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Korean Perceptions of Chastity, Gender Roles, and Libido; From Kisaengs to the Twenty First Century

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Throughout Korean history, a woman's self-worth and honor were measured by her chastity and adherence to men. Females have consistently been expected to be obedient, fertile, impalpable, and above all, sexually abstinent. The kisaengs, however, contradicted Korean expectations for women; for hundreds of years, they served as sexually promiscuous performing artists who offered intelligent and charming company to wealthy and influential men. Due to the influx of foreigners in the twentieth century, kisaengs, whose colorful personalities and beauty set them apart for centuries, were reduced to the same status as common prostitutes. Unprecedented demand for sexual services caused the South Korean prostitution industry to expand, and despite the emphasis placed on sexual abstinence and chastity, millions of men frequented red-light districts while thousands of women found employment in sexually oriented establishments. Due to this, the role of kisaengs greatly decreased but the Korean fixation with sexual abstinence remained. Although the kisaengs contradicted traditional Korean expectations concerning females and chastity, their existence is indicative of the emotional and sexual oppression that has pervaded throughout Korean history, one of the ramifications of which has been a thriving contemporary prostitution industry.

Development of Women's History in Pre-Choson Korea

The Kingdom of Silla (57 BC – 935 AD) granted women considerable rights.¹ Females were not solely viewed as secondary citizens, and many women made considerable political and domestic contributions. Unlike later periods, Silla women were not confined to their homes; they largely contributed to the tax and labor force, and lower and middle class women, regardless of marital status, often worked in agriculture and assisted their male relatives in learning trades. As vital members of the workforce, both men and women were expected to pay taxes until aged sixty, and males and females shared the responsibility of financially supporting their families. Lower and middle class men were subject to military conscription, and the wife would serve as head of the household in her husband's absence, exerting considerable control over finances and the daily activities within the household.² Families subsequently traced both male and female lineage, and women could not be divorced for failing to produce a male heir.³

Silla noblewomen also enjoyed considerable influence. Their education and intelligence enabled them to be important members of court, and some gained

¹ John Lie, "The Transformation of Sexual Work in 20th-Century Korea," *Gender and Society* 9, no. 3 (June 1995): 312.

² Yung-Chung Kim, *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945* (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 1979), 37.

³ Ibid

positions of political power. Three women served as rulers, while others achieved influence as royal consorts and concubines or through manipulating their male heirs. The first empress of the Silla Dynasty, Queen Söndök (r. 632-647), was revered as a just, virtuous ruler. She was not evaluated by her gender, but by the efficiency and success of her reign.⁴ After the death of Söndök, the throne passed over male relatives and was given to her female cousin, Chindök. Similar to her cousin, Chindök received the loyalty of male generals, officials, and courtiers, and made substantial efforts to fight foreign invaders and improve the infrastructure of the country.⁵ The last Silla queen, Chinsöng, ruled more than two centuries later and inherited a bankrupt dynasty whose people were desperate and starving.⁶

Other Silla women ruled as official regents, representing their sons from behind a veiled curtain.⁷ The significance of this practice indicates the respect held for the mother, and the responsibility bestowed upon her indicates the consensus that women were capable of making intelligent political decisions. Wives and concubines, who held the affection and ears of the ruler, were also able to influence politics and advocate for certain issues.⁸ The vital presence of Silla women therefore indicates that during this period of Korean history, women were not seen as delicate, incapable beings, but dependable and important members of society.

The Koryö dynasty (918 AD – 1392 AD) initially took a fairly liberal stance on women, but the growing influence of Confucianism ultimately caused the status of women to increasingly decline.⁹ According to the records of the Chinese traveler Xu Jing (1091-1153), men and women interacted freely, with no laws specifically prohibiting male and female social exchange.¹⁰ Women could also inherit property, and inheritances were split equally between sons and daughters.¹¹ If a woman died without children, her possessions could be passed onto her siblings, as opposed to her husband.¹² The practice of allowing women to inherit is indicative of the relative respect females were regarded with; like men, they were endowed with enough trust to own property.

Marriage, however, was expected of all respectable Koryö females, and single women were generally looked down upon. While a dowry was desirable, young brides were not required to bring anything but a wardrobe and the

⁴ Kim pg. 26 - 28.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Kim pg. 30.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Lie pg. 312.

