

When Camera Encountered 'Chosŏn Beauties'

Kisaeng Photographs, Tourism, and Postcards from the 1880s to Colonial-Period Korea

Yizhou Wang

Hong Kong Baptist University, China

Abstract This chapter contributes to an under-researched topic: *kisaeng* 妓生 (Korean female entertainers or courtesans) in early photographs of Korea associated with tourism. It examines the photographic representation of *kisaeng* from the perspectives of American travelers and Japanese colonial agents respectively. The second section focuses on the period between the 1880s and 1910 when Korea began to open up to the world. It explores the earliest photographic records of *kisaeng* through the lens of American travelers, set parallel to descriptions from their travel writings. The third section, set during the colonial period (1910-45), identifies a repertoire of visual practices associated with nation-building politics that celebrated *kisaeng* as idealized and civilized 'Chosŏn Beauties', or icons of traditional Korean culture, through the medium of photographic postcards initiated by the Japanese colonizers. It argues that such practices, relying on resources drawn from Korean entertainment culture, attempted to reshape Korea's national identity and create an imagery of a 'feminized' Korea under Japanese colonial rule.

Keywords *Kisaeng*. Korean photography. Tourism. Postcard. Nation building.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Early *Kisaeng* Photographs by American Travelers (1880s-1910). – 2.1 Percival Lowell's 'Fragrant Iris' in Winter Landscapes (1884). – 2.2 The "Impassive" Charm: Imperial *Kisaeng* in Burton Holmes' Lens (1901) and *Travelogues* (1908). – 2.3 *Kisaeng* and Ancient Greek *Hetairai* Alike: Homer Hulbert's *The Passing of Korea* (1906). – 2.4 *Kisaeng* at Photo Studios: Frank Carpenter's Collection. – 3 Embodying and Feminizing Korea: *Kisaeng* Postcards and Japanese Tourism in Colonial Period (1910-45). – 3.1 Touring the New Land, *Kisaeng* as the Guide and Tourist Attraction. – 3.2 *Kisaeng* as the 'Chosŏn Beauty', an Icon of Traditional Korean Culture. – 3.3 Westernizing the Bodies of *Kisaeng*. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Starting in the 1880s, late Chosŏn period Korea began to import ‘Western’ technology and culture through China and Japan. In the course of this process, photographic technology and equipment were introduced to Korea, followed by the advent of photography studios on the Korean peninsula. Meanwhile, the interplay of global tourism and colonialism fostered the making and circulation of images representing ‘exotic’ and ‘local’ cultures and knowledge. This chapter focuses on photographs of *kisaeng* 妓生 (Korean female entertainers or courtesans) that were produced in contexts related to the rise of international tourism in Korea. This research initiates an examination of photographs by individual ‘Western’ travelers, and builds a parallel between ‘Western’ perspectives and the Japanese perspective by analysing the ideas imposed on commercialized *kisaeng* photographs mass-produced on picture postcards by Japanese publishers.¹ It illuminates the production, practices of staging and performativity, circulation, and consumption of these *kisaeng* images in the transcultural contexts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Korea. It was a period of political upheaval, ranging from the end of the Chosŏn dynasty to the Korean Empire (1897-1910) to the Japanese colonial period (1910-45).² The intentions, function, visual effects, photographers, publishers, and audiences and reception are considered.

Compared to American travelers’ photographs, *kisaeng* on the purchased photographs were carefully staged to represent ‘Chosŏn beauties’ or ‘Korean beauties’ and became closely bound to the concepts of ‘Koreana’ and Japanese empire-building. Their images emphasize themes of Korean scenic views or famous tourist sites, customs, food, entertainment culture, education, etc. To construct an ideal of femininity for Korea, *kisaeng* were often beautifully dressed up and elegantly posed with exquisite ornaments and costumes. In some images, they performed their artistic skills such as painting and calligraphy or performed music. In many photographic portraits of *kisaeng*, Western-style furniture, movable wallpaper, carpets, and

Many thanks to Burglind Jungmann for bringing me to the realm of early photography of Korea and providing feedback. Special thanks to Ariane Perrin, Ding Chennan, Sugiyama Kazuya, and two anonymous reviewers for help and critiques.

