Convention and Innovation:  
The Lives and Cultural Legacy of the *Kisaeng* in Colonial Korea (1910-1945)*

Lee Insuk

The women known as *kisaeng* or “courtesans” played a key role as entertainers for the Korean Royal Court before 1910. The political and social situation of the colonial period (1910-1945), when Japanese culture was promoted and Western culture was also gradually introduced, influenced the traditional Korean performing arts as represented by *kisaeng*. As a consequence, the *kisaeng* can be seen as pivotal in the transition between the old and the modern in the Korean performing arts. *Kisaeng* at the Royal Court had to broaden their roles significantly from being performing artists to acting as sex workers. Due to an exaggerated emphasis on the prostitution aspect, *kisaeng* received a social stigma that made it necessary for them to hide their identities in contemporary Korea.

In this article, I examine how *kisaengs’* lives were linked to political, economic and ideological forces. I also explore how and why *kisaeng* organized their training system and expanded their performing repertoire by combining old traditions with new cultural influences in order to meet the expectations of their customers and the Korean public. A wide range of data, including resources on the Japanese colonial policies, the *kisaeng* school system, Japanese-produced *kisaeng* postcards, gramophone recordings, and the journal *Changhan* edited by *kisaeng* themselves, enables us to understand how and where *kisaeng* inherited the traditional performing arts and incorporated new trends in culture. I argue that the *kisaeng’s* experience in the colonial period should be re-evaluated in the light of the overall process of modernization in Korea.

**Keywords:** *Kisaeng*, courtesans, colonialism, kwŏnbŏn, convention, innovation

*Research for this paper has been supported by a 2009 Post-Doctoral Fellowship Grant from the Korea Foundation.*

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Introduction

The kisaeng 妓生 system and the performing groups made up of kisaeng no longer exist in contemporary Korean society. For over five hundred years, kisaeng played a key cultural role as professional female entertainers at the royal court of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910). Byong Won Lee points out that, despite their low social status and insignificant family background, the contribution of the kisaeng to Korean music and dance was considerable. It was through the kisaeng that the songs and dances of the court music (called yŏak, “female music”) were carried beyond the palace and transmitted to the general public.\(^1\) The last generation of kisaeng can be defined as Korean female courtesans who were trained at kisaeng schools during the era of Japanese colonization (1910-1945). They were also the last generation of Koreans to be trained in kagok (a traditional Korean vocal genre) without notation, using traditional methods. Such traditional teaching methods have almost disappeared, as over time the kisaeng have died or gone into hiding.\(^2\) Only a few of them are still teaching music or dance and are still respected as elderly musicians and dancers.

Any representatives of this last generation of kisaeng still alive in Korea today are in their late eighties and most of them are reluctant to reveal their identities for fear of being tainted by the stigma of their career. Drawing on the social and political impact on women’s psychological changes identified by feminist scholars (Jo Freeman, 1975; Lillian Faderman, 1981; Sheila Jeffrey, 1985; Celia Kitzinger, 1996),\(^3\) I will argue that this reluctance, far from being a case of individual preference, has been influenced by changes brought about by

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2. There is a valuable interview with the former kisaeng Ch’ohyang who hides her connection with kisaeng out of concern for her adopted son. Sŏ Chŏngbŏm, “Nilgŭn kisaeng Ch’ohyang’yi,” *Sumo sanin oet’olbag: Chŏnt’ong sahoe ŭ hwangbon e sŏn saramdŭl* [Lonely Recluses: People in their twilight years] (Seoul: Ppuri kip’ŭn namu, 1979), 70-85.
social, cultural and political forces during and since the colonial period. The issues raised in the following quotation from Geraldine Moane are critical to understanding changes in the social role of the last generation of *kisaeng* during this period:

> What will be kept clearly in the mind for the present is the insight that the personal is influenced and shaped by the political and social context. In order to understand the personal, it is therefore necessary to focus on the political and social context. Furthermore, if psychological patterns are shaped by social conditions, then psychological change must also involve changes in social conditions.4

The last generation of *kisaeng* faced dramatic political and social changes during the colonial period. At a time when Japanese culture was promoted and Western culture was also gradually being introduced, they played a pivotal role in linking old and new in the transformation of Korean culture. However, the image of the first-grade *kisaeng* during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) as elegant and intelligent was almost replaced by an image of third-grade sex workers, a stigma which affected the *kisaeng* in the 35 years of the colonial period.

In spite of their long history, the gradual disappearance of the last remaining *kisaeng*, and the existence of a wide range of valuable resources on them, few academics have taken up the challenge of introducing the *kisaeng* tradition within its social and cultural context to non-Koreans.5 In contrast, the culturally comparable Japanese courtesans known as *geisha* have been discussed by both Japanese, many non-Japanese scholars, and even non-scholars; culturally specific aspects of courtesanship are dealt with in, for example, *Geisha* by Liza Dalby in 1985 and *A Geisha’s Journey: My Life As a Kyoto Apprentice* by Komomo in 2008; and are also the subject of a Hollywood film based on Arthur Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* (book 1997, film 2005 directed by Rob Marshall). Geisha have always been a source of fascination among Asia specialists and

