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Kisaeng in Painting: Representation of Korean Beauty by Japanese Artists in the Colonial Korea

Shin Min-jong

Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies, The University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan

Abstract

The word “kisaeng” refers to a “Korean prostitute who works to entertain the aristocracy or royalty.” Generally speaking, kisaeng appeared during the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), and began to be painted in Korean genre paintings from the end of the Chosun Dynasty (1637-1897). They have long been regarded as a model of Korean beauty.

This article explores the image of kisaeng as represented by Japanese painters during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) from historical, social, and cultural perspectives. More specifically, I want to look at the personal and social relationship between kisaeng and male painters and examine the significance of their representation from various angles, based on the issues of class, gender, and art.

Kisaeng have served as the symbol of Korean beauty in painting and as a cultural icon that plays a leading role in popular culture and fashion in modern Korea. On the other hand, they have been ceaselessly discriminated against because of their sex, class, and race (especially during the colonial period), having existed as social “Others.” I want to explore the colonial modern society of Korea through the representation of “Others” as visualized by Japanese painter.

Key words: Kisaeng, Modern Art, Japanese Colonization

Introduction: Painting the Beauty

In their book titled *Korea: A Historical and Cultural Dictionary*, Keith L. Pratt and Richard Rutt (1999) describe kisaeng as ...professional girls trained in special skills of music, dance, poetry and conversation, with which they entertained upper-class men at banquets. Despite their low social standing (they were members of the ch'onmin: the lowest class of people), individual attachment to a single patron might offer the chance of becoming a concubine with a permanent place in his household, and some became secondary wives of the gentry. (pp.223-224)

In the modern society of Korea, kisaeng have retained a suggestive existence, both ideologically and aesthetically. Kisaeng are still remembered as symbols of the national culture, as pre-modern symbols of the oppression of women, and as early examples of emancipated females as well (Pilzer, 2006, p.295). In other words, values of passivity and activity, and pre-modernity and modernity, reside simultaneously in their bodies.

This article aims to explore the images of kisaeng painted by Japanese male artists during the Japanese colonial period and examine the meaning of the representations of kisaeng from various vantage points. Exotic women of foreign countries have always fascinated males. Their appearance in traditional dress might have been unique, arousing males' sexual curiosity. For example, Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) continuously expressed his fantasy of oriental women through paintings such as *Grande Odalisque* (1814) and *The Turkish Bath* (1862). It is also well known that Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) headed to Tahiti and left with the subject of his life's masterpieces: Tahitian women. It has also been established that Asian male painters portrayed European woman as well. Seiki Kuroda (1866-1924), called “the father of modern painting in Japan,” had painted a French woman named Maria Billault several times while staying in the French village of Grez-sur-Loing. Billault is well known not only as one of Kuroda's best models, but also (supposedly) as his lover. Keiichirō Kume (1866-1934), Kuroda's roommate during his stay in Paris, reminisces on an episode that occurred between Kuroda and Maria Billault in his article (Kume, *The Bijutsu-shinron*, 1927). Among Kuroda's paintings, *Reading* (1891) and *Portrait of a Woman (Kitchen)* (1892) are his representative works of those featuring Billault. After Japan's annexation of Korea (1910), Japanese male painters took notice of the women of their colony.

Until now, much research in various fields has been conducted on kisaeng, attempting to clarify their essence. However, in almost all cases, kisaeng have been interpreted in an ideological or political way through their social, sexual, and ethnic characteristics, similar to the way they have been interpreted in the field of art. This is because in both Japan and Korea, culture and art have primarily been discussed through the framework of politics, national history, economy, and ideology until quite recently. However, as Syun'ya Yoshimi points out, more flexible and diverse readings are open to us (Yoshimi, 2002, pp.3-12).

In this article, I will take note of the nature of paintings featuring kisaeng and consider existing discourse on this subject as well. I will consider how and why they were described by Japanese painters based on various reference materials from historical, social, and literary areas, analyzing several representative kisaeng paintings as well. I will thereby analyze the significance of representations of kisaeng and elucidate their contemporary meaning. I will use the novel approach of examining kisaeng in relation to their painters, introducing diverse viewpoints. This could be a new departure to pay attention to kisaeng in connection with their painter, introducing diverse viewpoints.

