



Korean Residential Architecture of Joseon Dynasty Through *The Kingdom of a Thousand Years*

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ABSTRACT: The novel *"The Kingdom of a Thousand Years"* by Kim Kyung-uk is based on a true story from history when three Dutch sailors drifted into Joseon during the 17th century. Through the narration of Jan Jansz Weltevree – the first Westerner to set foot in Joseon, the life, society, and people of Joseon are perceived and depicted in a fresh and unfamiliar way, different from the evaluations of Koreans or Easterners. This study focuses on examining the architecture and culture of the people in Joseon to understand the diverse types of houses for each social class during the Joseon period, while also identifying similarities and differences with the architecture of houses in Vietnam.

KEYWORDS: Architecture, culture, thatched houses, tiled houses, han-ok, *The Kingdom of a Thousand Years*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is a broad concept, and there are various definitions of it around the world. In his classic work *"Primitive Culture,"* E.B. Tylor defined culture as follows: *"Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"* (E.B. Tylor, 2018: 11). In this definition, Tylor equated culture with civilization, making it difficult to precisely delineate the content of culture. Another definition of culture provided by Tran Ngoc Them states: *"Culture is an organic system of material and spiritual values created and accumulated by humans through practical activities, in interaction with the natural and social environment"* (Tran Ngoc Them, 1999:10). He also proposed that culture can be seen as a system comprising four basic components: cognitive culture, community organizational culture, culture's behavior towards the natural environment, and culture's behavior towards the social environment. Thus, the way humans behave towards the natural environment is the third significant component of any cultural system. When interacting with the natural environment, people often exploit what is beneficial and cope with what is harmful. Eating represents the utilization of the natural environment, while dressing and housing demonstrate cultural responses to the natural environment..

In addition, there is a growing interest in cultural research through literature nowadays. In this trend, the author chooses Kim Kyung-uk's novel *"The Kingdom of a Thousand Years"* to explore Korean culture, specifically its food, clothing, and housing customs. The author delves into the study of Korean food culture through the article *"Exploring Cultural Utilization of the Natural Environment: Food, in Joseon Korea, as Depicted in the Novel 'The Kingdom of a Thousand Years'"*. Additionally, the author investigates Korean clothing culture through the article *"Studying the Attire of Joseon Koreans in the Novel 'The Kingdom of a Thousand Years'"*. Alongside food and clothing culture, the aspect of housing culture is also essential in this cultural exploration. Hence, this article focuses on studying Korean architectural culture through the literary work, specifically limiting it to the historical novel *"The Kingdom of a Thousand Years"* by Kim Kyung-uk. Specifically, the author will examine and analyze the architectural homes of the Joseon people in the 17th century to understand how the Koreans adapted to the natural environment in their cultural practices.

2. INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORK

Kim Kyung-uk, born in 1971 in Gwangju, is a distinguished South Korean author. He earned a bachelor's degree in English Literature from Seoul National University and subsequently obtained a Ph.D. in Korean Literature from the same prestigious institution. Kim embarked on his literary journey in 1993 as a student with the Young Writer's Award bestowed by "The World of Authors" for the novel *The Lonely*. Since then, he has garnered numerous awards, including the 37th Han-kuk Il-bo Literature Award in 2004 for the short story *"Jang Guk-yeong Has Died, So What?,"* the 53rd Modern Literature Award in 2007 for "99%"



the 40th Dong-in Literature Award in 2009 for *“Dangerous Reading”* and the esteemed 3rd Kim Seung-ok Literature Award in 2015 for *“Forever Young.”* In 2016, his mesmerizing piece *“Heaven’s Door”* earned him the distinction of the 40th Ideal Literary Award. Other notable works by Kim include *“No Coffee in Baghdad Café”* (1996), *“Meeting Betty”* (1999), *“Who Killed Kurt Cobain?”* (2003), *“Like a Fairy Tale”* (2010), *“God Does Not Have Grandchildren”* (2011), *“The Golden Apple”* (2013), *“Time of Dogs and Wolves”* (2016), and *“The Man Who Looks in the Mirror”* (2018).

The novel *“The Thousand-Year Kingdom”* is based on the true story of three Dutch sailors who drifted ashore in Joseon during the 17th century. The novel depicts the lives of these foreign individuals in a foreign land through the narrative of Jan Jansz Weltevrete. *“The Thousand-Year Kingdom”* vividly portrays the inner lives of the main character as well as aspects of social and political life in Joseon during the early 17th century.