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This article focuses on the experiences and legacy of the final generation of kisaeng during the Japanese colonial period, including their systematic training system, teaching methods, social involvement, and crafts, all of which were strongly influenced by political, economic and ideological forces. It will show how kisaeng perpetuated their profession in Korean society after the collapse of the Chosŏn dynasty, focusing on their social and cultural activities as expressed through their work. In addition, I will look at how kisaeng as female courtesans preserved their traditional performing arts and adapted to new cultural trends. These achievements will be considered using a wide range of data including resources on the kisaeng school system, Japanese-produced kisaeng postcards, the journal Changhan (長恨, Everlasting Regrets) edited by the kisaeng themselves, and gramophone recordings. This paper will not only introduce the last generation of kisaeng and highlight their social and cultural significance beyond the popular view of them as sex workers; it will also consider the momentous shifts that occurred in Korean culture and values during the colonial period as they relate to kisaeng.

Origin of the Kisaeng

The kisaeng 妓生 (妓 = talented, 生 = student) were also called yōak 女楽 (female musicians), kinyŏ 女妓 (tented women), yegi 藝妓 (talented performers) or kwan’gi 官妓 (official talents) according to the era and place in which they lived. The term kisaeng has been commonly used in contemporary Korea since the Japanese colonial period. Their origins are obscure; a casual reference in the Koryŏsa (History of Koryo) describes them as the descendants of the members of a migrant group, the Willow and Water People (Yangsuch’ŏk), whom the first ruler of the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392) had difficulty controlling and consequently designated as male and female slaves, sending them to various government offices established throughout the provinces.

Although the kisaeng system was originally developed during the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392), it was strengthened during the Chosŏn dynasty, and had

6. For more information on kisaeng in the Koryŏ Period, see Kathleen McCarthy, “Kisaeng in the Koryŏ Period” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1991).
strong links to the official ideology of the Chosŏn dynasty, Confucianism. Yangban (male literati) viewed Confucianism, which had developed in China over centuries, as a universal system of truth available to all civilized people regardless of geography, and they often claimed to be more faithful transmitters of Confucian orthodoxy than were the Chinese themselves. After the fall of the Ming dynasty to the Manchus in 1644, Korean scholars considered themselves the sole guardians of Confucian civilization.8

In Confucian ideology, music is viewed as an important vehicle for cultivating human nature and controlling the people. In order to carry out Confucian ritual music and the Royal Ancestor’s Shrine music, the first king of the Chosŏn dynasty, King T’aejo (r. 1392-1398), established an aak 雅樂 (elegant music) department and King Sŏngjong (r. 1469-1494) enhanced the court Music Department, Chang’ag’wŏn 掌樂院. To allow the Department to properly carry out royal court music and rituals, over 1141 performers were recruited, including 819 male accompanists, 10 boy dancers and 160 female performers.9

Female performers called yŏak had to be trained systematically in the palace to perform at the semi-annual sacrifice to Confucius, formal banquets, royal marriages, and welcoming ceremonies for foreign envoys. Another reason why the kisaeng system lasted for over five hundred years throughout the Chosŏn dynasty has been explained by Kim Yŏngchung as follows:

Since the early Yi dynasty [Chosŏn dynasty] there were demands for the abolition of the kisaeng system because it conflicted with Confucian ethics, but none had force enough to implement an effective opposition. This was because the kisaeng had direct influence on the conduct of the officials themselves. Also, it was often argued, if kisaeng were abolished government officials might steal the wives of commoners.10

Under the Confucian social ethos of Chosŏn society, the roles of women in the upper and middle classes were largely confined to the domestic sphere. Women received only an informal education at home, and were required to observe the Confucian virtues of diligence, filial piety and chastity. It was not possible for the yangban to enjoy music with their wives or other non-professionals, who

9. Song Chiwŏn, Chang’ag’wŏn, uju ǔ sŏnyul ǔl tamda [Chang’ag’wŏn, performing universal music] (Seoul:Ch’usubat, 2010), 32.
were excluded from such occasions. Apart from male musicians and boy dancers, kisaeng were the only female group to perform in a number of formal court ceremonies and at the yangban’s private functions. For the most part, except for national festivals, kisaeng were required to entertain male literati at parties with traditional music and dance performances. Under these social circumstances, it was inevitable that the kisaeng system would be strengthened by Chosŏn dynasty officials.

By the end of the Chosŏn dynasty there were three different and strictly classified grades of kisaeng. The grade of kisaeng and their performing repertoire also varied according to the social level of their guests. The highest grade of kisaeng were called the ilp’ae or “Grade 1,” a government position especially created to control the kisaeng group, and which also included female doctors (ūigi) who treated women in the palace. The ilp’ae were selected from lower class girls aged from six to ten. They were expected to learn music, dance, and literature in order to perform court music and to entertain at upper class functions. In order to achieve a higher level of performance, kisaeng lived together and trained every day in the court-supported institution of the Kyobangwŏn or “Teaching College.” They were also allowed to entertain private guests in their home. The association of higher-class kisaeng with entertainment during the Chosŏn dynasty did not necessarily mean these women were always subservient to men. Many kisaeng had close friendships with men and enjoyed a level of freedom and autonomy that was denied most of the women of that period. An even higher level of kisaeng, commonly called the yegi, were accomplished composers and singers of kagok (Korean classical song). During parties, yangban often enjoyed singing kagok together with these kisaeng. Kagok songs and the aristocratic song poems (sijo) that comprised their lyrics were the most popular media of expression of thought for both the yangban and the kisaeng.