Japanese Painters and Exotic Women

Visiting Korea and Encountering Kisaeng

During the Japanese occupation period, Japanese painters could very easily come and go in Korea as a result of Korea's new status as a Japanese colony. With the aggressive enforcement of policies by the Japanese Government General meant to stimulate tourism and movement, many artists visited Korea for the purpose of sketching trips or research (for example, they copied the ancient tomb mural in Korea or investigated the Korean climate and customs). In addition to their personal purposes, artists also visited Korea to serve as members of the jury for the Korea Fine Art Exhibition, the first and only official exhibition hosted by the Japanese Government General at that time (Yoshida, 2009, pp.72-75). For example, Bakusen Tsuchida, a modern Japanese-style painter who made a remarkable kisaeng painting, decided to go to Korea after he heard about a trip to Korea from his friend Chikkyou Ono (Ueda, 2008, p.102). It is said that Ono (1889-1979) visited Korea in 1932. There, he painted the scenery of Mt. Geumgang and submitted it for the thirteenth Imperial Art Exhibition (Teiten).

In Korea, artists made visits to kisaeng for many different reasons: to have some fun, as tourists, or to get inspiration for art. Kazuo Tōda (Kim, J., 2002, p.271),¹ one of the central artists of the Korea Fine Art Exhibition, whose painting was selected as the best work of the first Korea Fine Art Exhibition in 1922, stated the following:

When Japanese painters visit Korea, they sketch kisaeng before all. As every single dress is designed for a beauty, she not only seems novel for people from other countries, she even has sex appeal; they become exuberant when kisaeng stand before them, sending their highest praise. (Tōda, 1922, pp.43-47)

In Tōda's comment, terms such as "dress," "a beauty," and "sex appeal" hint that Japanese painters were attracted by the kisaeng's exotic appearance and that they sought pleasure and dreamt of sexual love with kisaeng. They could, of course, summon prostitutes or frequent houses of the gay quarter in Japan, but this was exceptional because the place was "Korea" and the partner was a "Korean woman." For Japanese artists, Korea was a place that stimulated "sexual expectations," "tireless sensuality," and "insatiable lust" (Kang, 1996, p.96). As Genzo Moroo asked in his book, "Isn't the woman called kisaeng quite different from a geisha of Japan?"² (Moroo, 1930, p.58); everything the Japanese saw in kisaeng was very new to them, from their look to their gestures and manners. Naturally, artists were eager to describe kisaeng. For example, Shūho Yamakawa, a Japanese-style artist, relates his impression of a Korean courtesan as follows: Kisaeng give me a beauty of pure heart. I also discover the beauty of Korean costume, with its simple and light color. It may make me find them beautiful

¹Kazuo Tōda (1891-1955) was a Western-style painter who graduated from the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. He moved to Korea in 1921 and taught drawing at Won-san Middle School and Yong-san Middle School.

²Of course, the "difference" between geisha and kisaeng may extend beyond a difference of appearance. Genzo Moroo seems to have been impressed with the abilities of kisaeng, such as their possession of enough political knowledge to take "part in political events" or "creating masterful paintings and calligraphic works." Moreover, Moroo finds that kisaeng do not cling to men as geisha do, which is quite different.

(Yamakawa, 2007, p.98). As the citation shows, Yamakawa highly appreciates the feeling of innocence and simplicity projected by the kisaeng.

On the other hand, kisaeng were a major topic of writers' meetings as well. For example, a report of a "table talk" between JirōSeikiguchi (playwright, 1893-1979), Takeo Katō (novelist, 1888-1956) and Hiroshi Hamamoto (writer, 1891-1959) was published in *Modern Nihon Chōsenban* in 1939. According to the report, writers discussed a wide range of Korean subjects, from personal experience, industry, and art to the necessities of life (such as food, clothing, and shelter). The interesting thing is that the topic of kisaeng is classified in the "food and clothing" category, giving us the feeling that kisaeng are an essential part of our daily life. Japanese writers converse about their impressions of kisaeng as follows:

Yūji Itō: Kisaeng are amateurish and friendly.

Jirō Seikiguchi: I think they are nice. Immaculately clean—they don't seem as seductive as geisha.

Takeo Katō: And they ask for nothing.

Seikiguchi: Magnificent. They put on light makeup and their dresses are also neat, with simple colors.

Hiroshi Hamamoto: Compared to geisha, who seem very professional, kisaeng are humane and sophisticated. Even if I don't understand the language, I never grow tired of it. (Modern Nihon, 2007, p.116) (Underlined by author)

Like Shūho Yamakawa, writers also highly praise the cleanliness and naivety of kisaeng. Writers prefer kisaeng to Japanese geisha, as they are not voluptuous or persnickety. This exoticism becomes connected to "sexual expectation," and this "sexual expectation" is extremely amplified at this point in time, in which the Korean language is not widely understood. This sense of incompatibility, based on their sexual and ethnic differences, might have stimulated artists to describe kisaeng.