¹⁰ Michael J. Seth, *A Concise History of Korea: From the Neolithic Period throughout the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 92.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

household supplies they would use.¹³ Although the bride's family was expected to pay the substantial cost of the wedding feast and ceremonies, females were generally not regarded as burdens who robbed their families of wealth, but as vital members of their natal families. Ideally, widowed women remained chaste, but many remarried, and in some cases, a widow was permitted to bring her deceased husband's land and wealth as her dowry.¹⁴ Accordingly, widows of soldiers who died in battle were given a government land grant that would support their family, but were expected to return it in the case of remarriage.¹⁵

The Silla and Koryŏ treatment of women should not be mistaken to signify that females enjoyed complete freedom or equality; women continued to be under the jurisdiction of men and subject to strict behavioral expectations. As time progressed, records show increasing numbers of women being confined to the home and restricted from outside labor. Wealthy women began to be raised upon the ideals of the *Yŏch'ik*, a Koryŏ book that taught women to uphold filial and submissive behavior.¹⁶ Confucianism, which increased in popularity throughout the Koryŏ period, encouraged the strengthening of mutually exclusive gender roles, and the status of women subsequently declined throughout the dynasty.

Chosŏn Dynasty Perception of Women

These trends intensified during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392 AD – 1897 AD), which implemented widespread Confucianism and viewed women as weak burdens. Early Chosŏn emperors, such as Yi Song-gye (1335 – 1408), strengthened Chosŏn sovereignty by enforcing Confucian morals, such as the Mandate of Heaven and filial piety. Chosŏn rulers appointed Confucian officials and de-popularized Buddhism by confiscating the land on which temples were built.¹⁷ Individuals who continued to practice Buddhism were chided from social circles, while monks were targeted for their Buddhist traditions. Chosŏn children were therefore raised on the principles of Confucianism, which highlighted the ineptitude of women and the importance of female submission and chastity. Girls were taught to revere their fathers, devote themselves to their husbands, and obey their sons; at each stage in her life, a woman belonged to a man. They were not trusted to dictate their own lives, and men made their decisions for them. Literature and Confucian books were also widely published in the Chosŏn, urging women to be loyal, chaste, submissive to husbands and in-laws, and filial.¹⁸

¹³ Ki pg. 52.

¹⁴ Kim pg. 48.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Kim pg. 52.

¹⁷ Seth pg. 122.

¹⁸ Seth pg. 155

The Chosŏn Dynasty also implemented a legal system called the *kyongguk taejon*, which provided a written record of laws that enforced strict regulations on the activities of women by repressing physical freedom. Women were forbidden from horseback riding, playing games, and attending outdoor parties. The punishment for defying this standard was one hundred lashes, and the physical confinement placed on females signifies the complete jurisdiction and control Chosŏn men held over women's lives.¹⁹

Furthermore, the only acceptable aspiration of a Chosŏn woman was to marry and produce children. Daughters were referred to as *todungnyo*, or 'robber women', because their dowry took away from their family's wealth.²⁰ Married daughters became *ch'ulga oein*, meaning 'one who left the household and became a stranger'.²¹ Once wedded, a woman was not only expected to be faithful, loving, and subservient to her husband, but she had to be fertile and bear male heirs. They were not valued for who they were, but for their ability to give birth and maintain a household. After marriage, a woman was referred to as 'the wife of...' or 'the mother of...', thereby losing her individual identity and becoming the full property of a man. As such, the Chosŏn dynasty's poor regard for women infringed upon their right to possess independent names and personalities, viewing them as an extension of their husband or son. If a husband felt that his wife had committed one of the "seven evils", which included "disobedience to parents-in-law, failure to bear a son, adultery, jealousy, hereditary disease, talkativeness, and larceny", he could easily divorce her.²² There was no due process or evidence; a man's word was powerful enough to ruin a woman, and once divorced, she was left to destitution or killing herself.

Marriage was therefore a respectable woman's only option, and widowhood was extremely unfavorable. Widows were treated with more disdain than unmarried daughters, who, unlike widows, still had the possibility of making an honorable match. If a widow chose to marry again, she held an unfavorable social stigma and was looked down upon by her peers. As an incentive to remain single, the government awarded chaste widows with land grants called *sushinjon*.²³ The Chosŏn also issued the Anti-Remarriage Law of 1477, which discouraged women from remarriage by restricting their sons from public service jobs.²⁴ Furthermore, widows were given a *p'aedo*, or suicide knife, and those who ended their lives were viewed as admirable; they were the epitome of filiality and

¹⁹ Seth pg. 156

²⁰ Seth pg. 156.

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Cho Uhn, "The Invention of Chaste Motherhood: A Feminist Reading of the Remarriage Ban in the Chosun Era," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 5, no. 3 (September 1999): 46.

²⁴ Ibid

faithfulness, which were both important Confucian values. If a woman engaged in a relationship with another man, she not only violated her honor, but that of her family and ancestors. Chastity, then, was considered one of the most desirable female traits, and a woman's abstinence was looked upon as more valuable than her life.