The second grade of kisaeng, ip’ae or “Grade 2,” were concubines who had retired at the age of thirty from the highest grade, and who acted as part-time prostitutes and entertained at private parties with their artistic skills. The third grade, samp’ae or “Grade 3,” served ordinary men by singing popular songs, and were forbidden to perform the regular songs and dances of

12. Pak Minyŏng, Han’guk hansi wa yŏsŏng insik ū kudo [Korean poetry in Classical Chinese and the epistemological frame for femininity] (Seoul: Somyŏng ch’ulp’an, 2003), 139-144.
13. Ibid., 232.
the first-grade kisaeng. Their repertoire consisted mainly of chapka (miscellaneous songs) and sijo; they also practiced prostitution. Regardless of the grade of kisaeng, most kisaeng were involved in “entertaining men” with song, dance or sexually explicit behavior. In both formal and informal functions and parties, the involvement of kisaeng was essential, and kisaeng appear in almost all contemporary paintings of functions of the Chosŏn period.

With the opening of Chosŏn to the outside world in the nineteenth century, the strictly Confucian Chosŏn society was forced to confront the destruction of the traditional order of affairs. As summed up by Pilzer:

Chosŏn emerged from several hundred years of isolation and entered a new era of rapid societal change and economic development as Japan forced Chosŏn to sign the unequal Treaty of Kanghwa in 1876. The traditional middle classes (chungin and regional bureaucrats) and the growing merchant class gained power. And as the clientele of the private samp’ae entertainers prospered, so did the institution of the private high-class female entertainer. At the same time, as the court was gradually weakened by foreign imperial encroachment, the numbers of court kisaeng dwindled.

The official courtesans, the kwan’gi 官妓, were abolished in 1907 by the incoming Japanese colonial power. Thereafter, the highest kisaeng could no longer live at the Kyobangwŏn in the palace or governmental offices and the traditional hierarchy of the kisaeng system collapsed.

Relocation of Kisaeng Activities during the Colonial Period

As part of the increasing Japanese control over the country, in 1908 the Japanese police (Kyongsich’ŏng 警視廳) promulgated the “Kisaeng Regulation Order” (Kisaeng Tansongnyŏng 妓生圍束令). Under this regulation, although kisaeng were prohibited from working as prostitutes, all kisaeng were required to undergo health examinations to check for sexually transmitted diseases. This fact suggests that the Japanese police did not recognize the traditional hierarchy of kisaeng, but rather treated kisaeng and ch’anggi 媺妓, chakpu 酌妓

16. Ibid., 297.
17. Yi Kŏngmin, Kisaeng ŭn ottŏk’e mandŭrŏjŏnmun’ga [How did kisaeng come into being?] (Seoul: Archive Books, 2005), 63-64.
or “prostitutes” all equally as sex workers, rather than as skilled female professional entertainers. The Order also required all kisaeng, ch’anggi and chakpu to register with the Japanese police and be affiliated with an authorized kisaeng chohap 組合 or ‘guild.’ According to Yi Kŏngmin, the aim of the Kisaeng Regulation Order was to manage the kisaeng through a kisaeng licence (In’gaju˘ng 認可證) issued by the Japanese police and collect tax revenues more effectively from them.19

In 1910, a male teacher of the traditional Korean classical vocal form of kagok, Ha Kyuil, established a private kisaeng institution, the Chŏngak Chŏnsūpso or “Institute for Korean Classical Music” to look after and train talented first-grade kisaeng. This establishment can be considered as the origin of the system of kisaeng schools, which trained female entertainers solely for performing traditional music and dance. Another aim for setting up the school was to protect kisaeng aged from 13 to 23 from being sold off to rich men, which was quite a common practice during this period.20 In 1912, an article in the Maeil Shinbo introduced the kisaeng’s fervent efforts to learn various kinds of performing arts.21 In 1914, the Japanese Governor-General of Korea (Chosŏn Ch’ŏngdokpu 朝鮮總督府) issued an order that made the chohap guilds change their names to kwŏnbŏn (Japanese: kenban 券番). The term originated from the Japanese geisha system’s management and accounting office, so Ha Kyuil’s Chŏngak Chŏnsūpso had to change its name to Taejŏng Kwŏnbŏn or “Taejŏng Kisaeng School” and then in 1925 to Chosŏn Kwŏnbŏn.22

At the time Ha Kyuil changed the school’s title to kwŏnbŏn, it usually offered training in classical songs (kagok and sijo), traditional instruments (kŏmun’go, kayagiım and yangggiım) and dance. Ha Kyuil also taught his students the traditional classical court dance or ch’unaengjŏn, which had first been performed in front of King Sunjong of the Chosŏn dynasty. Ch’unaengjŏn is not an active dance and its extremely slow, grave movements are intended to bring about a peaceful and tranquil mood.23 Learning such a formal dance and

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19. Yi Kŏngmin, Kisaenggīn 朝廷’re mandırŏjŏmnin’ga, 63.
23. Kim Chinkyang, Sŏn’ga Ha Kuyil Sŏnsaeng yakchŏn [Memories of the kagok singer Sŏn’ga
classical songs enhanced their reputation as the highest kisaeng, “yøgi,” even though the hierarchy system had already collapsed by this time.