Bakusen's and Gyoshū's Kisaeng Paintings: Korean Bench and Galbo

Bakusen Tsuchida's *Korean Bench* [Fig.1] is one of the remarkable paintings that describe kisaeng. Tsuchida traveled to Korea in 1933, and his original intention was to sketch some unique Korean customs and people, such as Korean farmers or elderly people living in the countryside. However, his search for models was entirely unsuccessful. It was a stroke of luck that Tsuchida came across a kisaeng and "mistook her for a noblewoman." Her elegant appearance made him change his mind, and he decided to depict kisaeng instead of customs (Kim, 2015, p.22 and p.28). Not only Tsuchida, but many Japanese men have claimed to have received some "aristocratic" impression from kisaeng. When they toured Korea and were actually facing kisaeng, they had the feeling of being a yangban (someone of the traditional ruling class of Korea), because kisaeng seemed to be dignified Korean ladies. They recall that watching a graceful lady serving at table is always an awesome experience. Tsuchida buried himself in sketching kisaeng for three months. He looked into kisaeng's houses and through photo albums of them. With more than 100 sketches with Chi-ok Lee, the Chi-song Lee sisters, and Guk-hyang Seo as his models, he finally produced *Korean Bench*. This painting is more highly evaluated for its artistic completion, including well-proportioned screen construction, sophisticated use of white and pale green colors, and the beautiful expression of the kisaeng's dress pattern, than the motif itself. In other words, it can be said that Tsuchida had raised Korean custom material to the level of an artistic "tableau." Painted kisaeng appear as "the symbol of simple and unaffected beauty" and we cannot glimpse any sign of the "femme fatale" in them. Compared to his other work (for example, *Serving Girl at a Spa* [Fig.2]), Tsuchida seemingly wanted to embody his impression of kisaeng vividly and differentiate the expression of kisaeng from images of other women. However, that is not typical of every painter.³ Gyoshū Hayami's painting could be an example.

Hayami firstly visited Korea in 1933 to serve on the jury of the Korea Fine Art Exhibition. It is known that he met Bakusen Tsuchida at that time and became interested in the motif of Korean woman, which included kisaeng. Hayami drew a series of Korean laboring women entitled *A Selection of Korean Woman*, and among them, *Galbo* (Korean prostitute) [Fig.3] is

³Ironically, the kisaeng, who were highly acclaimed by the Japanese, adapted their behavior and appearance to the preferences of Japanese men. It is said that the kisaeng who dealt with Korean men were much less pretentious. For example, Seiji Tōgō (1897-1978), a Western-style painter, recalls as follows. "The kisaeng I met at a Korean's banquet was more Korean...She was completely different from those I have met until now. She had no rouge on her cheeks and no pencil eyebrows. Her beautiful naked face was full of a dewy and luminous glow" (Tōgō, 2007, p.231).

especially noteworthy. The expression “galbo” refers to someone who sells her body for money in Korea. The meaning is similar to prostitute, but “galbo” is a particularly derogatory expression. In *A Korean Tomography*, Genzo Moroo strictly separates kisaeng from galbo, explaining “a kisaeng is similar to the concept of a Japanese geisha, and a galbo is a prostitute or streetwalker” (Moroo, 1930, p.57). Hayami could distinguish between kisaeng and galbo precisely, and may have represented a galbo for that special purpose. While Tsuchida uses quiet colors such as white, chartreuse, and lime-green and depicts the kisaeng’s face and her hairstyle very neatly with delicate line drawings, Hayami uses louder colors, and the presentation of the women also looks a bit queer. In *Galbo*, we can see two women: One is sitting by the door and smoking, and another, standing outside, seems to be waiting for a guest. Both are staring with blank expressions, and their space seems cramped and stuffy. Why did Hayami want to express this vulgar theme? In *A Selection of Korean Women*, Hayami also depicts a small, young kisaeng called dong-gi, a weaver, and an ironing woman as his subject matter, in addition to galbo. Regarding these materials, he says that he “felt interest in (Korean) customs” and “hoped to express the unique atmosphere of Korea” (Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, 2009, p.127). From his comment, we can suppose that he had been especially fascinated by the labor scene of lower-class women.

However, even though he describes girls of humble origin, Hayami never forgot to express them in an artistic way. Actually, the kisaeng’s house was said to have been filthy and of a decadent atmosphere at that time. Some Japanese writers, such as Kyōshi Takahama, Heisui Yoshikawa, and Hakuu Yamaji, describe the mood of the kisaeng’s house in their articles. For example, in Yoshikawa’s book, he describes a house of prostitution as follows:

It was hard to distinguish the boundary of wall and door, and the landscape painting which was hanging on the wall seemed extremely vulgar and crude...The entire room was pervaded by cigarette smoke and a peculiar smell. (Yoshikawa, 1932, p.94)

In contrast to kisaeng, who worked for exclusive restaurants and received upper-class guests, lower-class kisaeng or galbo opened whorehouses in their rooms and provided illicit sexual services. Yoshikawa’s description may be of a galbo’s house. Hayami also expressed this mood of crudity with the smoking figure, a scarlet table on the corner, and the galbo’s colorful dress. Nevertheless, he never intended to describe the unsanitary, hateful, or harassing air of the galbo’s room, as indicated in the novel. Rather, he seems to intend to express the color sensation in this picture, as seen in his other works. We find Hayami is treading a fine line between the vulgarity of the motif and its aesthetical expressions.