The Ambiguous Lifestyles of Kisaengs

The kisaengs thus clearly contradicted Korean expectations for women. They embodied the opposite of a traditional Confucian woman; instead of being chaste, restrained, submissive, and meek, kisaengs were taught to be witty conversationalists, extravagant in their beauty, highly educated, and sexually promiscuous. Throughout their careers, they had sexual affairs with various yangban, and cast a free-spirited, charming, and youthful façade.²⁵ They were not subject to the physical confinement that most women were held to, and they often traveled locally to entertain at various social gatherings.

At the height of their popularity, the Chosŏn dynasty recruited one hundred new kisaengs between the ages of six and ten every three years. In some instances, the daughters of kisaengs were selected, while others were sold into the profession by poverty-stricken families. The girls chosen, however, were the most beautiful and intelligent daughters of the lower class, and once recruited, they were immediately sorted into kisaeng houses to begin their training.²⁶ Each woman was placed in a sub-category according to her specialization and skills, and these classifications ranged from placements in the Royal Palace to border guard military posts.²⁷

In addition to this, the late-Chosŏn established specific grades of kisaeng. The first grade, called *ilp'ae*, trained daily, and were expected to achieve an advanced level of performance.²⁸ They attended schooling at the *Kyobangwon*, or the 'Teaching College', which was a court-supported institution.²⁹ The *yegi* were the most elite *ilp'ae*. Talented in classical song and musical composition, they were revered as the most beautiful and alluring kisaengs and interacted exclusively with the yangban.³⁰ The second grade, the *ip'ae*, were retired kisaengs over the age of thirty who acted as entertainers at private parties.³¹ The level was

²⁵ The Yangban consisted of the landowning men of noble families.

²⁶ Seth pg. 158

²⁷ David R. McCann, "Formal and Informal Korean Society: A Reading of Kisaeng Songs," in *Korean Women: View From The Inner Room*, ed. Laurel Kendall and Mark Peterson (New Haven: East Rock Press, 1983): 19.

²⁸ Insuk pg. 76

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

referred to as *samp'ae*. They served less affluent men and were thus forbidden from singing the songs and performing the dances of the *ilp'ae*.³²

The extensive education of *kisaengs* also set them apart from most historical Korean women, who received little schooling. Their education was a strenuous process that began between the ages of six and ten and continued throughout their careers.³³ All *kisaengs* underwent extensive training in etiquette, conversation, prostitution, poetry, music, and dance.³⁴ Their education was meant to imitate the learning of the wealthy, with whom they spent the duration of their careers. *Kisaengs* with remarkable intelligence were also trained in medicine and provided treatment to women of noble families, who were generally not allowed to consult male physician. Artistically talented *kisaeng* occasionally served as seamstresses and sewed royal garments.³⁵

While most Korean women could not read or write, the extensive schooling of the *kisaeng* endowed them with the ability to compose *sijo* poetry. These three-lined vernacular poems concentrate on heartache, loneliness, and feelings of powerlessness:³⁶

Since love departed
not a word, not one.
Cherry tree by my window
many times had bloomed and faded.
Alone by the lamp at midnight
I sit, overwhelmed by tears.³⁷

Kisaengs were able to express themselves through their work, and they often composed leisure poetry. In keeping with Confucian values, educating females was generally viewed as dangerous and impractical, and most females were only taught the household deeds required to be dutiful wives and mothers.³⁸ Since few women were literate, and the majority never received formal schooling, the *kisaengs* were perhaps the most holistically educated females in society.

But above all else, it was their lack of chastity that set *kisaengs* apart from other women. The essence of their careers was to be alluring and attractive, and a *kisaeng's* success was measured by her ability to enchant and seduce wealthy

³² Insuk pg. 77

³³ Lee Insuk, "Convention and Innovation: The Lives and Cultural Legacy of the *Kisaeng* in Colonial Korea (1910-1945)," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 23, no. 1 (2010): 76.

³⁴ Suh Ji-young, "Women on the Borders of the Ladies' Quarters and the *Ginyeo* House: The Mixed Self Consciousness of the *Ginyeo* in Late Choson," *Korea Journal* 48, no.1 (2008): 144.

³⁵ Seth pg. 158.

³⁶ McCann pg. 129.

³⁷ David McCann, "Traditional World of *Kisaeng*," *Korea Journal* 12, no. 2 (1974): 41.

³⁸ Hyaewool Choi, "Women's Literacy and New Womanhood in Late Choson Korea," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 6, no. 1 (2000): 89.

men. Chastity was not expected of them, and their virginity and sexuality was seen as a commodity to be sold and exploited. A kisaeng who refused to engage in the sexual aspect of their work would have been unsuccessful and dismissed in further disgrace. As such, promiscuity was a tactic of self-preservation. Respectable women, however, were expected to uphold their chastity at all times. Their virginity was their greatest asset and their key to an honorable marriage. They were instructed to guard their chastity with their life, and in the case of rape, women were taught that suicide was preferable.³⁹ Respectable women could prove their honor through demonstrating chastity and upholding their husbands in life and death, whereas a kisaeng's duty was to frequently engage in sexual activities.

