

Speaking Flowers in a Modernized Colony: The Transformation of Kisaeng in Colonial Korea

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Introduction

- *Kisaeng* is the Korean professional female courtesans skilled in music and a symbol of Korean traditional culture.
- The Chosŏn three-grade *kisaeng* system (Lee 76-77)
 1. First-grade court *kisaeng*
 2. Second grade former court *kisaeng*
 3. Third-grade *kisaeng* who served commoners and merchants
- The hierarchical social system drastically reconstructed due to the expansion of Japanese Imperialism and the Japanese colonization in Korea (1910-1945) which accelerated Korean modernization.

Research Focus

- *Kisaeng's* transformation as Chosŏn lower-class traditional female artists in the socio-political and cultural context of colonial Korea

Thesis

- Modernization and colonial capitalism jointly led to the transformation of *kisaeng's* social role and career as modern *kisaeng* in colonial Korea.
- After emancipating from the feudal class system, modern *kisaeng* possessed a higher degree of mobility and autonomy when reconstructing their social status and was commercialized and commodified as modern entertainers in the entertainment industry, tourism, and prostitution industry.
- However, their modern adaptation faced challenges from being stigmatized as non-nationalistic capitalist modern girl and became the subject of criticism against colonial modernity and capitalism, which further depicted the dilemma of facing nationalism, modern enlightenment, and colonialization concurrently in colonial Korea.

Findings

1. Social Identity Reconstruction

- The Kabo Reform (1894-1896) emancipated *kisaeng* from slavery and *chŏnmin* status and dismissed court *kisaeng*. The *Kisaeng* Regulatory Act and *Changgi* Regulatory Acts (1908) then rebuilt a modern system to manage all *kisaeng* together and blurred the boundaries between the three grades of *kisaeng* (Suh 2009, 168).
- *Kisaeng* of different grades and regions started sharing their repertoire, so third-grade *kisaeng* and rural *kisaeng* migrated to major cities by the colonial railway could learn elite classical music like first-grade *kisaeng* and mobilized upward, while first-grade *kisaeng's* privilege status was weakened for learning folk and regional music (Lee 81; Pilzer 298).
- Modern *kisaeng* developed modern subjectivity and the socio-political consciousness to choose their career since *kisaeng* became a licensed occupation but not slavery, and to secure their labor rights and social status through social and nationalist activism (eg. strike, March First Movement (1919), the publication of *kisaeng* magazine *Changhan*) (Hwang 142-149; Kwon 143-148).

2. Commercialized and Commodified *Kisaeng*

- *Kisaeng* and *changgi* unions (renamed as *kwŏnbŏn* (券番) after 1917), established according to the *Kisaeng* and *Changgi* Regulatory Act since 1908, was corporatized by the early 1930s and earned commission by dispatching *kisaeng* to perform in *yorijip* (restaurants), gramophone recording companies, radio program broadcasting, and modern theaters (Kwon 140-142; Lee 78-81).
- *Kisaeng's* performance and *kwŏnbŏn* training no longer focused on Korean traditional music but also included Japanized, westernized, and modern music (eg. *sinminyŏ*, *yuhaegga*, revue dance) to cater to the hybridized colonial cultural trend (Choi 387-390; Lee 79-89). Profitability since then overrode *kisaeng's* artistry in colonial Korea.
- *Kisaeng* with pre-modern characteristics was commodified in colonial tourism as tourist attraction to attract Japanese and foreign tourists. Besides, more *kisaeng* became licensed prostitutes as the colonial government legalized the prostitution industry and the sex labor market expanded (Kwon 136-137; Pai 309; Pilzer 299)

3. *Kisaeng's* Dual Roles in Colonial Modernity

- Modern *kisaeng's* transformation was both the product of politically dominated colonial modernization and a facilitator in Korea's adaptation to colonial modernity.
- Their social, economic, and cultural transformation was greatly led by the political domination of colonial government on the socio-political reform, capitalization, and cultural hybridization,
- and, on the other hand, promoted the Japanized culture as cultural trendsetters, contributed to the economic growth in colonial capitalism, and exhibited ethnic bifurcation with their Korean pre-modern style in the colonial tourism, which eventually benefited the colonial power expansion (Robinson 78-79).

4. Challenges to *Kisaeng's* Modern Transformation

- *Kisaeng* assimilated to the modernized, hybridized popular culture was criticized by nationalists, traditionalists and neo-Confucians against modernity, capitalism and colonialism for their corruption in Korean artistry and aristocracy (Suh 2009, 182-184)
- They were stigmatized as westernized, capitalist modern girl who acted against the nationalistic modern gender notion (i.e., "wise mother, good wife") and failed to transformed as new women in the public gaze (Suh 2013, 20-24).

Conclusion

- The social structure and ideology was modernized to liberate *kisaeng* from the feudal class hierarchy with their increased mobility and subjectivity shown in social and nationalistic activism.
- *Kisaeng's* performing spaces and music was Japanized, westernized, and modernized with the colonial modernity, and their bodies was commodified in the colonial capitalism, eventually facilitating the Imperial power expansion.
- *Kisaeng's* transformation triggered the public antipathy against modernity, capitalism, and colonialism amid the desire for Korean independence, showing the conflict between modernization and colonialization, and the antagonism between the Japanese colonizers and colonized Korea.

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