For Hayami, galbo might have been a much more appropriate motif with which to express “Koreanness” than kisaeng, whom almost every painter depicted. For example, in his *Beside the Flowers*[Fig.4], which was produced in the year prior to *Galbo*, a Japanese woman in a modern kimono is knitting in a room decorated with a Western-styled table and chairs. According to Shinobu Ikeda’s explanation, this woman represents “the normative model of ‘femininity,’” responding to the tastes and expectations of fancy bourgeois men, who wanted to be protectors of art and women (Ikeda & Kim, 2002, p.276). As seen in *Beside Flowers*, for bourgeois males, including Hayami, “the normative model of ‘femininity’” could be demonstrated with images such as an “elegant lady wearing modern clothing and [enjoying] a soft life and easy living” (Ikeda & Kim, 2002, p.277). In this respect, the image of galbo is a radical departure from his (or the male) perspective of the ideal woman, because a galbo is vulgar, traditional, and her life is tough. Even though it is not easy to grasp Hayami’s exact intention in choosing a galbo, as he never said anything about it, it seems certain that Hayami took a deep interest in galbo in some way. At least it was true that Hayami genuinely felt interest in Korean customs. It is said that he energetically visited various parts of the country during his stay in Korea. Additionally, a part of a photo, which shows Hayami and his three daughters in traditional Korean clothing, is well known (Ozaki, 2009, pp.70-71). Was it a reflection of his way of thinking of male over female? Is it Hayami’s pure interest in Korean customs as his subject matter? If not, is it the superiority of the Japanese modernist to uncivilized colonial people? Whatever the reason may be, the above two representations by Hayami and Tsuchida are noteworthy in that they suggest obvious differences in standpoints or ways of expressing kisaeng.

Models of Painting

As shown in the episode regarding Tsuchida's *Korean Bench*, models are always required for paintings, and many artists in Korea actually had difficulties when looking for models. Tsuchida had already said that one reason of opting for kisaeng as his motif was that he failed in his search for peasants or old men. Koreans had little understanding of Western paintings in the modern period, and as a natural consequence, they could hardly think of using them as a model of painting. (Incidentally, oriental painting did not have a tradition of using models for paintings, except portraits). Therefore, artists continuously struggled to search for their models. Many historical records reveal the artists' distress in those days.

The concept of modern art was introduced to Korea for the first time in 1915, after Hui-dong Go (1886-1965), the first Western-style painter, completed his studies at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts and came back to Korea. After that, as the Korea Fine Art Exhibition was established by the Japanese Government General of Korea, modern art became more publicized. Nevertheless, we can still find text from newspaper articles of the 1930s like the following: "I hear that "modeling" is acknowledged as a woman's career in different parts of the world like Tokyo and Paris, but it is not recognized in Chosun (Korea) yet" (Anonymous, *Samchulli*, 1930). Surprisingly, the same story can be found in the newspaper even in 1940. The article was entitled "Worrying about no understanding of painting, worrying about no model" (Anonymous, *Dona-A Ilbo*, 1940, p.2). Both articles demonstrate that there was not only an absence of recognition for artistic activities, but also a strict social norm that prohibited woman from becoming professional models. Itaru Tanabe, who served as a member of the jury for the 16th Korea Fine Art Exhibition, also commented that "outstanding figure paintings, especially of the nude, are small in number...It may be because there is no 'model' in this area" (Itaru, *Maeil Shinbo*, 1937, p.1). In fact, a strict custom called "Naewaebub," which was an institution or custom that prohibited men and women from free contact, had existed in Korea since the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1897); it was derived from Confucianism and put a high premium on women's virginity and sexual fidelity. As a result, it was difficult, especially for male painters, to acquire female models and draw them. Under those circumstances, kisaeng faced relatively less pressure regarding modeling in front of male painters. Not only that, the nice appearance of the kisaeng also positioned them to play an active role as the attractive models for paintings (Choi, *Samchulli*, 1931). For example, when Hui-dong Go had been worrying about getting a model for his entry work for the Chosun Local Products Expoin 1915, a celebrated kisaeng named Chae-kyung volunteered to model, and thanks to her, he was able to complete his painting entitled *A Beauty Playing Gayagum* (Anonymous, *Maeil Shinbo*, 1915, p.2) [Fig.5].