During the 1910s, more than sixteen kwønbøn were established across the nation in order for kisaeng to receive training and then go on to work as courtesans. [Figure 1] According to the Chosøn miin pogam or “Chosøn Pictorial of Beauties,” in 1917 sixteen kwønbøn were run and controlled by the Japanese police, with girls aged from eight to twenty being eligible to attend. Approximately 65% of the girls there were aged between sixteen and twenty. In 1918, girls in their late twenties were very rare.25 This suggests that the kisaeng’s working period was very short, no more than ten years.

In order to achieve financial independence most kisaeng, even while being linked with kwønbøn, worked in the evenings at party houses called yorijip. The yorijip were deluxe entertainment complexes serving cuisine, drinks and performances for colonial officers, Japanese tourists, rich Koreans and even independence fighters. The first yorijip, called Myøngwølgwan, was set up in

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Ha Kyu-il] (Seoul:Yeøm, 2003), 77-78.

24. Shin Hyungyu, professor at Chung-Ang University, has generously allowed the author to use his important collection of digital images of postcards for this study.

Seoul in 1909. It had many private rooms and a large stage for performances. After the collapse of the kisaeng system, many former first grade kisaeng came to Myōngwŏlgwan to work, so that it became the most famous high society meeting place of the colonial period. One of the most famous kisaeng, Yi Nanhyang, started performing at Myōngwŏlgwan at the age of 13. She recalled her performing experience including participating in the royal banquet (Chinyŏn 進宴) in front of Emperor Sunjong (r. 1907-1910) and at Myōngwŏlgwan through her newspaper article series in 1970-1971.26

There were several yorijip during the 1910s for which performers would be dispatched from the kwŏnbŏn. If a customer requested a kisaeng, a yorijip would contact a kwŏnbŏn, and the kisaeng would be dispatched in a rickshaw sent by the restaurant. Travelling by rickshaw was part of the kisaeng image, but more importantly, the restaurant was able to pass on the cost of the rickshaw to the customer. About 15% each was deducted from the kisaeng’s fees for her kwŏnbŏn and for the yorijip.27 Such business transactions and the kisaeng themselves were under surveillance by the Japanese police and kisaeng were officially banned from doing prostitution. In order to run their business smoothly kwŏnbŏn and kisaeng had to offer the police bribes.28 A photo

featuring two young *kisaeng* and a Japanese police officer provides some evidence of the close relationship between the two professions in this period. [Figure 2]

In 1920, there were six *kwŏnbŏn* located in Hansŏng (Seoul), with over 80% of *kisaeng* (470 out of 588) belonging to one of these *kwŏnbŏn.* Of these, the Chosŏn Kwŏnbŏn and Hansŏng Kwŏnbŏn were more active than the others, because most members of these *kwŏnbŏn* had already been well-trained professional *kisaeng* in the palace and were able to carry on their profession after the breakdown of the court system.

### Shifting from Convention to Innovation

As Japanese colonial power became entrenched in Korean society, assimilation to Japanese norms occurred throughout Korea. Since the Special Order for Koreans (*Chosŏnmin saryŏng* 朝鮮民事令) No. 7 was promulgated in 1912, the assimilation policies were increasingly reinforced. For example, in 1936 Special Order No 19 was launched in Korea, and legislation was passed to compel Koreans to learn and speak Japanese instead of Korean, and to adopt Japanese names at school. From 1937, increased airtime for Japanese-language broadcasting decreased the time available for Korean-language programs (which ceased all together in 1944) and suspended programming that promoted Korean culture. The *kisaeng* schools were directly influenced by this order.

The former highest grade *kisaeng* were no longer restricted solely to the classical repertoires of music and dance that had been their mainstay during the Chosŏn dynasty. They were, in fact, forced to broaden their repertoire to meet their clients’ and audiences’ expectations. In response to these pressures, *kisaeng* schools expanded their repertoire to include folk genres such as *p’ansori* (operatic folk songs), *chapka,* solo instrumental music for the popular twelve-stringed zither *kagagŭm sanjo,* and even Japanese music. Among the *kisaeng* schools in Seoul, the Hansŏng Kwŏnbŏn (185 students) and Taejŏng Kwŏnbŏn (181 students) were the most famous, and concentrated on educating

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the highest grade ilp’ae kisaeng. In 1918, the Hansŏng Kwŏnbŏn offered an unusually diversified curriculum of ten different types of vocal genres, including folk songs. At the P’yŏngyang Kwŏnbŏn, kisaeng also had to learn Japanese and to play Japanese instruments (samisen and koto) in order to serve their customers, who were mostly Japanese or Koreans working for the colonial government. The postcard reproduced here [Figure 3] shows kisaeng performing the samisen, a Japanese three-stringed musical instrument, as one of their school subjects.