Despite their promiscuity, kisaengs were often admired and loved by powerful men, presenting a unique type of company that neither filial wives nor common prostitutes could provide. The kisaengs offered romance and flirtation, which men could not have with their restrained, Confucian wives. They not only provided physical beauty, but their vast educations enabled them to offer intellectually stimulating company, thereby intriguing and alluring men. Their vivid, bright personas contrasted with other women, who were forced to mask their true personalities and remain quiet and obedient. Kisaengs thus appeared unique, exotic, and exciting to yangban men, who were accustomed to withdrawn and meek females. They not only attracted wealthy yangban lovers, but often became their exclusive concubines. Emperors, such as Yunsangun (1494-1506), officially assigned the most beautiful and charming kisaengs to his bedchamber, and the most politically desirable post a kisaeng could receive was the royal court.⁴⁰

Since kisaengs were the only women with unrestricted access to public events, as well as the only females who freely interacted with men, they became characters in many works of literature. Although most historical women left few written records, kisaengs were documented in novels, folk tales, and poetry. The heroines in *Ch'unhyang-jon*, one of the most famous novels of the Chosŏn dynasty, were kisaengs whose loyalty and beauty caused aristocrats to marry and fall in love with them.⁴¹

³⁹ Jung Ji Young, "War and Death of a Kisaeng: The Construction of the Collective Memory of the 'Righteous Kisaeng Non'gae' in Late Choson," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 22, no. 2 (2009): 172.

⁴⁰ McCann pg. 19.

⁴¹ Sung-Won Cho, "Renaissance Nun Vs. Korean Gisaeng: Chastity and Female Celibacy in 'Measure for Measure' and 'Chun-hyang Jeon,'" *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 4 (2004): 574.

Hwang Chini, a kisaeng who lived in the reign of Chungjong (1506 - 1544), is also famed for her exceptional beauty, determination, and irresistible flair. Her suitors were amongst the most influential men of the era, and she was universally admired for her simple beauty, charm, and musical ability.⁴² She was



Figure 1: Hwang Chini as depicted in a 1910 textbook

also remembered as a great literary talent; six of her sijo poems and seven Chinese poems composed by her are well known.⁴³ She has since become a character in operas and fictions, and a recent television program has centered on her life.

Kisaengs, however, were not just famed for their beauty, and Non'gai, a sixteenth century kisaeng, has been remembered for her boldness and courage. Her enduring loyalty was proven during the Hideyoshi invasion of Korea (1592-1598), during which she enticed a Japanese general to come to her on a cliff. While embracing him, she plunged over the ledge, throwing herself and the general to their deaths in the river below.⁴⁴ In sacrificing herself, she is remembered as an admirable heroine whose filiality to the state was embodied in her self-sacrifice. As a kisaeng, it was not possible for her to demonstrate chastity, but she did embody Confucian loyalty. According to the records of Yu Kwanik (1713-1780), kisaengs continued to make spring and fall sacrifices to Non'gae long after her death.⁴⁵

The documentation of kisaengs in national memory, literature, and folk lore indicates that they have not only been valued as playthings of the wealthy, but that some have been respected and remembered.

Kisaengs and Prostitution in Colonial Korea

The social and political unrest of the late Choson ultimately caused its downfall in 1897, leading to the creation of the Korean Empire. The Korean Empire, which attempted to modernize but remained relatively weak, became increasingly submissive to the imperialistic power of Japan.

Korea was consequently annexed to Japan in 1910, and the Japanese thereafter attempted to destroy Korean culture. The traditional kisaengs were soon

⁴² Kevin O'Rourke, "Demythologizing Hwang Chini" in *Creative Women of Korea*, ed. Young-Key Kim-Renaud (Armonk: M.E. Sharp, 2004), 99.

⁴³ Young Key Kim-Renaud, "Introduction" in *Creative Women of Korea*, ed. Young-Key Kim-Renaud (Armonk: M.E. Sharp, 2004), 13.

⁴⁴ Ji Young, pg. 162.