Photography was in the same position. Japanese photographers who visited Korea around 1900 took many photos of kisaeng. Not only were kisaeng not under the authority of their husbands, but they also adapted to posing for the camera like professional models (Kwon, 2001, pp.94-95). Thus, kisaeng were not only exotic foreign women for painters, they also played a significant role as models. In this process, some painters and kisaeng developed personal relationships. For instance, *Hong-ryeon* (1918) by Hakutei Ishi (1882-1958) is a portrait of a kisaeng which hints at the private relationship between an artist and a model.

Gaze at Kisaeng

I would like to discuss the relationship between Japanese artists and kisaeng in connection to its background and the kisaeng's face. Most kisaeng paintings depict a scene in which she learns or plays an instrument or makes herself comfortable in a private space. As modern kisaeng have played a leading role in transmitting Korean traditional culture, including traditional dance and music, scenes of their dancing or musical performances have been well described as original and symbolic subjects of Korean custom. At the same time, there are many paintings that express a kisaeng's private time in her small personal space. Of course, the possibility cannot be ruled out that Japanese painters created this scene just as a form of "seated woman" or "standing woman" without any meaning, because it was one of the main themes of Western-style painting (called *Yōga*) by Japanese artists. Moreover, in those days, representing the figure accurately was regarded as more important than including some hidden meaning. However, allegorical interpretation is not out of the question, because this scene makes us imagine the artist's voyeuristic interest in her life. *Korean Kisaeng* by Takeshiro Kanokogi (1874-1941) is an interesting example of this viewpoint. [Fig.6]

Korean Kisaeng by Takeshiro Kanokogi

A woman (she is undoubtedly a kisaeng) stands in front of white drapes falling from the ceiling to the floor. She is radically naked and wears her hair down. She may be winding down, rubbing her stiff left leg after an exhausting day. In this moment, her rare and precious moment of rest is interrupted by Kanekogi's eyes.

Kanekogi was a Western-style painter who had studied under Jean-Paul Laurens (1838-1921) in France and acquired an Academic art technique, which has been recognized as an "official" and "approved" style. As a strict "academician," he boasts of his gift in this painting, with his sound and accurate drawing and realistic description of the figure. On the other hand, thematically speaking, it is hard to extract any attribute that symbolizes kisaeng, such as Korean traditional costume, hair that is done up in a knot,⁴ or a sitting position with one knee bent. As academic artists usually do, he is supposed to have put some allegorical or ideological messages in the painting, but it is not certain.

Next, let us focus on her face. The kisaeng's straight face seems a bit sorrowful or forlorn. In general, Korean people, including kisaeng, tend to be represented with a gloomy face in modern East-Asian painting. Beyond the visual arts, the same expression is also discovered in literature written by Japanese writers. For example, Toshiyuki Kajiyama's (1930-1975) novel entitled *Shadows of the Yi Dynasty* (1963) deals with a love story between a kisaeng (Young-soon Kim) and a young Japanese artist (Ryōkichi Noguchi), and in this novel, Noguchi always sees through a kind of "unlucky woman's" "cold gloom" on Young-soon's face (Kajiyama, 2002, pp.60-61). Also in *Pyongyang* (1939), a short story by Takeo Katō, there is a scene in which the hero mutters that he is reminded of the sad and plaintive Arirang song when he sees a Korean woman (Modern Nihon, 2007, p.81). In this way, many Japanese artists and writers have perceived some feeling of depression on the faces of Koreans.

Melancholy Korea: Their Gloomy Faces

In a sense, the gloom on a woman's face could have been regarded as an ideal of beauty in Korea at that time. Women were required to have not only "physical beauty" but also "mental beauty." For example, there were specific criteria of "mental beauty," such as "a woman who keeps silent": for example, a woman who loves only one man until her dying day, never saying "I love you" or a "woman who doesn't have any curiosity when she hears a story."⁵ Women were asked to be submissive, passive, and lily-white, and these conditions were considered representative of Korean beauty. On the other hand, some people comprehended the cloudy face to express the "grief of Koreans over losing their country." For one reason or another, it is undeniable that both perspectives reflect a preconceived notion that kisaeng (or Korean women) are fragile and incompetent creatures who must be protected by men.