The new kisaeng training system at the kwŏnbŏn schools clearly illustrates how quickly kisaeng assimilated new cultural developments whilst continuing to use traditional teaching methods. The students at such schools had to complete a three-year course and pass the final exam in order to gain their diploma. In order to transform young girls into professional courtesans within a very limited time, both a high level of musicality on the part of the teachers and excellent teaching methods were crucial, aspects also critically important in the traditional kisaeng training house, the Kyobang, during the Chosŏn dynasty. The students were required to meet a strict standard of aural and oral musicality and concentration in order to achieve the requisite high level of performance. Teachers expected students to listen carefully and follow the teacher’s eyes, mouth and hand movements while singing. Students then copied the teacher’s singing as closely as possible. Such a teaching style is known as kujŏn simsu 口傳心修, literally, “transmitted through the mouth, cultivated by the mind.”

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The teaching style and rules at the kwŏnbŏn schools were quite strict. A kwŏnbŏn kisaeng in the 1920s, Kim Chinhaeng, provides one example of the school’s severity: “When a student did not concentrate in class, the lowest and most common punishment was for a few stitches to be sewn on her wrist with a needle.”32 This particularly painful method of punishment has become a symbol of kisaeng training, and so was shown in the opening scene of the contemporary performance, Kisaeng Becomes You in 2009.33 Students who showed poor attendance and manners or were two months behind on tuition fees (2 yen per month) were expelled.34 Such strict punishments continued under the kwŏnbŏn system and they had their origins in the high level of professionalism required to serve the king or government officials during national feasts. Kisaeng did not learn music and dance as hobbies or for cultivating their minds, but rather to provide professional services.

At the P’yŏngyang Kwŏnbŏn, the timetable for the school [Table 1] shows that kisaeng took eleven subjects in total. In terms of its musical content, four different musical subjects were taught: kagok, Japanese songs, Korean folk songs, and musical skills. According to this timetable, the curriculum was focused on training the first grade kisaeng, offering kagok and calligraphy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mon.</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>Calligraphy</th>
<th>Kagok</th>
<th>Japanese Songs</th>
<th>Korean Folk Songs</th>
<th>Singing practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tues.</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Calligraphy</td>
<td>Kagok</td>
<td>Japanese Songs</td>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wed.</td>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>Calligraphy</td>
<td>Kagok</td>
<td>Japanese Songs</td>
<td>Korean Folk Songs</td>
<td>Singing practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thurs.</td>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>Calligraphy</td>
<td>Kagok</td>
<td>Japanese Songs</td>
<td>Korean Folk Songs</td>
<td>Attitudes &amp; Manners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fri</td>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>Calligraphy</td>
<td>Kagok</td>
<td>Japanese Songs</td>
<td>Korean Folk Songs</td>
<td>Singing practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat</td>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>Calligraphy</td>
<td>Kagok</td>
<td>Painting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

32. Ibid., 47.
34. Minato Kawamura, Malhanin kkot kisaeng, 194.
35. Ibid., 197.
every day. This reveals how these *kisaeng* schools tried to preserve traditional classical music by treating *kagok* as the most essential subject in their training, equal in importance to calligraphy in the overall curriculum. However, research has not yet been done to determine whether every *kisaeng* school offered a curriculum organized similarly to that shown above.

In these schools, training in traditional Korean music included dance and at least two or three musical instruments (the *kömun’go* six-stringed plucked zither, the *yanggìm* brass-stringed dulcimer and the *kayagìm* twelve-stringed plucked zither), as well as folk songs. For example, prominent *kagok* singer Yi Chuhwan (1909-1972) was proficient not only at playing the *p’iri* (double reed oboe) and singing *kagok*, but also at performing Buddhist dances called *süngmu*.³⁶ *Kagok* singers, even though their major focus was on *kagok*, also had to learn traditional Korean instruments and dance.³⁷

The reasons for this broad training are clear. Firstly, traditional Korean music was originally either for ensembles or orchestral groups rather than for solo performances. Solo instrumental performance or *sanjo* developed only in the late nineteenth century. To produce a good ensemble performance, it was essential for all players to have knowledge of the techniques used by other instruments in the ensemble. For example, in the *kagok* ensemble, a singer performed both the role of singer and conductor, and consequently, *kagok* singers needed considerable knowledge of all the accompanying instruments. Secondly, Korean traditional classic dance assisted the understanding of *sigimsae* (musical ornamentation) which is one of the most distinctive characteristics of traditional Korean instrumental and vocal music.

Among classical dance genres, the court dance, *Ch’unaengjön*, was especially popular traditionally, and also seemingly with the clients of the *kisaeng* under Japanese colonial rule. Many postcards produced by the Japanese Tourism Department in the 1920s shows *kisaeng* dressed in *Ch’unaengjön* costume. This traditional classical dance features very limited movements expressing very slow curving lines in a tranquil mood, movements that are also exaggerated by the dancer’s long sleeves. [Figure 4]

A prominent scholar of *kisaeng* dances, Kim Yŏnghŭi, has identified the repertoire and performing order of the theatrical court dance in contemporary

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³⁷ Information provided by Cho Soonja, a Human Cultural Asset for *kagok*, during a personal *kagok* lesson. February, 1999.
Korea as formed by kisaeng from Tadong Chohap and Kwanggyo Chohap in the 1910s. These chohap kisaeng also performed 33 different types of court dance for royal festivities in 1915 and 1917.38

The Kisaeng as Cultural Innovators

1. Release of Gramophone Recordings

From 1907, kisaeng began to release vocal music recordings through several gramophone record companies. The following table explains the details of the gramophone recordings until the launch of microphone recording in 1928.

