

A Lifetime with the Song of the Loom

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Put the hemp in the sky.
Grab the clouds and hang it
up on the heddle shaft
With a spindle made of nut-
meg wood

With a reed made of jujube wood.
Whirring, purring I weave.
Mama, mama, my mama
What will you do with that fabric
When my brother gets married?
We will make blue and green cloth.
Clunk, plunk
Patter-clunk, plunk.

A person falls asleep contentedly while listening to this melancholy melody sung to the whirring of a loom. Although weaving is a legacy that evidences the bone-tired, weary lives that our mothers used to endure, the mother who weaves in our memory remains a noble person, almost sacred, whom we hold dear in our hearts.

If we think of all the tireless efforts our mothers put into weaving cotton or hemp cloth, from the gathering of raw materials in the fields to ensuring that the woof and weft closely interlace with each other, it no doubt evokes a feeling of lament much like what one feels when reminiscing about straw shoes made with one's own hair, clipped with a silver-sheathed knife.

But today the music of the loom to which mothers used to sing has long disappeared. The years into which our

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mothers poured their hard labor, regrets and longings have become as distant as the Milky Way, which has disappeared from the skies over today's polluted cities. At a time when we miss all-but-forgotten customs, allow me to embark on a journey in search of the song of the loom.

Weaving was an essential task in every Korean household in the days when communities were for the most part self-sufficient, but it is practiced in only a few places nowadays, which are identified by the products: Andong fabric, Hansan ramie, Koksŏng fabric, Naju fabric.

Today, only a thin thread of tradition is being carried on by those who have been designated by the government as human cultural assets. This is true of Koksŏng fabric, which was once included in the tribute presented to the king as a top-of-the-line summer fabric.

The village of Sŏkkok-myŏn, Koksŏng-gun, Chŏllanam-do province is referred to as "Tolshil" in the regional dialect, meaning a village in a stone-strewn valley. The fabric woven here is called *tolshilnai*, meaning "fabric produced in Tolshil." *Nai* is derived from an old expression meaning "to weave." Similarly, *saetgolnai* refers to cotton textile produced in Saetgol.

Tolshil residents have long been known for their fine textured hemp cloth. Hemp cloth woven in Tolshil is as delicate as ramie, which is why the



The dried hemp stalks are pounded with a stone to make them soft (left). Then comes the whitening process, which involves repeatedly soaking the hemp stalks in ash water, rinsing it in clean water and stepping on it to squeeze the water out (right).

villagers' products earned a reputation for their exceptionally high quality. The techniques used to produce an item of tribute for the royal court have been handed down from generation to generation, with this expertise being designated an intangible cultural asset by the Korean government.

Kim Chôm-sun, a 79-year-old woman living in the village of Chuksan-ri, nestled among bamboo groves, is Tolshil's best weaver. Though nearing 80, she is still energetic and continues to work at her loom. Her voice is as pure and precise as the finely textured fabrics she weaves.

Nevertheless, she lives in poverty. Her tiny house, whose thatched roof was recently replaced with slate, looks as though it might be blown over by

the wind at any moment. A dirt wall protects its central veranda. Her kitchen does not even include such basic appliances as a gas stove. Instead, a huge caldron sits. Kim seems ashamed of her miserable living conditions; her smile is empty when she says that her only companions are lice and rats.

Kim has lived her entire life without owning so much as a patch of tillable land, making a living doing needlework and weaving. She has lived in this hut since she married at the age of 20. Her husband was lazy and a gambler to boot. Still, she never resented him or fought with him because she was so grateful for his allowing her mother, who had nowhere else to go, to live with them. She did not even

complain when once, in a reckless moment, he gambled away the deeds to a few acres of paddies that she had managed to acquire with the money she earned from weaving day and night. Having no one to confide in, she would sit at her loom and sing the "Song of the Loom," as the tedious work helped her concerns and worries and her heart to achieve serenity and order, like the texture of her weaving. As she recalled her past, her eyes red-dened.

Kim has two sons and a daughter. With her earnings from weaving, she managed to take care of her mother as well as put one son through middle school, another through high school and a daughter through college. In those days, her mother advised her to



After the whitening process, the ends of the hemp stalks are pounded to separate the filaments (upper left). Kim uses her fingernails to shred the hemp into strands (upper right). The strands are hung over a pole in preparation for making them into thread (above). Kim rubs the strands over her lap in order to connect their ends (left).

weave coarse-textured fabrics, because they could be completed more easily and quickly. But for some reason, Kim stuck to making high-quality fabrics, saying that she would rather earn more for the same size of fabric. She never dreamed that by doing so she would maintain the tradition of this region and that one day she would end up being designated a human cultural asset. She says she is not her old self now because she is getting on in years. When she was young, she could easily weave a bolt of cloth in two days, but now it is hard for her to weave ten bolts of cloth in a year. She would like to open a small museum before she dies, so that all aspects of the type of weaving she practices could be kept alive.