In 1627, three Dutch sailors named Weltevrete, Evoken, and Denison were sailing on the ship *Ouwerkerck* to Nagasaki, Japan when they were caught in a storm and shipwrecked on Jeju Island, Joseon (Korea). They were imprisoned in Jeju for about a year before being escorted to the capital on the orders of King Joseon. According to the laws of Joseon at that time, foreigners were not allowed to leave once they set foot on Joseon’s territory, so three of them were forced to become soldiers imperial soldiers. Evoken was assigned to a fire-arrow unit, while Weltevrete and Denison belonged to the artillery unit. Later, Weltevrete was given the task of manufacturing cannons to serve the military.

In the following spring, an envoy from the Tatar Empire (the ethnic Manchu people who would later establish the Qing Dynasty) arrived in Joseon. If the Tatar envoy discovered the presence of Western foreigners in Joseon, they would suspect that Joseon was in contact with foreign powers and plotting betrayal. As a result, all three Dutch people were detained. On the day the Tatar envoy departed, Denison disappeared after deceiving the guards. He intercepted the Tatar envoy and pleaded for their help to leave Joseon. The Joseon court was furious, and Denison was punished severely. Later, Weltevrete and Evoken were exiled to the southern region, where they coincidentally discovered cannons left behind by the Ming Dynasty from the war against Japan. They planned to upgrade the cannons and make them more powerful. Weltevrete focused on researching the production of cannons under the gentle supervision of a friendly camp commander. However, his successor was different from him. Due to his passion for banquets and his desire to assert his authority, this person prohibited Weltevrete from manufacturing cannons any longer. The monotonous life drove Weltevrete to seek a way to escape Joseon. However, his escape plan was thwarted by Evoken, who wished to stay in Joseon instead of risking his life elsewhere. As a result, Weltevrete was discovered and imprisoned for a period of time. At the same time, news of the current commander's authoritarian and dictatorial rule reached the ears of the King of Joseon, resulting in his dismissal and exile to Jeju Island. The newly appointed commander granted freedom and restored the opportunity for Weltevrete to research and improve the cannons. Finally, Weltevrete successfully manufactured the cannons.

Meanwhile, the Tatar king changed the country’s name to *“Qing,”* meaning *“purity,”* and proclaimed himself the Emperor. Thus, a nomadic tribe on the steppe became a ruling dynasty over all of China. The emerging empire demanded Joseon become its vassal state instead of maintaining a friendly diplomatic relationship. If Joseon refused, the Tatar Empire would invade and conquer Joseon. However, the Joseon court never agreed to the Tatar’s demands for submission. Furthermore, with the hostile attitude displayed by the Joseon court towards the Tatar, the war between the two nations was inevitable. In that winter, an army of 120,000 Tatar soldiers advanced towards Joseon. When news of the impending war reached King Joseon, the royal family, the noble officials, and a force of 12,000 troops quickly moved to Nam Han Mountain Fortress. The enemy forces surged in like an unstoppable wave. The war on Joseon soil suddenly became the war of Weltevrete and Evoken. In one battle, amidst the deafening roar of the cannons, Evoken pushed Weltevrete aside and fell dead upon him. Thus, all of Weltevrete’s comrades perished, and he was left alone to fight in a foreign land among unfamiliar people and beliefs. Nevertheless, he still whispered to himself, *“Even if the enemy retreats, I will continue to fight. The battle for the soul has just begun.”*

During the initial days when Weltevrete set foot in the land of Joseon, he couldn't help but marvel and be astonished by what he observed about the society and people of Joseon. Among many "peculiar" aspects he witnessed, he paid meticulous attention to the houses and the culture of the Joseon people, deeply sensing and vividly describing them. Through Weltevrete's detailed descriptions, the author will analyze how the Koreans coped with the natural environment in their cultural practices during the Joseon period, following the cultural perspective of Trần Ngọc Thêm (1999).



3. ARCHITECTURE OF HOUSES DURING THE JOSEON PERIOD

As part of the East Asian monsoon climate zone, South Korea has a temperate climate with distinct four seasons. The winter is usually long, cold, and dry, while the summer is short, hot, and humid, and the spring and autumn are very pleasant. Currently, South Korea is a developed industrial country, but it was primarily an agricultural nation focused on rice cultivation from the 15th to the early 20th century. These conditions served as fundamental factors in shaping the distinctive architectural style of houses in coping with the country's natural environment.