According to the Korean Traditional Music Disc Museum, 685 gramophone recordings are preserved today.39 However, there are only a few gramophone recordings left from the early 1920s. Even though many were made and sold, they were made of very fragile “shellac” material. In addition, recordings of

Table 2. Gramophone producers and performers until the launch of microphone recording in 1928<sup>40</sup>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Record label</th>
<th>Year of Launch</th>
<th>Kisaeng Singers</th>
<th>Repertoire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Columbia</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>Ch’oe Hongdo</td>
<td><em>Chapka: Sŏdo sori</em> (miscellaneous songs of the north-west provinces)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Victor</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Kim Hyesŏn, Pak Yihwa, Pyŏdo, Yŏm Kyewŏl, Ch’ae Ok and Hyang Sŏn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese Gramophone Company</td>
<td>Royal Record Nipponophone</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Kim Hongdo</td>
<td><em>Chapka: Sŏdo sori</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nipponophone</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Ch’oe Yŏnok and Cho Moran</td>
<td>Classic; <em>kagok, kasa and sijo</em> Korean Folk songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Kim Yŏnyŏn, Park Ch’aesŏn, Sin Ongnan, Sin Ongyŏn, Yun Usŏn, Yi Yusaek, Cho Tŏkhyang and Han Puyong</td>
<td>Japanese and Korean popular songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilch’uk Chosŏn Sorip’an</td>
<td></td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Total 21 <em>kisaeng</em> including Yi Nanhyang, Kang Soch’un, Kwŏn Kumju, Kil Chinhong, Kim Kyewŏl, Kim Kŭmhwa, Kim Sanwŏl, Kim Ch’uwŏl</td>
<td>Classic; <em>kagok, kasa and sijo</em> Folk: Folk songs, <em>p’ansori, chapka and tan’ga</em> (short songs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese Gramophone Ltd.</td>
<td>Chebip’yo Choson Record</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Total 11 <em>kisaeng</em> including Kang Soch’un, Pak Nokchu</td>
<td>Classic; <em>kagok kasa, sijo and samhyŏnyukkak</em> (instrumental ensemble music) Folk: folk songs, <em>p’ansori, chapka and tan’ga</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haptong Gramophone Ltd.</td>
<td>Pihaenggip’yo</td>
<td>1926</td>
<td>An Kŭmhyang, Kim Wolsŏn, Yi Nanhyang and Pae Unsŏn</td>
<td><em>Tan’ga</em> and Japanese songs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
classical songs were extremely limited in the 1930s, while the number of \textit{kisaeng} singers recording significantly increased when they expanded their repertoire from traditional folk genres to newly-composed Korean popular songs (\textit{yuhaengga}), and even Japanese and Western popular songs. The recording companies also promoted their records using publicists who assisted performers and the companies through positive reports in the Tong-a Daily and the Maeil Shinbo to attract new audiences.

2. \textit{Performances at Kyôngsông Radio Broadcasting}

The Japanese used radio broadcasting as an assimilation tool. The first Korean broadcast network, Kyôngsông Radio Broadcasting, was established in 1927 in order to contribute to the Japanese assimilation process. Encouraged by the Ministry of Communication, this medium contributed to Korea’s cultural, educational, and entertainment forums. While the broadcast schedule included Japanese music, it also set aside spots for lectures on ethics, agriculture improvement, and women’s education.\textsuperscript{41}

The role of \textit{kisaeng} as singers for radio programs was critically important. Classical and folk songs and pop music performed by \textit{kisaeng} were regularly aired on the radio during the Japanese colonial period. According to Song Bangsong, \textit{kisaengs’} performances on radio contributed to the increasing popularity of Korean traditional music, whereas classical songs, including \textit{kagok} and instrumental musical genres, were insignificant in radio programs in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{42} The number of students in the classical vocal genres (\textit{kagok}, \textit{kasa} and \textit{sijo}) at schools then was higher than that for folk songs and \textit{chapka}.\textsuperscript{43} However, in the programs of Kyôngsông Radio Broadcasting, \textit{chapka} was the most popular genre while the classical \textit{kagok} were rarely aired. This fact reflects the low demand for classical songs from audiences during Japanese

\textsuperscript{40} The table has been adapted from the following two references: Kwôn Tuhûi, “Chôn’gi nogûn iûn ū kisaeng kwa ŭmban sanûp” [\textit{Kisaeng} and the recording industry until the launch of microphone recording in Korea], \textit{Han’guk ŭmbanbak} 10 (2000): 593-607; Kwôn Tuhûi, \textit{Han’guk kîndae ŭmaksa} [Korean musical history during the 19th and 20th centuries] (Seoul: Minsogwôn, 2005), 120-126.