1 The *kisaeng* photographs by Western travelers have rarely been studied. The colonial-period Japanese *kisaeng* photographs have attracted scholarly attention in the recent decades (e.g. Yi 2005; Pak 2018). Pak contributed a Master’s thesis on *kisaeng* portrait photographs published in newspaper and illustrated books, in which she includes a detailed literature review of research on *kisaeng* images (4-11).

2 The Japanese materials published during the Japanese colonial period in Korea are transcribed in Japanese.

costumes were mingled with traditional Korean elements, suggesting inspiration from Western sources through the 'Japanese lens'.

The production of picture postcards originated in Europe in the 1860s-70s. By 1900, postcards had become widespread due to lower costs for the reproduction process. The tourist photographic postcard soon became a popular category of postcard (Freund 1980, 99-100). Postcards likely reached Korea around 1900, and their production blossomed during the colonial period due to their promotion by Japanese institutions and companies. In early twentieth century Korea and Japan, the postcard was undoubtedly still a novel medium that provided a new way to connect with the increasingly open world.

Photographs of *kisaeng* were reproduced in large quantities by Japanese publishers on postcards. They served the increasing Japanese demand to tour and know the colonized Korea, and propaganda purposes of reshaping the identities and concepts of 'Koreana' and the expanded Japanese empire through visual media. Hyung Il Pai's (2010; 2013) discussion of Japanese tourism in colonial Korea touches on picture postcards. I suggest that *kisaeng* in photographs on early twentieth-century commercial postcards were not represented as suffering victims nor as mere sexual objects for male desire. They were strategically remodelled as stunning, elaborately or fashionably dressed, well-educated, civilized, and talented women under the new regime of colonial rule.

2 **Early *Kisaeng* Photographs by American Travelers (1880s-1910)**

After Korea, the 'Hermit Kingdom', was forced by the Japanese Empire to open diplomatic and commercial relations with Meiji Japan and signed the Treaty of Kanghwa in 1876, King Kojong (1864-1907) made the decision to establish diplomatic relations with the United States and signed a treaty with the Americans in 1882.³ Since that point, American travelers made trips to Korea with their cameras, during which they explored the unknown country and attempted to record its 'authentic' life and culture. Four of them - Percival Lowell, Burton Holmes, Homer Hulbert, and Frank Carpenter - arrived in Korea between the 1880s and 1910 for different reasons - diplomacy, travel, and evangelism. They all shared an interest in representing *kisaeng* through the photographic lens, either by making *kisaeng* photographs or collecting them.

3 The Treaty of Kanghwa marked the turning point when Korea ended its isolation from the world.

2.1 Percival Lowell’s ‘Fragrant Iris’ in Winter Landscapes (1884)

Percival Lowell (1855-1916), best known for his later career as the astronomer who mapped the ‘canals’ on Mars and discovered the planetoid Pluto, was significant in modern Korean history as a successful U.S.-Korea diplomat and a pioneer of Korean photography.⁴ As a photographer, Lowell is well known for his ground-breaking photographic portraits of King Kojong and the royal family, and for his photographs of the Korean palace. He was likely the first to take photographs of *kisaeng*, which he later included in his travel diary, *Chosŏn, the Land of the Morning Calm: A Sketch of Korea*, which contains award-winning photo illustrations that introduced Korea to the ‘Western’ world.⁵

Lowell was prolific during his three-month stay in Seoul, the capital of Korea, between December 1883 and March 1884.⁶ Many of his photographs produced during this trip have been preserved in Lowell’s photographic archive at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.⁷ Among the sixty-one photographs in the archive, two photographs taken in 1884 feature a lone *kisaeng* against the backdrop of winter landscapes [figs 1-2]. These two photographs stand out from his oeuvre as he preferred landscapes, architecture, and crowds in most of his photography. The photograph with the forest view was used as the frontispiece for *Chosŏn, the Land of the Morning Calm*, suggesting his fondness for the *kisaeng* [fig. 2]. Both photographs depict the same *kisaeng*, nicknamed ‘Fragrant Iris’, riding a horse and accompanied by an old groom. They were likely photographed in winter as she wears heavy, thick clothes, and snow can be seen on the horizon and along the forest footpath. Unlike the other *kisaeng* photographs discussed in this article, Lowell places much weight on the delineation of the rural landscape, featuring either deserted land, trees, snow, and remote hills, or dense woods with a footpath. The two photographs were likely taken on the same day in late winter or early spring in 1884 during his trip to Seoul.