⁴⁵ Ji Young, pg. 169.

tainted and prostitution became increasingly widespread. During the colonization of Korea (1910-1945), the Japanese outlawed the use of the Korean language, forced people to adopt Japanese names, and treated Koreans with contempt and discrimination.⁴⁶ Young women were coerced into joining the ‘Women’s Volunteer Corps’, and forced into military prostitution for Japanese soldiers. They were either drafted at gunpoint or lured under the false pretense that they would be awarded respectable and well-paid jobs. Out of all their colonial possessions, the Japanese specifically targeted Korean women due to their chastity and sexual abstinence; as virgins, they were free of venereal diseases. Conversely, at least one of every five Japanese soldiers needed treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, which they contracted during mass rapes in the Russo-Japanese War.⁴⁷

The hierarchy of kisaengs also collapsed shortly after the imposition of Japanese imperial control, and the term kisaeng began to be used loosely amongst prostitutes and female entertainers. The status of kisaengs descended to that of a common prostitute, and the Japanese forced them to undergo mandatory health screenings to check for sexually transmitted diseases.⁴⁸ Not only was this representative of the control that the Japanese exerted over Korean citizens, but it is indicative of the initial Japanese viewpoint that they were not talented performers, but unclean prostitutes.

Despite this, traditional kisaengs continued operate, and multiple schools emerged to train young girls. In 1910, a male teacher opened a school called *kwonbon* to educate aspiring kisaengs.⁴⁹ By 1917, there were sixteen *kwonbon* schools, all of which were monitored by the Japanese police force.⁵⁰ Teachers expected students to be punctual and hard working, and unfocused pupils were severely punished or expelled. The high price of tuition caused many of the students to resort to serving at *yorijip* party houses, which provided amusement for colonial Japanese officers, wealthy Korean men, Japanese tourists, and occasionally, independence fighters.⁵¹ Their entertainment venues accordingly began to vary, which led to the teaching of folk songs, solo instrumental music for the *kayagum sanjo*, and Japanese music.⁵²

⁴⁶ Matsui Yayori and Lora Sharnoff, “Sexual Slavery in Korea,” *University of Nebraska Press* 2, no. 1 (1977): 23.

⁴⁷ Yayori pg. 26.

⁴⁸ Insuk pg 77.

⁴⁹ Insuk pg. 78

⁵⁰ Insuk pg. 79

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Insuk pg. 81

Although kisaengs began to receive more holistic educations, the majority of colonial Korean women had only basic schooling, and educating women continued to be viewed as a threat to traditional Confucian values. Korean men were generally uncomfortable with the idea of females attaining higher education and entering the professional workforce. Education, however, was seen as a means to modernization, which also meant an end to Japanese occupation. The number of schools was subsequently increased, but the curriculum focused on teaching girls to be Confucian wives and mothers.⁵³

During this time, kisaengs continued to defy the traditional standards for through advocating in the public sphere and establishing their own journal. Kisaengs from Hyeju and Suwon participated in movements to reduce the national debt, while others took part in the Korean Independence Movement of 1919.⁵⁴ Their continued freedom was also evident in the establishment of the *Changhan*, the kisaeng journal which translates into “eternal bitterness”.⁵⁵

Originally published in 1927 by the *Kugilgwon*, a famous Seoul kisaeng house, only two volumes have been preserved. Many essays are passionate and heated, urging readers to fight for equality and respect. Pak Nokchu, a Seoul kisaeng, writes:

We kisaeng need to unify systematically in order to survive in this society [...] Now we can

raise our voice and thoughts to people who ignore us through this journal, which has become our ‘mouthpiece.’ Our social status is extremely miserable and marginalized. There is no social welfare system for us at all in our society. This means that we have not been treated equally with other ordinary people as human beings, and are always looked down on as



Figure 2: Kisaeng students at a Kwonbon.

“Gesang School” Cornell University Library, 1904.

⁵³ Mary E. Connor, *Asia in Focus: The Koreas* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 200.

⁵⁴ Insuk pg. 90.

⁵⁵ Insuk pg. 90.

slaves. However, we shall not endure this anymore. [...] We are human beings and we also have tears, blood, and sense.⁵⁶

Kisaengs used the *Changhan* to take advantage of their relative freedom and attempted to rally to improve their social standing. The journal also featured literary prose, essays, short stories, and film and book reviews. The topics of their works varied from laments about their poor status to legal and social issues. The reaction to the publication of the *Changhan* was favorable, and many people believed the kisaengs were beautiful, well-spoken, and impassioned.⁵⁷

Military Comfort Women and the Occupation of the US Military

The end of World War II signified the transfer of power from Japan to the United States. 70,000 American troops arrived in Korea, and although the kisaengs began to diminish in numbers, the Korean prostitution industry boomed.