\textsuperscript{42} Song Bangsong, “Kyônggi Pangsongguk e ch’ulyônhan yôgidûl ū kongyôn hwaldong,” 104-105.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 98.
colonization, in spite of the kisaengs’ interest in kagok. Chapka and folk songs could more easily attract the Korean public rather than classical songs in terms of tempo, melody, texts and performing duration. For example, Isudaeyŏp (the first piece of one suite of kagok) takes 12 minutes to sing and its tempo is extremely slow (one beat per 3 seconds). Such pieces may well have found it difficult to compete against faster paced popular songs.

The repertoire of kisaeng performers on the radio varied: twenty-seven genres from vocal music to instrumental music were aired. The classical kagok was performed only four times over 320 broadcasts. This fact suggests that the popularity of kagok in the 1920s may have been very low. On the other hand, vocal folk music such as sŏdo chapka, miscellaneous songs of the northwest provinces (30.9%), and namdo chapka, miscellaneous songs of the southern provinces (18.75%), were more popular among the public. It is clear that the radio’s use of traditional performers stimulated a revival of traditional music genres. However, there were objections to radio’s use of kisaeng entertainers from the kisaeng schools in P’yŏngyang as well as disagreements over which folk songs were “representative” of certain regions.44

Another important point to note is that kisaeng rarely performed instrumental music. Song Bangsong points out that learning instrumental music required more time than vocal music. Therefore, the short period of kisaeng training during the period of Japanese colonization made the vocal folk genres, excluding kagok, more popular, leaving the instrumental and classical genres in a weaker position.

Korean radio had a catalytic effect on the creation and expansion of the important popular cultural medium of song. This music was “consumed” in records and radio broadcasts, but it also became the staple of restaurant, wine shop, and home singing—a continuation of earlier and more “participatory” forms of popular culture. On the other hand, Korean intellectuals worried that the “vulgar” pop idiom was replacing an appreciation for traditional music.45 However, some kisaeng gained great popularity with their popular song (yuhaengga): amongst others, Wang Subok (1917-2003), Sŏnu Ilso˘n (1918-1990), and Sin Ilso˘n (1907-1990) achieved great popularity with audiences.46

45. Ibid., 65-67.
3. Performing Revue Dance and Western Music

The above postcard [Figure 5] shows eleven kisaeng performing a revue dance on stage in the 1930s. The dance became popular in the 1910s and the 1920s in Japan and other countries, so it was introduced to Korea by the Japanese Chŏnsŏng Circus Club in Korea in 1913. After that it was performed by kwŏnbŏn kisaeng as a popular theatrical entertainment in concerts or expos. Such performances seemed to be one of the most common visual spectacles for men in the 1920s. In addition, the frank display of the female body was strong enough to attract male audiences. Their dancing costumes and the new and very expressive performing styles for women would be striking for the Koreans in that they fail to cover their shoulders or legs compared with their traditional Korean dancing costume. The ordinary and dancing costume in those days, hanbok, also covered almost the entire women’s body. The following postcard shows kisaeng’s other pioneering work. These were women introducing Western performance with other male performers.

The above postcard [Figure 6] shows males and females combining to perform Western chamber music, with three kisaeng accompanying one female singer on piano, violin and accordion. In the 1910s, individual kisaeng were

47. See the Seoul Museum of History’s exhibition catalogue, Kûndae taejung yesül—Sori wa yŏngsang [Popular art of the modern age: sounds and images] (Seoul: Seoul yŏksa pangmulgwan, 2003), 68.
even trained in Western music. In 1916, the kisaeng Kim Myongok from the Tadong kisaeng school left for Japan to lean the piano, as announced in the Maeil Daily on October 27.

4. The Kisaeng Journal Changhan

In 1927, the pent-up energy, passion and deep sorrow found an outlet in a unique journal, Changhan 長恨 (literally “eternal bitterness” but also a literary Chinese term meaning “everlasting regret”), written and published by kisaeng themselves, but not discovered until 2005. Unfortunately only two volumes of the journal have yet been found: the first volume of about 120 pages was published on the 10th of January, 1927, and the second one on the 12th of February in 1927. Since the journals were unearthed in 2005, Korean scholars have started to write about kisaeng’s lives based on Changhan and old newspaper articles. The price of each journal was 40 chŏn including postage. The address of the publisher is the Kugilgwan, one of the most famous kisaeng party houses in Seoul.

The theme of the first journal is “Friends! Be vigilant against social prejudice.” The authors were not passive and reticent like upper class women, but they seemed independent and volatile, unlikely to back down in a dispute or give up when confronted by barriers. The main writings refer to the social
discrimination towards them and their strong desire to be treated equally as human beings who had been oppressed and whose rights had been denied by both Koreans and Japanese. The aim of the journal is clearly conveyed in the essay written by the kisaeng Pak Nokchu in the inaugural volume in 1927:

We kisaeng need to unify systematically in order to survive in this society, which is the main reason why we eventually published Changhan. Now we can raise our voices 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 slaves. However, we should not endure this any more. […] We are human beings and we also have tears, blood, and senses […]. How meaningful the launch of this journal, Changhan, is! It would lead us to live as human beings. I am really proud of the launch of this journal and I hope we can put infinite effort into it.49

Through Changhan, kisaeng attempted to disseminate their views and to express their grievances. The journal contains thirty-five prose articles, other literary works (a film review and a book review written by kisaeng), and three essays by foreign clients (a Japanese, a Chinese and a Westerner). The three articles written by foreign clients share common opinions. They seemed enamoured of the kisaeng, but recommended that they revert to their traditional elegant kisaeng roots. The articles written by kisaeng themselves cover a wide range of subjects: their professional experience as miserable courtesans; their ambiguous identity; the social prejudice directed towards them, and issues related to their self-respect. The short stories included here are also very moving, reflecting the substantial literary abilities of many kisaeng. If the fact that the kisaeng were the best-educated, best-dressed and most elite female group in the country is considered, then their production of a journal is not so surprising.