Both women and Korean people in general were considered to be social "Others," sexually and ethnically, during the colonial period. A kisaeng must have been discriminated against more severely due to the nature of her job. Some educated women with a high-school diplomas or higher were involved in kisaeng jobs, as they could live under affluent and easy circumstances (Suh, *Samchulli*, 1936). However, even though they had been working for the upper classes and were materially comfortable, kisaeng appeared as marginal individuals who were at the bottom of the social heap. They always had to be targeted as a subject of control or abolition; hence, a kisaeng was seen as "a toxic agent who corrupts public morals, destroys a family, and sells her fidelity cheaply" (Anonymous, *Dong-gwang*, 1931). Japanese painters might have expressed the "social otherness of the pleasure quarters and the loss of tradition in modern society" as they relate to kisaeng (Suh, 2009, p.183). At first glance, it seems as if they understand the stern reality of a kisaeng's life and think of her as a pitiable fellow. Nevertheless, it is ironic that kisaeng cannot but acknowledge her otherness, by being drawn and seen and remembered by people over time.

⁴Quick aside: Bobbed hair was also unusual for kisaeng in those days. This hairstyle caused social problems, intensifying the ideological conflict between the pre-modern conservatism and westernization of the modern period. Kisaeng sometimes had their hair cut to represent chastity. According to some newspapers, kisaeng had their hair cut short when they decided to quit their job or to express dissatisfaction to the owner. Regarding short hair and kisaeng, refer to Kim, 1999, pp.178-181; *Maeil Shinbo*, 1931, p.4; *Sidae Ilbo*, 1924, p.4; Ikeda and Kim, 2002, pp.293-294.

⁵Besides those, there were additional virtues as follows: "woman who is active and not listless," "woman who cries for others but does not cry for herself," "woman with a fragile figure, but who is really valiant," "woman who maintains chastity." These were regarded as qualifications of beautiful woman (Choi, *Samchulli*, 1931).

Reviviscence of the past

...A Korean kisaeng was a fond and lovely flower, who reminds us of dying dynasty. Korean traditionality, which was represented by kisaeng, has amplified sexual pleasure. Kisaeng was a metaphor of colonial Korea. (Kim, 2015, p.182) (Underlined by author)

As the quotation indicates, kisaeng aroused a “sexual anticipation” in Japanese men, which was impossible in their own country (Kang, 1996, p.96). The more notable fact is that the image of kisaeng, which represents collapsing Korean tradition, so thoroughly stimulated the sexual interest of the Japanese.

The perception of kisaeng as a symbol of Korean tradition is closely related to the tourism and movement policy administered by the Japanese Government General. The Japanese government had strategically used the image of kisaeng throughout most of their colonial period. The design of a postcard envelope published between the 1920s and 30s is an example [Fig.7]. On the outside of the envelope, the Japanese Governor General Building and two kisaeng are illustrated, and a catchphrase saying “Perfect Saturation of Antiquated Color and Modern Color (古代色と近代色の完全たる飽和)” is seen on the upper part. They might have expressed the Government building as a symbol of modernity and the kisaeng as that of Korean traditionality. Similar displays that appropriately use two contrasting images are seen in photos as well. *Chosun* [Fig.8] by propaganda photographer Yōnosuke Natori (1910-1962) is a typical example. The Japanese Government General Building is seen in the background. In front of it, we can find a banner saying “The Korea Fine Art Exhibition...Please come in (朝鮮美術展覧会...お入り下さい).” In the foreground, four Korean women in white dresses are sharing a pleasant conversation. It seems that they welcome or enjoy the modernization initiated by Japan, and Korea has come to a time of peace. The visual contrast between an imposing edifice and fragile women and the ideological confrontation between the modernity of the art exhibition and the traditionality of white costumes have justified Japan’s administration of Korea, emphasizing its stasis and backwardness.

Meanwhile, in some ways, the kisaeng have played a leading role in the success and reproduction of traditional Korean art. A Japanese artist who encountered traditional dance and music through a kisaeng for the first time identified her as Korean tradition itself. Artist Seiji Tōgō tells it: I felt the authentic Korea when I heard a kisaeng playing the gayageum (Korean zither) and singing folk songs, screwing up her face (Seiji Tōgō, *Modern Nihon*, 2007, p.231). As mentioned by Tōgō, the gayageum sanjo (free-style solo) performance, in particular, had actually become widespread and popularized by kisaeng. But not only gayageum, as almost all kinds of Korean traditional music, such as folk song, janggu, and yanggeum zither, were learned and played by kisaeng, they were sometimes referred to as “kisaeng music” (Lee, 2009, p.281). At banquets, Japanese men experienced Korean-style dishes and unique Korean house structures such as *ondol* (Korean floor heating systems), and they encountered “versatile” kisaeng who danced, sang, and served at the same time. Throughout this, they got a grasp of Korea (Suh, 2009, p.174). Then why do kisaeng so often represent “collapsing tradition?”