American military officers, convinced that Asia was laden with infectious and venereal diseases, attempted to restrict American soldiers from consorting with prostitutes by threatening \$1000 fines and one year of imprisonment.⁵⁸ Yet, men continued to seek Korean pleasure women, causing the military to establish the Venereal Disease Control Council. The VD control council examined the rates of soldiers with sexually transmitted diseases and discussed prevention methods.⁵⁹ Similar to the Japanese, the military insisted upon mandatory health examinations for kisaengs, dancers, bar girls, waitresses, and any woman associated with providing sexual services to soldiers. If diagnosed, a woman was forcibly treated, and the most severe cases were sent to a women's prison until cured. American officials were particularly concerned with US forces consorting with "unclean, non-American" women, and sent sanitary control officers to inspect bars, restaurants, and pleasure quarters.⁶⁰

Despite these measures, the American demand for comfort women increased and the prostitution industry continued to thrive. It is estimated that at least 250,000 women became military prostitutes, while thousands more served as bartenders, dancers, and call girls.⁶¹ Korean businessmen and pimps opened dance halls and brothels close to military bases, and both Seoul and Incheon had dance halls with 250 prostitutes each.⁶² The efforts of US officials to prevent soldiers from visiting pleasure establishments was ultimately pointless; the presence of

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Insuk pg. 91.

⁵⁸ Lee pg. 462.

⁵⁹ Lee pg. 463.

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Yayori pg. 27.

⁶² Lee pg. 464.

American troops contributed nearly 25 percent of South Korea's gross national product, and the sex industry accounted for over half of the local economies surrounding military bases.⁶³ Aware of the economic benefits, the Korean government proposed to contribute fifty million yen to facilitate prostitution near military bases.⁶⁴ They also approved the supply of comfort women to Korean War troops, and officers could reward a soldier's valor with ticket for a visitation with a prostitute.⁶⁵ Soldiers, devoid of female company, inevitably turned to Korean women as an outlet for their psychological burdens, loneliness, and bridled libido.

The status of kisaengs, however, steadily declined during this period. For the most part, American soldiers did not take the time to understand their history and purpose. They were generally not interested in hearing the traditional songs, poetry, and music of the kisaengs and instead sought their sexual favors; they had wives and girlfriends on the home front, and many did not view Korean women as suitable partners for anything but sex. The lack of interest and the decreased appreciation of the traditional dances and music resulted in the skills of the kisaengs becoming a lost art. The American classification that labeled them equivalent to bar maids and common prostitutes further destroyed them; while they were once loved by wealthy noblemen as the most enchanting and attractive women in the country, they were now regarded as unsanitary and inferior vessels of disease and sexual crime.

The Rise of Prostitution in Contemporary Korea

Despite the fading of the traditional kisaeng, the economic prosperity of the last half of the twentieth century resulted in a thriving prostitution industry. The growth of the middle and upper class endowed millions of Koreans with disposable incomes, and men could increasingly afford to pay for sexual services. In response to the high demand, sexual services became available through additional channels of prostitution, such as sex tours, room salons, cabarets, nightclubs, bars, beer halls, coffee shops/tea houses, motels, hotels, saunas, bath houses, erotic barber shops, and massage parlors.⁶⁶

As a result of the booming economy and the 1965 normalization treaty, Korean tourism also became an important source of economic wealth, and the idea of kisaeng tours was thereafter created. Although this was essentially a sex tour through the red-light districts of Korea, it was marketed as a high-class kisaeng tour due to the increasing cost of Japanese prostitutes and the decline of

⁶³ Lee pg. 454

⁶⁴ Yayori pg. 27.

⁶⁵ Soh pg. 173.

⁶⁶ Sea-ling pg. 48.

the geisha.⁶⁷ The kisaeng tours circulated around a party at a government mandated restaurant, where as many as two hundred tourists would mingle with prostitutes who also served as tour guides. After watching the women perform dances and songs, the men would be accompanied to their hotels.⁶⁸

The Korean government regulated kisaeng tours by implementing mandatory standards for the prostitutes involved. They were required to possess a junior high school education, pass frequent health tests, and attend required lectures, which ranged from the economic necessity of sex tourism to how to act around clients.⁶⁹ The majority of customers were from Japan, and it was not uncommon for Japanese businesses to reward successful salesmen and managers with expense-paid trips to tour high-class Korean brothels.⁷⁰ This resulted in nationalistic, anti-Japanese feelings amongst Koreans, and the sex tour industry decreased in the 1980's after widespread protests. The tours did continue on a smaller scale, but most were moved to high-priced resort areas.⁷¹

In the 1960's, the Korean government began promoting industrialization, which caused thousands of young people to migrate to cities. There were, however, few opportunities for rural women in urban areas; most did not have the resources to pursue higher education that would lead to a career, and factories, shops, and businesses preferred to hire men. Those who were fortunate enough to find employment were paid less and had poor job security, which caused economically desperate women to resort to prostitution. Due to the high demand, their jobs were protected, and they were relatively well paid. In comparison with the average female worker, who grossed under 100,000 wŏn per month, a prostitute made more than 200,000 wŏn.⁷² As of 2000, it was estimated that up to twenty percent of Korean women between the ages of 15 and 29 had been involved with jobs that served sexual purposes.⁷³

⁶⁷ Lie pg. 319.