According to *Chosŏn, the Land of the Morning Calm*, Lowell met ‘Fragrant Iris’ at several banquets, and he was particularly fond of her. When talking about Korean women throughout his book, Low-

⁴ Pai (2016) has done research on the archive of Percival Lowell’s photographs.

⁵ Lowell’s *Chosŏn, the Land of the Morning Calm: A Sketch of Korea* (1888) provides detailed information of his travels in Korea. Earlier editions were printed in 1885 and 1886.

⁶ The records of Lowell’s trip to Seoul can be found in his *Chosŏn, the Land of the Morning Calm*.

⁷ For Percival Lowell’s photo archive at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, see <https://collections.mfa.org/>.



Figure 1 Percival Lowell, *The Kisaeng 'Fragrant Iris' in a Winter Landscape*. 1884. Albumen print, 28 × 36 cm. Photograph. © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 2 Percival Lowell, *The Kisaeng 'Fragrant Iris' in a Wood*. 1884. Photograph, as the frontispiece of *Chosŏn, the Land of the Morning Calm: A Sketch of Korea* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1888)

ell considered *kisaeng* (he mostly used the Japanese term *geisha*) a social class different from other Korean women who were 'invisible' on several different levels. This observation of the *kisaeng* unique status and visibility in Korean society, and Lowell's personal interest in the *kisaeng* 'Fragrant Iris', might have motivated him to capture her twice.

2.2 The “Impassive” Charm: Imperial *Kisaeng* in Burton Holmes’ Lens (1901) and *Travelogues* (1908)

Burton Holmes (1870-1958), born in Chicago, was a celebrated American traveler, photographer, lecturer, and film producer. His camera preserved rare portrayals of government *kisaeng* in the Korean imperial palace, which have not been studied yet. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, travel lectures illustrated with photography were extremely popular in the United States. Magic lantern slides were widely used to accompany illustrated lectures where speakers described foreign lands to public audiences (Peterson 2013, 23). Emerging from this popular medium, film technology led to the development of commercial travelogue films as another popular entertainment form (24). Holmes was a pioneer among his American contemporaries in the fields of both photographic travel lectures and travelogue films. When delivering his lecture series that toured the United States between the 1890s and the 1950s, he incorporated photographs and film clips that he made during his travels worldwide (24).

Holmes’ travels included one trip to Seoul in 1901, during which he not only documented Korea through the medium of photography but also made the earliest film that recorded people’s lives in Seoul during the short-lived period of the Korean Empire (1897-1910).⁸ Through Holmes’ lens, *kisaeng* played a notable role in both media. In addition, Holmes (1910; 1908) included descriptions of *kisaeng* in the tenth volume of his travelogue series, the *Burton Holmes Travelogues* (1901 first edition titled *The Burton Holmes Lectures*).⁹

Like Lowell, Holmes had a chance to meet the emperor Kojong at the imperial palace in Seoul. It is particularly remarkable that Holmes received an invitation to see and take pictures of government *kisaeng* in the royal palace (107-10). Noted in his *Travelogues*, Holmes observed a large troupe of more than eighty *kisaeng* serving the court, who constantly waited for a summons to dance in front of the emperor (107-8). Despite the lack of supplementary information about the content of Holmes’ monochrome silent film footage of Ko-

⁸ For the full version of Burton Holmes’ film footage about Korea (length: 5’12”), see <https://www.travelfilmarchive.com/item.php?id=13393&clip=n&num=10&startrow=0&keywords=korea>. The Burton Holmes Collection at UCLA contains more than 16,000 hand-painted glass lantern slides produced between 1887 and 1937 for Holmes’ illustrated travel lectures. For information on the Burton Holmes Digital Archive, see <https://humtech.ucla.edu/project/burton-holmes-digital-archive>.