For example, in the *Shadows of the Yi Dynasty*, Noguchi reminisces that he “watched the hidden Korea for the first time” through the Korean court dance performed by Young-soon, which had probably urged him to depict the scene of kisaeng dancing (Kajiyama, 2002, p.60). He must have wanted to reproduce “the declining Korean custom and its beauty of sorrow” (Kajiyama, 2002, p.60 and p.69). Bakusen Tsuchida also mentioned that “we (Japanese) have to visit Korea right now and look around the place very carefully, because the quintessence of Korean art is disappearing (Tsuchida, *Osaka Asahi Shimbun*, 1935). It was 1933 when Tsuchida visited Korea for his *Korean Bench*. From Tsuchida’s comment, we can understand that the unique part of Korean culture and tradition had already begun to vanish by 1933. For Japanese people, the destruction of Korean customs represented by the kisaeng elicited a nostalgia for vanishing exotic beauty, as well as a nostalgia for the vanishing traditions of Japan (Ueda, 2008, p.103). However, Tsuchida might not have been aware that a major cause of the losses in Korean cultural heritage was the rapid modernization pushed by the Japanese colonial administration.

Not only Japanese men but also Korean men had found the sense of loss of tradition in the kisaeng. For example, in Tae-jun Lee’s short story entitled *Paegangnaeng* (1938), a modern man called Hyun expresses anxiety about the decadence of kisaeng. For Hyun, the “decadence” meant the westernization of their dress, music, and dance. By the 1930s, kisaeng were already losing their traditional features. In the restaurant, it is said that many kisaeng already sang jazzy popular songs and

performed social dances, dressing in Western style (Suh, 2002, pp.170-176). For Hyun, it looked like “another ruin.” It was not just nostalgia Koreans felt through kisaeng at that time. They also felt a sense of frustration that kisaeng were losing their authenticity. Even though the Japanese saw Korean beauty, kisaeng were no longer the symbol of Korean tradition for Korean men. For them, kisaeng looked like “art” defiled by “capital,” “tradition” destroyed by “modernism,” and “Korean people” damaged by the “empire” (Suh, 2002, p.184).

For Japanese men, kisaeng were also a symbol of naivety, which is seen only in the “country.” In 1940, a kisaeng named Eun-sil Park was selected as “Miss Chosun,” defeating a number of distinguished competitors. The reason Park was selected was because she was thought to “represent Korean traditional beauty” and “remind people of Korean mountains and sky” (Kim, 2016, pp.135-136). This is related to a sort of cultural, sexual, and ethnic superiority the Japanese felt over kisaeng. For example, “child and woman” has been one of the most popular motifs in the Korea Fine Art Exhibition, symbolizing the innocence or local color of Korea. However, this naivety and local color implies emotional and mental immaturity and backwardness at the same time. According to Shinobu Ikeda, many Japanese painters have described the theme of “local nature and the women who live there” all over their colonies. It can be interpreted as an expression of their desire to look at the Asian local and woman from the standpoint of the strong and superior ruler (Kim, 2005, p.132). The image of kisaeng was no exception. As previously mentioned, kisaeng have symbolized the tradition, beauty, and naivety of Korea. It has even been said that the beauty of the period shows the circumstances of culture and the civilization of a country (Kim, 2016, p.132). However, these images simultaneously represented the stagnancy and pre-modernism or primitivity of Korea. In this regard, kisaeng have been described as a symbol of “uncivilized utopia” (Kim, 2005, p.138).

Conclusion: Overcoming the “Otherness”

Not only male artists depicted kisaeng. Gyokuyo Kurihara (1883-1922) was a female painter who painted kisaeng when she traveled Korea. Her *Happiness of Body, Happiness of Heart* [Fig.9], which used kisaeng as its motif, was accepted for the 11th Bunten Exhibition in 1917.⁶ A commentary on her work is as follows:

...Mrs. Gyokuyo painted an official kisaeng (who serves for the government) in whom every foreign visitor felt interest, during her stay in Korea. In her *Happiness of Body, Happiness of Mind*, Gyokuyo tried to express the solitude of a wealthy woman in *Happiness of Body* in contrast to the woman in *Happiness of Mind*, who shows mental happiness even if she does not live in comfortable circumstances. (Takematsu Haruyama, *Bijutsu shinpō*, 1917)

As the citation indicates, Kurihara seemed to express the value of a normal life and the small pleasures of an ordinary woman in comparison to the happiness of body. In this context, the description of *Happiness of Body* reveals a void in the woman’s heart. In this regard, it can be said Kurihara represents Japanese modern values regarding woman, called “a good wife and wise mother (良妻賢母).” “Good wife” (良き妻) and “wise mother” (賢い母) were regarded as virtues for an ideal lady in modern Japan. It was an educational principal of women at the same time. This notion was established in 1899 with the declaration of the Girl’s High School Act. According to this act, housework and childcare are women’s duties, and this is valuable because it supports a husband’s social life and nation formation for next generation (Shitanaka, 1994, p.1166).