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Yayori pg. 23.

⁷¹ Lie pg. 320.

⁷² As of 2011, 200,000 won is approximately \$176.00.

⁷³ Sea-ling pg. 41.

These massive urban migrations accordingly led to an increase in street prostitution. Street prostitutes lived in brothels that were run by a pimp or madam, and they were often beaten by their customers and their brothel-owner. These establishments ignored laws and human rights, and drug addiction was used as a means to weaken and placate the prostitutes; “After having my body ravaged by several customers in a row I just get too tired to move my limbs. At times like that, I need a shot of heroin. [...] I can’t help but take the drug in order to keep myself in working condition”.⁷⁴ These young women, who were often coerced or kidnapped by pimps, primarily served lower class men who could not afford sex tours or expensive call girls. The average street prostitute charged approximately 50,000-100,000 won, or the equivalent of the cost of “a few beers”.⁷⁵

As the demand for sexual company steadily increased, high end “room salons” were also established to provide services for wealthy men. The Korean “room salons” offered private rooms in which groups of two to ten men would drink and be entertained by an equal number of young women.⁷⁶ The

Figure 3: A red-light district in the Yongsan-gu district of Seoul, South Korea.



popularity of room salons has since grown, and by 1998, the number of room salons had increased by 112 percent.⁷⁷

The traditional kisaengs, however, nearly disappeared. Due to the widespread availability of prostitutes and sexual entertainment services, the kisaengs were no longer revered as the most desirable and exotic women in society. Few kisaeng houses still operate, but many traditional

dances and songs have been lost. Foreign businessmen are occasionally escorted to a kisaeng house, but these are weak modern interpretations compared to the esteem and reverence the kisaengs were once regarded with.

⁷⁴ Lie pg. 320.

⁷⁵ Sea-ling pg. 50.

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Cheng Sea-ling, “Assuming Manhood: Prostitution and Patriotic Passions in Korea,” *East Asia* 18, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 50.

Relating Prostitution With Korean Perceptions of Chastity and Sexuality

The increasing prevalence of the prostitution industry has caused many Koreans to dehumanize sexual encounters with prostitutes while hypocritically upholding the significance of chastity for respectable men and women. Conservative interpretations of Confucianism have further fueled these beliefs while alternatively adding to the continued dominance of prostitution. While the importance of female sexual abstinence is highly stressed, male libido continues to be viewed as acceptable, and men who frequently visit prostitutes generally carry no social or cultural stigma. This implies that it is natural for men to have a strong sex drive, thus justifying both their masculinity and sexual dominance over women.

From a historical viewpoint, Confucianism has strongly discouraged interaction between men and women and implemented strict gender roles. Since the tenth century, males and females were separated at seven years of age, and remained segregated throughout their lives.⁷⁸ Nearly all marriages were arranged, and the betrothal was often completed while the bride and groom were young children. Wives were taught to refrain from speaking and moving during the ritualistic wedding night, and this practice was symbolic of the restraint, silence, and submission that they were expected to adhere to throughout their marriage. Displays of affection and romance were also labeled as unnatural and frivolous, and marriages were often loveless and unfulfilling. It was consequently recommended that sexual interaction between husbands and wives be limited to reproduction purposes, and physical desire was regarded as dishonorable. In the privacy of their homes, husbands and wives remained physically separated for the duration of their marriages. Houses were built with inner and outer sections, and the women were hidden in the innermost chambers. The role of an honorable, Confucian wife was thus to be an obliging and subservient shadow within her own home, and this lack of interaction caused men to seek sexual and psychological fulfillment outside their marriage, which was inevitably offered by *kisaengs* and prostitutes. Husbands were permitted to have numerous extramarital affairs and polygamous relations, while wives were expected to be unfailingly loyal.⁷⁹ Historical records of women emphasize chastity or her lack of it, indicating that it was her most important role in life and the only noteworthy aspect.

The Korean insistence on chastity, however, was most evident in the mistreatment of women who were trafficked into sex slavery for Japanese troops. Despite the suffering and psychological torment that comfort women were forced

⁷⁸ Kim pg. 57.