⁹ Holmes reorganized the contents of his travel lectures and transferred them into the ten published volumes of the *Burton Holmes Travelogues*. In the tenth volume of his *Travelogues* about Korea, Holmes used different terms, including ‘dancing girls’, ‘ge-sang’, ‘coryphée’, and ‘corps-de-ballet’ to refer to *kisaeng* or a *kisaeng* troupe.



Figure 3ab
Burton Holmes, *Official Kisaeng at the Palace*. 1901. Seoul, Korea. Two shots from the 35 mm film footage about Korea. The Travel Film Archive

rea, I postulate that the one-minute clip (from 3'30" to 4'36"), which features dancing girls, was a rare encounter made fortuitously when the *kisaeng* were practising in the palace. At the beginning of the clip, Holmes shows the faces of several young *kisaeng* [fig. 3a], which parallels the focus on *kisaeng*'s faces in his textual descriptions. He writes that they "are sometimes pretty", "with faces powdered and made up" (108). The rest of the clip showed the *kisaeng* dancing with musical accompaniment from the male musicians sitting in the back [fig. 3b]. The ease of the facial expressions and movements of the *kisaeng* reveals that when Holmes was holding his camera and shooting the scene, they were merely practising or warming up rather than performing on a formal occasion. Meanwhile, corresponding to Holmes's observation in the *Travelogues* that *kisaeng* were "always immaculately dressed" (108), most of the *kisaeng* in the footage were dressed in white or light-coloured *hanbok* with their hair neatly bound up in a similar style.

In addition to the film clip, Holmes' photographs of *kisaeng* on hand-painted glass lantern slides offer more visual details about *kisaeng*'s bodies, facial expressions, dresses, and accessories, and their living and working spaces. Figure 4 features one *kisaeng* in



Figure 4
Burton Holmes, *A Kisaeng Seated with a Folding Fan*. 1901. Hand-painted 3.5 × 4 inches glass lantern slide. © Burton Holmes Digital Archive, UCLA

a white top and grey skirt, seated on a floral-patterned carpet and resting her right hand, which holds a green folded fan with tassels, on her knee. She calmly looks directly into the camera, which suggests her awareness of Holmes and the fact that she was being captured by the camera [fig. 4]. She was surrounded by other figures. To her right, another seated figure pinching a similar green folded fan with her hands is partially visible. They were probably both at dancing practice. This photograph is a rare close-up documentary image of the interior space for *kisaeng*'s regular practice, possibly at court.

More details of *kisaeng*'s space are portrayed in figure 5 [fig. 5]. This photograph depicts a group of six young *kisaeng* sitting in a room decorated with screen panels showing bird-and-flower paintings, figure paintings, and calligraphy in the Chinese style. The interior setting suggests the *kisaeng*'s artistic and literary cultivation and the refinement of their daily lives. Five of them stare into the camera, while none of the six girls smile or express any excitement on their placid faces. Holmes' critical commentary on the palace *kisaeng* in the *Travelogues* coincided with such visual representations in his photographs. He was disappointed by the "calm-faced" or "quite expressionless" *kisaeng*, or "impassive coryphées", who danced to the "dull music", "monotonous, stiff, and automatic in their posturing", although he noted the Korean emperor's unceasing interest in watching their performance (Holmes 1908, 108-9, 112). In contrast to the calmness of the *kisaeng* represented in the glass lantern slides, Holmes' film footage contains more vivid expressions and motions. Thus, the expressionlessness of *kisaeng* captured in the still photographs might have, to a large extent, reflect-



Figure 5
Burton Holmes, *Kisaeng Seated in a Room with Bird-and-Flower Paintings and Calligraphy*, 1901. Hand-painted 3.5 × 4 inches glass lantern slide.
© Burton Holmes Digital Archive, UCLA

ed Holmes' personal perceptions and feelings about *kisaeng*. From the perspective of using visual materials as historical resources, it is worth noting that Holmes provided valuable first-hand visual resources that documented the lives and performances of *kisaeng* at the court in 1901 Seoul before the government *kisaeng* (*kwan'gi* 官妓) system was officially banned in 1908.¹⁰ These works represent a unique viewpoint visualizing *kisaeng* in everyday life with more randomness and spontaneity. They are distinct from the numerous staged or highly performative photographs of *kisaeng* (often smiling) produced in photography studios or outdoor settings that were printed as postcards and other illustrated products by Japanese publishers.