Koksöng tolshilnai, like other fabrics, is categorized as farmers' fabric, medium fabric or delicate fabric, depending on the number of strands between the warp.

Farmers' fabric, which has four or five strands between the warp, was used for making farmers' work clothing and mourning garments. The medium fabric, which has six or seven strands between the warp, was used for ordinary shirts and coats for scholars. The delicate fabric, with nine to twelve strands between the warp, was reserved for royalty or senior govern-



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The strands are then made into strong threads by spinning them on a wheel (above). Finished thread is the result (right). The thread is then wound onto the pukpanül (lower right).



ment officials.

Kim Chõm-sun has woven all three types, and she has spun and woven all materials, from cotton to silk. As for the delicate weaving of fabric for which every strand requires extreme attention and care, no one can do it better than Kim.

Kim learned how to weave from her grandmother at a very young age, and she began to work on the loom when she was 11. From the time she married and came to live in Chuksan, a village renowned for its royal tribute items, her main occupation has been weaving. She has been weaving for almost 70 years now.

Kim strokes the back of her hand as she talks about how she used to stay up for several nights to finish a bolt of fabric to sell at the Tolshil temporary

market, while describing her labor as harder than giving birth. Considering the amount of effort involved in weaving a bolt of cloth, one can understand why she describes weaving this way.

Kim begins the preparations for weaving around the time of the lunar calendar's Sosõ ("small heat"), which falls on July 7 or 8. She begins by harvesting fully grown hemp, removing the leaves and steaming the stalks in a cave reserved for that purpose.

After the stalks are steamed, the outer layers are peeled off and then bound together and allowed to dry. What is crucial is the degree of dryness. If the hemp stalks become too dry, it is difficult to make thread from them, and if they are too moist, they rot.

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ed by quality into top, medium and low. Then it is decided how each will be used; for example, as fabric for a man's long coat, a regular set of clothing or a mourning shroud. Then comes the whitening process, which involves soaking the hemp stalks in ash water made from burned rice stalks. This process is one of the secrets of toshilnai. The color of hemp cloth from other regions that is not put through this type of whitening process cannot compare with toshilnai.

After the whitening process, Kim uses her fingernails to shred the hemp stalks into strands, which she then makes into threads by rubbing them over her lap. In the rubbing process, the ends of the threads are connected, and they are placed in a basket in a neat pile to keep them from becoming tangled. They are then made into strong threads by spinning them with a wheel.

When the threads are ready, the warp is set up depending on the intended width of the cloth and the number of strands. Then the warp is wound; it goes through the reed, one end fixed on the warp beam and the other end tied to the shaft. It is then pulled taut, and starch is applied with a brush to the warp's beam side before the warp is wound on the beam, underneath which a low-heat chaff fire pot sits to facilitate the even application of starch.

When the warp is wound, the beam filled with the warp is set on the loom and then a stretcher beam is placed between the warp with two different courses of threads. The warp under the stretcher beam is hung on the heddle. This warp is called the heddle thread, while the other is called the controlling thread.

Only after all these preliminary processes have been completed can Kim sit at the loom and begin weaving. She pulls and pushes the treadle with her right foot, so the heddle thread alternates with the controlling thread, from top to bottom and then from bot-



Kim weaves on her loom (above). Tolshilnai is finely woven and very white as a result of the special whitening process (right).

Tolshil residents have long been known for their fine textured hemp cloth. Hemp cloth woven in Tolshil is as delicate as ramie, which is why the villagers' products earned the reputation for exceptionally high quality. The techniques used to produce an item of tribute for the royal court have been handed down from generation to generation.



tom to top. With one hand she moves the shuttle filled with the weft from left to right to feed the filling, and with the other hand she beats the reed to ensure tight interlacing with the warp. This is how the fabric is made, one strand at a time.

But after all her efforts, the hemp produced by Kim hardly commands a favorable price. Only rarely do people with a discerning eye appreciate hand-

made hemp, and the number of people with an interest in buying it has dwindled over the years.

Kim says that she has heard about people in Seoul who spend millions of won for a suit or a dress. She sometimes feels offended that they do not appreciate her work, in which each strand is interlocked with the greatest care. As a result, she often feels disheartened sitting at her loom today,

although in the old days she never felt that way.

She accompanies me to the edge of the village to see me off, standing there waving her hand. This traveler's heart is darkened like the night road. Behind that darkness, the bamboo groves to the rear of Kim's house seem to rustle and moan, and my ears seem to hear the plaintive clomping of her loom. ♦