⁷⁹ Young-Hee Shim, "Feminism and the Discourse of Sexuality in Korea: Continuities and Changes," *Human Studies* 24, no. ½ (2001): 136.

to endure, those that returned home continued to be treated with abhorrence. Families refused to take their daughters back, and parents believed their honor would be tainted if they welcomed a spoiled daughter into their homes. If a former comfort woman married, she was often abandoned when her husband discovered her past. In addition to the disgrace of being unchaste and carrying venereal diseases, these women also carried the stigma of being divorced. As a survival mechanism, former comfort women thus had no choice but to hide their past. As Lee Young-Ok, a 73 year old survivor of Japanese sexual slavery, noted;

At that time, a woman's chastity was considered to be more important than her life. How could I tell people I was daily raped by many soldiers. It would have been a great humiliation to my parents. Many times I regretted I came back home alive. It would have been better for me to die there... Yet, looking back I am angry at the fact that because of traditional Korean customs I had to hide my past without myself doing anything wrong.⁸⁰

The stories and emotional trials of these women attest to the collective embarrassment and taboo, both nationally and on a personal level, to acknowledge libido and sex.

Furthermore, the Korean obsession with chastity arguably feeds the prostitution industry; even if a couple loves each other, they will not have sexual relations until marriage, and a young man will visit prostitutes in order to save the purity of their girlfriend.⁸¹ According to an interview with five Korean men, they view their girlfriends and wives as too respectable and pure to be subject to unchecked sexuality, and in order to feel fully satisfied, they resort to prostitutes to fulfill their needs.⁸² In a 2001 survey conducted by Gahyun Youn, about half of young men aged 15 to 22 stated that their friends had never visited a prostitute, which strongly implies that the other half of participants knew of peers who had paid for sex.⁸³ Conversely, nearly all the girls agreed that virginity was crucial to their self-worth and purity, and the sexual education they received focused on protecting their bodies from sexual aggression and maintaining their virginity.⁸⁴

The dominance of the sex industry also continues to be influenced by the lack of freedom and choice that has governed Korean relationships. Until the 1960's, it was rare for a bride and groom to meet before the wedding ceremony, and marriages were almost completely arranged by their parents.⁸⁵ Even in the

⁸⁰ Pyong Gap Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women': The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class," *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6 (Dec 2003): 950.

⁸¹ Shim pg. 142.

⁸² Sea-ling pg. 66.

⁸³ Youn pg. 356.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Gahyun Youn, "Perceptions of Peer Sexual Activities in Korean Adolescents," *The Journal of Sex Research* 38, no. 4 (November 2001): 352.

1990's, only half of all "mate selections" of men and women in their 20's were chosen by the couple rather than their family.⁸⁶ Because these arranged marriages were often loveless, spouses found fulfillment outside their marriages, often through prostitution or adultery.

Many arranged marriages also stem from the insistence upon chastity and the general mistrust of allowing children to interact with the opposite gender. Interactions between young men and women are linked to smoking, drinking, and above all, premarital sex. If young men and women are exposed to each other, many Korean parents believe that inappropriate coital relations will eventually ensue. Parents therefore keep their daughters from young men, believing that interaction leads to libido, which would be the epitome of dishonor and shame. Preventing dating and utilizing arranged marriages is thus a method to ensure a child's abstinence and future success; marital unions are arranged to the economic and social benefits of the couple and their families. Knowing that they could be destined for an arranged marriage, dating is sometimes deemed pointless by young people. There is also a general consensus that pre-marital relationships undermine a student's ability to concentrate on schooling and sabotages their ability to do well on college entrance exams.⁸⁷ Students who were devoid of mixed-gender relationships were viewed as being "of sound mind and body", and their chastity is invariably linked with academic success.⁸⁸

Conclusion

The Korean insistence on sexual abstinence and the strict Confucian standards are the primary source of the dominance of the kisaengs and the growth of the sex industry. Despite the insistence on chastity and the prevalence of Confucianism, prostitution has had an extensive presence throughout Korean history. For over a thousand years, kisaengs were living contradictions of the expectations that women should be chaste and subordinate shadows within their homes and society, and their success was a testament to the unfulfilling marriages and restrictive roles that resulted from societal expectations. Although the traditional kisaengs have declined in number, the modern prostitution industry experienced unprecedented expansion in the mid to late twentieth century. While sexual interactions with prostitutes are dehumanized, coital relations between unmarried men and women are viewed as the epitome of dishonor, and the highest taboo continues to be placed on libido and sexuality. On both a historical and contemporary level, the lasting prevalence of the Korean prostitution industry is a product of the rigid standards placed on the people, resulting in the exploitation

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Youn pg. 352.

and abuse of women throughout history. In turn, this has reduced millions to menial sexual creatures, or at best, subjected them to subservient and austere social and sexual standards. Both the dominance of the prostitution industry and the hypocritical insistence upon chastity has pervaded throughout history, and in the foreseeable future, will most likely continue to play a major role in Korean culture.

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