3.1 Thatched house architecture

Korean Thatched Houses are traditional houses with roofs made of straw or reeds. In the novel *"The Kingdom of a Thousand Years,"* Korean Thatched Houses are described by foreign visitors as follows: *"These huts have thatched roofs made of straw and reeds, and their walls are coated with mud, scattered here and there. All the huts look equally dirty and shabby. Do outsiders view the construction of tall, imposing houses as disrespectful? All the roofs are low and simple, making them appear as if they are bowing in a humble manner. From the chimneys of each house, smoke from the stoves rises into the air"* (2020: 51). Or it's described as: *"The low thatched houses stretch endlessly. The buildings are simple and elegant. Small winding roads run between the thatched houses, creating a maze-like network that seems endless. The roads do not pass through each other but have to go around narrow and dirty. It's as if there's a heap of rubbish scattered between the houses. The blue smoke emanates from the chimneys of all the thatched houses"* (2020: 85).

From the descriptions above, it can be seen that the traditional houses of ancient Koreans were constructed quite simply using readily available natural materials such as clay, straw and reeds. They have the advantage of excellent insulation and temperature regulation to cope with the hot summers and cold winters in Korea. However, the drawback of these materials is that they are flammable, and especially the thatch needs to be replaced every year due to mold, making it quite inconvenient. This characteristic is also quite similar to Vietnam, as in the 17th century, Vietnamese houses were small, with walls plastered with mud, thatched roofs, and only one floor¹.

Another interesting feature of traditional Korean thatched houses, which sets them apart from other rice-cultivating countries, is their ondol heating system. It involves placing a large, flat stone called "gudeuljang" under the floor of the house. The ancient Koreans invented this heating system to cope with the extreme cold and even snowfall during winters. However, for Westerners in the novel *"The Kingdom of a Thousand Years,"* *this ondol heating system was considered "quite primitive"* (2020:77). In the 17th century, Westerners were already using indoor stoves to burn firewood, and when they witnessed the *"hot floor which scorched us, yet the face still shivered from the cold wind blowing in. We seemed to sit on a red-hot iron while hugging a piece of ice"* (2020:76), they deeply felt the difference. From this, we can also observe the contrast between Eastern and Western architecture, where one side features simple, small, and low houses without modern amenities, while the other side boasts tall, grand, sturdy, and well-furnished buildings.

3.2 Hanok Tile House Architecture

In addition to thatched houses and garden pavilions, Korean homes also include a type of tiled house called "Han-ok," which means "Korean house." Typically, Han-ok was known as the house of the yangban, the ruling class consisting of government officials and scholars during the Joseon dynasty. However, when considering its origins, Han-ok has a long history dating back even earlier, and its scope is quite extensive (2017: 249). One distinctive feature of the han-ok tiled house, which is also a characteristic of Korean architecture, is the use of paper for wall coverings. We can see this clearly from the descriptions in *"The Kingdom of a Thousand Years"*: *"From the walls, ceilings to the floor, everything is covered with pinkish paper. Inside the room, a windscreen is built with paper (...) Thanks to the paper coverings, it creates a warm atmosphere (...) On the walls, short passages are written everywhere. Some lines are inscribed with ink. Even on the paper covering the windows, there are writings"* (2020: 148-149). The use of paper on various parts of the house, from walls to doors and windows, might seem strange to Jan Jansz Weltevree, who till couldn't help but think that *"pasting paper - something easily torn - on the doors for entry and exit was quite peculiar"* (2020:320). However, the paper used for Korean houses was crafted with great care, making it exceptionally durable, as *"many layers are*

¹ Source: <https://nghiencuulichsu.com/2015/09/30/viet-nam-vao-the-ky-thu-17/>



laminated when making the paper. One thin layer of paper cannot withstand a human fingernail, but multiple layers combined can even resist arrows" (2020: 322). This robust paper helped ancient Koreans cope with the freezing cold of winter.

The process of making paper is also described in detail in the novel: "They soak the mulberry tree trunk in ashes and then remove the bark. They wash the bark in flowing water and dry it under the sunlight. They use a wooden mallet to beat the softened raw paper material, removing any impurities. After mixing the paper material with the glue made from mulberry tree, they squeeze out the water. They paste the wet paper onto a wooden board and dry it in the sun. They then assemble the dried paper sheets together and flatten them with the mallet. The more they pound, the more the paper layers blend into one another, becoming strong, firm, and smooth." (2020:322)

Wallpaper can be considered one of the significant inventions of the Koreans due to its practicality, which has persisted to this day and remains one of the widely exported products to the world. Korean wallpaper is not only tough, durable and strong but also highly aesthetic, featuring a wide variety of patterns and colors. Concerning the color of roof tiles, while Korean tiles often come in blue, the prevalent color for tiles in Vietnam is brownish-red. Both Korean and Vietnamese tiles are available in plain and patterned versions. Thus, when observing Korean and Vietnamese tiled houses, we can also notice the similarities and differences between these two cultural traditions.

