hearted person, black list, black mark, black mail, black market, black propaganda.
3. Darkness, gloom, Hell: The Bible (Job 3:5, 'Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; ...let the blackness of the day terrify it.')
4. Sorrow: The Bible (Jeremiah 8:21, '...I am black, astonishment hath taken hold on me.')
5. Disease: The Bible (Job 30:30, 'My skin is black upon me...')
6. Famine: The Bible (Revelation 6:5-6, 'a black horse... A measure of wheat for a penny ...'; Lamentations 4:8, 'Their visage is blacker than a coal...').
7. Morbid, depressed: e.g. black comedy, black mood, black humour
8. Sad, tragic, catastrophic: e.g. Black Tuesday (the day the stock market crashed on 29 October 1929 which started the Great Depression), Black Monday (Stock market crash on 19 October 1987), Black Friday (various tragic events).
9. Secrecy, the unknown, ambiguity: e.g. black box (whose internal workings are unknown or inexplicable), black project
10. Anarchism: Originating in the 1880, its symbol is the Black Flag.
11. Unusual in the negative sense: e.g. black sheep of a family.
12. Power and authority: e.g. lawyers' and judges' black robes, clergymen's everyday clothing, formal academic robes, mortar boards at graduation ceremonies, etc.
13. Stylish, sexy, elegant, sophistication in fashion: e.g. sexy underwear (most often black), men's tuxedos for 'black tie' events, the little black dress (most fashion-conscious women's essential item of clothing), the expression, 'X is the new black' which is based on the assumption that black is always fashionable.
14. Profit in accounting or economy: e.g. in the black (free of debt or showing profit), Black Friday (in the USA a day after Thanksgiving Day – supposedly the busiest shopping day of the year).
15. Beauty and health: The Bible (The Song of Solomon 5:5-6, 'I am black, but comely..... I am black, because the sun has looked upon me...'; The Song of Solomon 5:11, '...his locks are bushy, and

black as a raven.’; Leviticus 13:37, ‘But if there is black hair grown up therein; ...the priest shall pronounce him clean.’

16. Very occasionally lucky: e.g. a black cat (can be lucky or unlucky).

<White>

1. Purity, innocence, cleanliness, peace: The Bible (Psalm 51:7, ‘Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.’; Ecclesiastes 9:8, ‘Let thy garments be always white...’; Daniel 7:9, ‘...whose garment was white as snow...’, 11:35, ‘...and to purge, and to make them white...’, 12:10, ‘Many shall be purified, and made white...’; Matthew 17:2, ‘...his raiment was white as the light.’; Mark 9:3, ‘And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them.’; Luke 9:29, ‘...his raiment was white and glistening.’; John 20:12, ‘And seeth two angels in white sitting...’; Acts 1:10, ‘...behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;’; Revelation 3:4-5, ‘...they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.’, ‘He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment’, 3:18, ‘...white raiment...’, 4:4, ‘...I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment...’, 6:11, ‘And white robes were given unto every one of them...’, 7:9, ‘...before the Lamb, clothed with white robes...’, 13:14, ‘and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life...’). Liturgical robes of priest often white, as are bridal gowns and angels ‘outfits.
2. Righteousness, faithful, true,: The Bible (Revelation 19:11, ‘And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.’; Revelation 19:14, ‘And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and lean.’)
3. Good: In western movies good guys wear white hats, and the bad guys black hats. A white lie, white magic, etc. means not bad or malicious, but something done for a good reason.
4. Victory: The Bible (Revelation 6:2, ‘...behold a white horse...a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.’)
5. Authority: physicians/scientists white coats. white tie and tails for highly formal functions
6. Uniforms: tennis players, cricket players,
7. Emptiness, sickness,