2.3 *Kisaeng* and Ancient Greek *Hetairai* Alike: Homer Hulbert's *The Passing of Korea* (1906)

Homer B. Hulbert (1863-1949) was an American missionary, journalist, historian, and educator who resided in Korea from 1886 until he was forced to leave by the Japanese resident-general in 1907. He lived through the Japanese establishment of a protectorate over Korea in 1905 and the Protectorate period (1905-10). He was also known for his political activities, advocating for Korean independence from Japanese imperial rule (Schmid 2010, 7-23). His 600-page book, *The*

¹⁰ Park (2015) has done a comprehensive historical study on government *kisaeng* in late Chosŏn Korea.

Passing of Korea (1906), presents his extensive experiences in Korea, and it has been argued as a critique of the Japanese colonial efforts in Korea. In addition to the book's main intention to criticize Japanese colonization, it also attempted to portray to the 'outside' world an 'authentic' view of a distinctive Korean culture and society as seen through Hulbert's eyes. I suggest that the illustration of the *kisaeng* helped to serve this purpose.

In the second chapter, "The People", from *The Passing of Korea*, Hulbert included a studio photograph of a government *kisaeng* dressed in a refined costume for performance and standing in a dancing pose with her back facing the viewer [fig. 6]. To accompany the photograph, Hulbert wrote a paragraph articulating his personal thoughts about Korean *kisaeng*. To elucidate these female social roles from a culture with which he was unfamiliar, Hulbert's approach was to search for more familiar equivalent examples to compare and contrast. He linked Korean *kisaeng* to ancient Greek courtesans or high-class prostitutes, called *hetairai* or *hetaira*, literally 'female companion' (Glazebrook 2020).¹¹ He asserts, though without further elaboration, that "the condition of Korea to-day [today] as regards the relations of the sexes is much like that of ancient Greece in the days of Pericles"¹² and "there is much similarity between the *kisang* [*kisaeng*] (dancing-girl) of Korea and the *hetairai* of Greece" (Hulbert 1906, 41). *Hetairai* were known to accompany men's drinking parties as a means to display status, and they were often depicted on ancient Greek vases and drinking cups.

In contrast, Hulbert maintains that "the *geisha* of Japan [is] the exact counterpart of the *kisang* [*kisaeng*] of Korea" (41). The reasons are not explained clearly, but he might have intended to suggest that there was much more freedom in sexual relations among Korean *kisaeng* than among Japanese *geishas*.¹³ At the beginning of the same paragraph, Hulbert stated:

As for morality in its narrow sense, the Koreans allow themselves great latitude. There is no word for home in their language, and much of the meaning which that word connotes is lost to them. (41)

Hulbert seemed to regard Korea as a country with fewer moral restrictions. Furthermore, he showed sympathy for *kisaeng* girls who

11 *Hetairai* is an ancient Greek term and euphemism, and it refers to those who were known to have possessed outstanding physical beauty, cultural accomplishments, and, importantly, greater freedom than married women bound within the familial structure.

12 Pericles (c. 495-429 BC) was a powerful Athenian statesman and general in ancient Greece around the fifth century BC who affixed a legendary status to *hetairai*.

13 Taylor Atkins (2010, 175-84) includes a comparison between Korean *kisaeng* and Japanese *geisha* with discussion on the Japanese perception of *kisaeng*.



Figure 6
Anonymous, *A Dancing-Girl Posturing*. Photograph.
From Homer Hulbert, *The Passing of Korea* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1906, 40)

belonged to the “degraded class”, although he positioned himself as a member of the “most enlightened countries”, a category to which Korea did not belong (41). In the context of the Japanese protectorate over Korea, by associating *kisaeng* with the tradition of *hetairai* rather than *geishas*, Hulbert implied that Korea was a country with a long history and refined culture comparable to the ancient civilization of Greece.