3.3 Grand Aristocratic Residences

With the political and social changes, Korean architecture also underwent transformations. According to the Korean Student's Dictionary, during the early Joseon dynasty, places such as palaces, government offices, city gates, fortress walls, schools, ETC represented the typical architecture of the era. Some notable architectural structures that have survived to this day include Sungnyemun, Donhwamun of Changdeokgung, Namdaemun of Gaeseong, and Janggyeong Panjeon of Haein Temple. Comparing this to the Goryeo period, where temple architecture dominated, we can perceive significant differences. The scale of buildings was strictly regulated and varied depending on the social status of the occupants. The purpose was to maintain social order and prevent extravagance². One's social status in Joseon could be discerned through the house they lived in. Let's step into the home of a high-ranking official during the Joseon era through the account of Jan Jansz Weltevree: "(2020: 111)

If the houses of commoners were low and small, the residences of Joseon officials were still low but incredibly spacious. This architectural style with interconnected and airy doors exemplified the Korean culture's response to the hot and humid natural environment during the summer. On the other hand, when the cold winter arrived, Koreans coped by using a system of heating with firewood under a stone-paved floor to keep warm. Moreover, Koreans have always placed great importance on feng shui in architectural design, selecting harmonious locations in sync with nature. The architecture of the Joseon era was simple yet elegant and environmentally friendly. This standout feature left a profound impression on foreigners in the novel "The kingdom of a thousand years": "The dominant feature of this kingdom's architectural style is simplicity and repetition. The repetition of simple lines and graceful curves formed by stones and trees embodies a staunch resistance to change. On the other side of the door are buildings and gardens indistinguishable from what lies behind the door, waiting to be explored. The building and the garden are both unremarkable, so the building does not enclose the garden, nor does the garden dominate the building. Each small pond in the middle of the garden has lotus flowers floating gracefully. I even saw large bodies of water that created artificial islands. These islands were protected by pine trees. The pine trees seemed like The pine tree looks like an old sage who is quietly looking at his reflection in the lake. Inside the grand aristocrat's residence, earth, stone, and water harmonized seamlessly. I found this scenery quite familiar. The grand aristocrat's house was like a miniature palace. However, its solemnity and dignity did not match that of the royal court." (2020:112)

Through the descriptions, we can see that the residences of high-ranking Korean officials were not grandiose but rather spacious. Especially, trees and ponds were neatly incorporated into the living space of these aristocrats, making their homes always airy and close to nature. The architectural style of the residences of high-ranking Korean officials during the Joseon era reminds us of the ancient royal gardens of Vietnam. Both Korean aristocrats' residences and Vietnamese ancient royal gardens have a similar feature - the landscape gardens. Landscape gardening is an art of shaping nature within limited space, creating a backdrop to elevate the value of the buildings or the ensemble of buildings. The landscape gardens of Vietnam and Korea are both influenced by East Asian garden designs, with many similarities to Chinese and Japanese gardens, often consisting of three main elements: water surfaces,

² Source: Student Encyclopedia, <https://terms.naver.com/entry.naver?docId=986168&cid=47322&categoryId=47322>.



greenery, and small rocky formations. The gardens in both countries typically include miniature landscapes, water pavilions, moon-viewing platforms, ponds adorned with willow trees, and more..

4. CONCLUSION

The article surveyed the various types of housing in Joseon-era Korea, as described in Kim Kyung-uk's literary work, "*The kingdom of a thousand years*," and analyzes them from a cultural perspective. The research findings reveal that there were three primary types of housing during that historical period: thatched houses for common people, Hanok Tile Houses for officials, and grand residences for high-ranking officials. Regardless of the type, Korean homes in the Joseon era directly utilized natural materials available for construction. Notably, Korean architecture demonstrated a remarkable adaptation to the region's hot summers and cold winters by incorporating clay - a good insulation, heat retention materials and roofs made of straw or baked tiles, for the walls, and thatched roofs or fired tiles - materials that help avoid heat and keep warm. Through this survey, it is evident that Korean architecture had an eco-friendly aspect, with a significant presence of trees surrounding the houses and a consideration for feng shui, as reflected in water features such as ponds or lotus ponds within grand residences.

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