On the other hand, Hye-shin Kim points out that these two images show the colonial “mind” and “body” pursued by imperial masculinity (Kim, 2015, pp.180-183). According to Kim, both “a dressed-up woman waiting for someone and a woman doing housework show two qualities of femininity,” responding to the desire of imperial men (Ikeda & Kim, 2002, p.283). This shows that Kurihara’s outlook on kisaeng was not so different from that of Japanese men. In her painting, Korean women, both “a good wife” and “a prostitute,” are represented in a dominant-subordinate relationship with imperial men. What Kurihara’s painting shows is that even a modern intellectual woman like Kurihara could hardly be free from the ethnic, gender, and social hierarchy.

⁶“Bunten Exhibition” (文展) was an official exhibition of Japan, founded in 1917, that adopted the French “Salon” system. This exhibition was sponsored by the Ministry of Education and renamed as the “Imperial Art Exhibition” (Teiten) in 1919. With the Imperial Art Exhibition as the center, Japan founded art exhibitions all over its colonies: the Korea Fine Art Exhibition (Senten, 1922-1944), the Taiwan Fine Art Exhibition (Taiten, 1927-1943), and the Manchuria Fine Art Exhibition (Manten, 1937-1945).

The most difficult thing when discussing kisaeng is their borderline characteristics. Even though kisaeng have been treated as being weak, requiring protection and controlled by men, they actually served as an independent and leading figure as a successor of Korean tradition and a pioneer of modern trends. They were socially marginalized, while being loved as piteous flowers at the same time. Considering kisaeng in accordance with colonial history is even more complicated. Almost all situations could be attributed with political or ideological characteristics due to the nature of the period. Even if painters produced kisaeng paintings on the basis of their personal impressions or feelings, those paintings are destined to be considered “ideological products.” As mentioned earlier, various kinds of viewpoints (geopolitical, social, ethnic, and sexual) are involved in representations of kisaeng. It is often said that the truth regarding the nature of kisaeng is difficult to grasp. As Ji-young Suh points out, we may have to pay careful attention to the “cold-hearted silence” on a kisaeng’s face and “the voice of refusing conversation” (Suh, 2009, p.91). It could be the first step to understanding the verity of kisaeng more flexibly, freely, and widely, but also discreetly.

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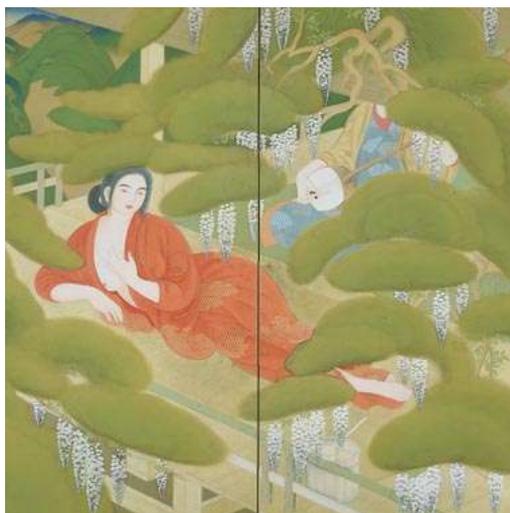
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Figure



[Fig.1] Bakusen Tsuchida, *Korean Bench*, 1933, Ink and Color on silk, 153.0×209.0cm, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, Kyoto.



[Fig.2] Bakusen Tsuchida, *Serving Girl at a Spa*, 1918, Color on silk, 197.6×195.5cm, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.



[Fig.3] Gyoshū Hayami, *Galbo (Korean prostitute)*, 1933, Glue on silk.



[Fig.4] Gyoshū Hayami, *Beside the Flowers*, 1932, Color on paper, 165.0×96.3cm, Kabuki-za Theater.



[Fig.5] Newspaper article about an episode of the model of *A beauty playing Gayagum*.



Korean Kisaeng, 1925, Oil on canvas, 53.2×41.0cm, Private Collection.



[Fig.7] Postcard envelope published between the 1920s and the 30s



[Fig.8] Yōnosuke Natori, Chosun, 1936, Gelatin silver print, 33.5×31.9cm, Japan Camera Industry Institute.

[Fig.9] Gyokuyo Kurihara, Happiness of Body, Happiness of Heart, 1917.