<Red>

1. (Through association with blood) life, sacrifice, covenant: The Bible (passim, e.g. Genesis 9:4-5; Exodus 12:13, 23:18; Deuteronomy 12:23; Isaiah 1:15; Matthew 26:28; Revelation 7:14, 19:13.). Red being the symbol of the blood of Christ, Popes wear red.
2. Courage, martyrdom: St. George’s Cross. Mary Stuart wore a red shirt at her execution in 1587 to imply that she was an innocent martyr. The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane (1871-1900). The Thin Red Line at Balaclava (1854).
3. Terror, power: The Bible (Revelation 12;13, ‘...behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads.’)
4. Sexual passion, lust, sin: The Bible (Isaiah 1:18, ‘...though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’; Revelation 17:3, ‘...I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy...’; Revelation 17:4, ‘And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour...having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication.’ The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850)
5. Temptation of sin: The Bible (Genesis 25:30, ‘And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage ...’; Proverbs 23:31, ‘Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup ...’)
6. War: The Bible (2 Kings 3:22, ‘...The Moabites saw the water on the other side as red as blood.’; Nahum 2:3, ‘The shield of his mighty men is made red, the valiant men are in scarlet...’)
7. Vengeance: The Bible (Isaiah 63:2, ‘Wherefore are thou red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the wine fat?’, 63:4, ‘For the day of vengeance is in mine heart...’)
8. Devil, Satan: In Christianity Satan is depicted red or wearing red in popular culture.
9. Wrath, anger: (Roman Catholicism) one of the seven deadly sins: See red (become very angry). Red

- rag to a bull (something that will enlarge another particular person).
10. Romantic love, courtly love: Red is the symbolic colour of the heart, and the red rose related to the use of red roses as a love symbol. St. Valentine (Roman Catholic bishop martyred in about 296 A.D.)'s Day.
 11. Sexiness: Red on women drives men wild. Surveys show women dressed in red are more attractive to men (see <http://foxnews.com/story/o,2933,444415,00html>).
 12. Celebration, ceremony: e.g. red carpet and red seats in opera houses/theatres.
 13. Prostitution: Prostitutes were required to wear red. Red-light district.
 14. Warning, danger: e.g. stop signs/lights, red flag (motor racing), red card (football), to raise a red flag.
 15. Embarrassment: To have red ears/a red face.
 16. Deficit, losses: To be in the red (losing money).
 17. Red tape: Calling attention (print in red ink), bureaucratic obstacle, a difficult case.
 18. Communism: Red Army. Red Square. Red scare.
 19. Caught red-handed (seen doing something illegal or private; red here means blood, i.e. caught with blood still on the hands).

<Blue>

In western Europe and the USA, surveys regularly show blue is the favourite colour. According to a survey in Germany in 2009, blue is given as the favourite colour of 46% of men and 44% of women respondents.⁹

1. Faithfulness, loyalty: True blue (US faithful & loyal). In the UK bride wears something old, something new, something borrowed. and something blue (which is a sign of loyalty and faithfulness, and a sapphire engagement ring symbolizes fidelity).
2. Virgin Mary: In Christianity blue is associated with Virgin Mary (In most medieval religious paintings Mary is seen wearing blue). In the contemporary Anglican Church at the mass dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the priest wears a pale blue and white chasuble.
3. Excellence, distinction and high performance: The British Queen wears a blue sash on formal occasions. Blue ribbon (highest award). Blue-ribbon panel (top level experts). Blue chip stock (high quality reliability company stock). Blue blood (nobility).
4. Labour/working class: Blue collar workers who wear blue denim overalls.
5. Infinity, distance: The wild blue yonder (sky).
6. Peace: The colour of the UN's Peacekeepers, called 'Blue Helmets'.
7. Cold: Cold water tap is marked blue.
8. Serious/dowdy: Blue-stockings (intellectual unfashionable women).
9. Melancholy: Having the 'blues'. 'Blues (music)'. Pablo Picasso's Blue Period painting.
10. Pornography: e.g. blue movie.

<Yellow>

Surveys show that it is not a very popular colour in western Europe and the USA. The Bible does not mention it as a colour very often, although gold is mentioned in a few places.