2.4 *Kisaeng* at Photo Studios: Frank Carpenter’s Collection

The photograph of a government *kisaeng* published in Hulbert’s *The Passing of Korea* was likely made in a photography studio before or during 1901. Studio photographs featuring *kisaeng* in similar exquisite attire and ornaments can be found in the collections of other American travelers, for example, Frank G. Carpenter (1855-1924). Carpenter, born in Mansfield, Ohio, was an American journalist, photographer, world traveler, travel writer, and geography writer and lecturer. He travelled to Korea twice (as well as China and Japan) in 1894 and 1908 as part of his first and second world journeys (Swan-

son, Friend 2010). After that, Carpenter (1926) published one travelogue about Korea and Japan. As a journalist, Carpenter's extensive world travels (including Europe, Asia, Africa, and North, Central, and South America) were mainly financed by writing assignments from newspapers, magazines, and presses.¹⁴ As such, his travelogues reached a wide readership. His publications on his travels, including syndicated publications, were in wider circulation than the accounts produced by other 'Western' travelers in Korea.

During his world travels, he took many photographs, but he also gathered photographs from the countries to which he travelled. In his collection of over 15,000 photographs, there is a group of photographs of Korea (currently 46 digitalized files) that cover a wide range of subjects including the Korean emperor/empress, street scenes, Korean men/women, Japanese generals in Korea, etc.¹⁵ In contrast to Lowell's enthusiasm for the Korean landscape, most of Carpenter's collected photographs depict the Korean people, among which *kisaeng* photographs can be found.

Two monochrome photographs from Carpenter's collection portray the same government *kisaeng* dressing up in a studio setting and posing [figs 7-8]. Both photographs show the shared interior settings, including the same carpet and pot of plants, probably from a photography studio in Korea. The background of the *kisaeng* in profile features a long curtain in the Western style and pattern [fig. 7], while the screen depicting a bookshelf holding thread-bound books and vessels was set behind the *kisaeng* showing her back in a standing pose [fig. 8]. Moreover, the decorative headdress, the carefully prepared hairstyles (though slightly different), the refined embroidery on the costume for performance with extended sleeves, the dangling ornaments, and the physical beauty of the young *kisaeng* are highlighted in black and white contrast with rich, layered tones.

A similar style of dress, posture (back to the audience), and interior setting is shared by Hulbert's *kisaeng* photograph [fig. 6]. All contribute to our knowledge about the early photographs of *kisaeng* that were produced or circulated between 1894 and 1908, just before and at the start of the Japanese occupation. They also shed light on the subject matters and settings of the early Korean photography studios. Between the 1880s and 1910, especially in the period after the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), entrepreneurs from Japan's ports and commercial centres, e.g. Yokohama, established and dominated the

¹⁴ For examples, the newspaper *Cleveland Leader* (for which Carpenter had a regular column entitled 'Carp's Washington'), the *Boston Globe*, the American Press Association, the *New York World*, *Cosmopolitan Magazine*.

¹⁵ They were donated to the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. For the online database of the Carpenter Collection, see <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/ffcarp>.



Figure 7 Anonymous, *A Seated Government Kisaeng*. c. 1894 or 1908. Black and white photographic print. © Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



Figure 8 Anonymous, *A Standing Government Kisaeng*. c. 1894 or 1908. Black and white photographic print. © Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

photo studio and printing business in Korea (Lee 2014). It was only in 1907 that the first photo studio, likely run by Koreans, Ch'önyöndang Photo Studio 天然當, opened, marking a turning point in the history of Korean photo studios and photography. A rapid increase in Korean-run photo studios soon followed (Lee 2014). *Kisaeng* were indeed ‘public women’ in Chōson society who could be visible in public. They were not required to cover their heads and bodies with long clothing as was the case for gentry women. As both Hulbert’s and Carpenter’s *kisaeng* photographs show, the staged settings in photo studios rather than on the street or in an open-air background indicate that they likely were photographed in Japanese-run photo studios and sold on the market, probably targeting both ‘Western’ and Japanese travelers in Korea. They were printed on a higher quality paper stock than the one used for the later Japanese postcards from the colonial period. It suggests a higher price point than the affordable mass-produced picture postcards. Perhaps because they were products of the Japanese-run photo studios, the government *kisaeng* photographs from the collections of Hulbert and Carpenter were later reproduced by Japanese publishers on picture postcards in the colonial era [figs 9-10].