As members of a modernizing society, kisaeng also participated in social, economic, and political activism. Kisaeng in Hyeju participated in the 1907 movement to repay the national debt, and expressed their patriotism and social activism by supporting the independence activists.50 In addition, thirty-three kisaeng aged 15 to 23 in Suwôn participated in the Korean Independence

Movement in 1919 and the kisaeng Kim Hyanghwa (1897-?) endured six months of imprisonment after the movement. Their patriotic involvement was discussed in a symposium on the “Kisaeng in Suwon and the Korean Independence Movement” in 2008 and was turned into a TV documentary in 2009. In 2009, the Korean government re-evaluated her activism by giving her an honorable, posthumous award as a patriot who fought for national independence.

Conclusion

They [living courtesans and their heirs] are the historical present of an always elusive past. Far from allowing us to deny the chasm of historical distance, they draw attention to it even as they also suggest the possibility of meaningful relationships across time and space. Moreover, they insist, through their vitality and their very survival, on why we should listen to them as we attend to echoes of their courtesan sisters—because all of them are real people who produced and inspired remarkable art, and for whom art was a way out of hardship, subjugation, and even cruelty.

The last generation of kisaeng faced dramatic political and social changes and the deterioration of traditional values in colonial Korea (1910-1945). Alongside the continued existence of kisaeng traditional performances during the colonial period, something that occurred despite the promotion of Japanese culture and the gradual introduction of Western culture, their broader repertoire and social roles were strongly related to the political situation. The social and cultural roles played by the last generation of kisaeng broadened significantly, and acted as a pivot between the old and the modern in Korean performing arts. However, since independence from Japan in 1945, this legacy has mostly been ignored, and they have been left carrying a social stigma that makes it necessary for them to hide their identities in order to survive in contemporary Korea.

In this article, I have therefore examined how the last generation of kisaeng

51. Yi Tonggūn, Researcher of Suwon Museum, presented his paper titled “Suwon kisaeng ūi chŏn’gye yangsang kwa 3.1 undong” during the “Symposium of the Suwon Kisaeng and the Korean Indepence Movement” by the Association of the Kyŏnggi Regional History on 7 November 2008 and produced his collaborative work, the television documentary series, Suwon kisaeng manse undong [Suwon Kisaeng’s Korean Independence movement] with Kyŏnggi City Council in March 2009.

negotiated their new circumstances in order to survive under Japanese colonial power. They responded by training themselves in multiple arts at kisaeng schools (kwŏn'bŏn), working as courtesans, and performing as professional artists. I have also explored how kisaeng put their efforts into performing Korean traditional genres while assimilating into both Japanese and Western culture to meet their customer’s expectations. They had to sing or perform traditional Korean music, Japanese songs, jazz or Korean popular songs (yuhaengga) on radio programs and in recordings. Some kisaeng gained great popularity with their singing, such as Yihwajungsŏn (1898-1943), Chu Sanwoŏl (1893-1982), Pak Nokchu (1906-1979), and Wang Subok (1917-2003).

In addition, kisaeng endeavored to express their various identities as human beings through their journal, Changhan. This journal revealed not only their role as innovative, cultural pioneers in terms of their understanding of both old and modern culture, but also the depth of their suffering and sorrow as sex workers serving their Japanese colonial masters under harsh conditions of social discrimination. Some of the kisaeng also expressed their patriotism and social activism by participating in the Independence movement in 1919 in order to be accepted as part of modern Korea. However, their efforts were not intentionally to canonize the kisaeng legacy as a chapter in the history of Korean traditional performing arts, but rather to survive under these turbulent circumstances. Unfortunately, their patriotic involvement started to be appreciated only after their death.

It is meaningful that innovative works by kisaeng such as the journal Changhan, kisaeng post cards depicting their cultural involvement, Suwon kisaeng’s patriotic involvement, and a kisaeng popular star, Wang Subok, have been discovered and reported since 2005. This fact tells us that the images of kisaeng have been changing from negative ones into those of positive “modern girls” or “cultural leaders” as issues of gender identity and colonialism become more prominent in contemporary Korea.

As observed above, the topic of ‘kisaeng’ contains old and new cultural dialogue, colonialism, gender identities, and the modern process of Korean society coming together. The kisaeng’s social significance and cultural resonance for Korean society during the colonial period needs to be viewed through an interdisciplinary focus. Therefore, it is urgent that kisaeng’s experiences be thoroughly re-evaluated through the prism of their acculturation and positive social involvement as Korean professional performing artists and socio-cultural leaders.