1. Sunshine, warmth:
2. Laid back, relaxed: mellow yellow.
3. Hope, support, remembrance: Wearing yellow ribbon in the USA.
4. Easter:
5. High visibility – yellow taxis, US school buses – highway construction equipment
6. Warning, caution –railway signalling – traffic lights – yellow cars
7. Cowardice –yellow-belly (coward)
8. Sensationalist: Yellow journalism to maximize profit

As we saw in the above, some of the colour symbolism is the same in both traditional Korean and western societies, while others are completely different. In contemporary Korean society, western colour symbolism has become more familiar, especially to younger generations,

⁹ Eva Heller (2009: 13), *Psychologie de la Couleur*. Cited in Wikipedia.

although traces of *oaheng*-based colour symbolism remain in traditional performances such as *kut*, *Ch'ŏyong mu*, *o keangdae* masked dance plays, etc. Since colours often carry contradicting symbolism in any society, the newly introduced concepts such as black symbolizing death¹⁰, have happily co-existed with the traditional Korean colour symbolism. Moreover, new traditions based on newly-introduced colour symbolism are created. For example, 4 April has been apparently designated as a day for eating *jjajangmyŏn*, noodles with black bean sauce, a popular cheap snack dish in Korea. The Korean word for 4, *sa*, is homophonous with sino-Korean word, *sa*, meaning 'death'. Since black symbolizes death, 4 April (which has double 4) is a day of death, so black bean sauce is linked to it. Mourners at the funeral mostly wear black, instead of traditional white, and bridal gowns are almost always white, instead of being predominantly red as in traditional costumes which also has *saektong* (fives colours based on *ohaeng*) sleeves. But a compromise has been made and the bride wear the traditional outfit with the three red circles of rouge on her face at a ceremony called *p'yebaek*, a post-wedding ceremony where the bride pays respects to the members of her new family.

On the fashion front, nowadays black is often regarded as the most fashionable colour, especially by young people. White, which has long been the favourite colour of the Korean people, is still favoured by many people. So the contemporary K-pop stars often wear monochromic outfits.

Perhaps the biggest difference in general colour preference between traditional Korean and western tastes is perhaps that the former favours red, while the latter, blue. Contradiction always exists in colour symbolism, so although many westerners prefers blue to any other colour, red is considered sexy, while traditionally Koreans preferred red to blue in general. But tastes change according to the world trend in fashion. For example, blue jeans have become a symbol of youthful fashion. They were invented by Levi Strauss, a German immigrant in San Francisco in 1873, and Vogue magazine made them high fashion in 1935. In the 1950s, they became an essential item of clothing for the young people in the USA, Europe, and later became the uniform of young people around the world. Young Korean people are no exception, and pop idols often appear in skin-tight blue jeans or denim hot pants.

Conclusion

Although tradition is something that has been handed down for generations, it can and does incorporate changes over time. Sometimes a tradition is invented by a person or a group of people for a specific purpose, and extra or different meanings are given to it later by other people for a different reason or purpose.

Colour symbolism in Korean society is a good example. In pre-modern Korean society, it was underpinned by *oaheng*, which is based on the ancient Chinese cosmology of the Five Elements. It not only dominated the everyday lives of the Korean people, but heavily influenced all forms of arts from the ancient times. The tomb murals dating back to the Koguryŏ period often depict the five animals representing the five directions in the corresponding colours.

Colour symbolism in contemporary world has multiple dimensions and connotations, and preferences change frequently according to the changing world trend. When a particular colour is in fashion, traditional colour symbolism vary rarely enters into the consciousness of people who use it, particularly the young and the fashion-conscious. For example, the colour known as 'Roman

¹⁰ Although the Death Messenger was thought to wear black, the association of black with death was not very strong in pre-modern Korean society. Rather death was more associated with white, which represents the west where the sun sets, hence people go there after death.

purple' in the Christian church is currently one of the trendiest colours this year in England. According to my rector, it symbolizes 'penitence', hence the clerical vestment worn during Lent is in that colour, but I doubt whether many people who like to wear that colour this year are even aware of it. However, there are certain traditions connected with colour symbolism, which persist despite the inevitable changes. The colour symbolism often reflects the social, political, religious and cultural history of a nation, and as such is a valuable source for its study.

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