3 **Embodying and Feminizing Korea: *Kisaeng* Postcards and Japanese Tourism in Colonial Period (1910-45)**

During Korea’s colonial period, numerous postcards of *kisaeng* photographs were produced by Japanese publishers. Based on the texts written on extant colonial-period postcards from the available databases, they mainly targeted Japanese residents in Korea and Japan for the communication of quotidian and trivial matters.¹⁶ The publishers of the *kisaeng* photo postcards in colonial-period Korea were many and varied, and they included their names in Japanese and sometimes English on the postcards. Among them, the government institutions such as Chosen [Chosŏn] Branch of Japanese Tourist Bureau (*Mantetsu Keijō kanrikyoku* 満鉄京城管理局) and The Railway Bureau of the Government-General of Chosen [Chosŏn] (*Chōsen Sōtokufu Tetsudōkyoku* 朝鮮総督府鉄道局) facilitated production. Besides the names of publishing houses, business enterprises and photo studios either from Japan or Korea, e.g. Tokyo Publishing Press (*Tōkyō In-satsu Kabushikigaisha* 東京印刷株式会社), Taisho, Hinde-Shoko Seoul Korea (*Keijō Hinode Shōkō* 京城日之出商行), Tanida, Wakizaka Shoten Heijio [Pyongyang] (*Heijō Wakizaka Shashimbu* 平壤脇坂写真部), K. Iwata, Seoul, Coreā [Korea] (Kankoku Keijō Iwata Shashinkan 韓國京城岩田写真館), and Shoseido 東京松声堂, appeared on the postcards as the publishers. This section analyses the design of the colonial-period *kisaeng* postcards, and it explores the imposed idea connecting *kisaeng* images with nation-building.

3.1 **Touring the New Land, *Kisaeng* as the Guide and Tourist Attraction**

After Japan became the mandated protector of Korea and then colonized it, Japanese authorities deployed visual tools to promote tourism in their new territory. *Kisaeng* were selected as the imagined ‘guide’

16 For a glimpse into the quantitative data, the collection database of the National Museum of Korea includes roughly eight hundred photo postcards with the *kisaeng* subject. See <http://www.emuseum.go.kr/>. The digital Korean Photo Postcard Database from the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, Japan contains about 858 postcards with *kisaeng*, many of which were used and carry a stamped postdate and hand-written texts. See <https://kutsukake.nichibun.ac.jp/CHO/index.html?page=1>. The database for the North American project *Photo Postcard Image Collection of Colonial Korea* holds a massive collection of 8,000 postcards of colonial Korea, which also contains *kisaeng* photo postcards. This database is only available on site at University of Chicago, Columbia University, Harvard University, University of Michigan, Duke University, University of Toronto, and UCLA. The author had a chance to examine the database at the University of Chicago Library. For more information, see <https://ceas.uchicago.edu/news/8000-images-colonial-korea-captured-postcard-collection>.



Figure 9 Anonymous, *A Government Kisaeng in Dancing Posturing*. Colonial period, Korea. Photography postcard. Collection of Yamamoto Shunsuke, Kyoto. © International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan



Figure 10 Anonymous, *A Government Kisaeng Dressed Up*. Colonial period, Korea. Photography postcard. Collection of Yamamoto Shunsuke, Kyoto. © International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan

and a tourist attraction for actual and potential Japanese tourists. When opening a Korean railway map published by the Railway Bureau of the Government-General of Chosen [Chosŏn], the image of a beautiful *kisaeng* might have appeared as an alluring welcome.¹⁷ Postcards, as an affordable means of attracting tourists, were manufactured to show Japanese the tourist attractions to be found in their Korean colony. It was a common practice to combine *kisaeng* photographs and scenic views of Korea. Titles such as *A Hundred Views of Keijo [Seoul] (Keijō Hyakkei 京城百景)* and *The Fifty Scenic Views of Heijo [Pyongyang] (Heijō Gojikkei 平壤五十景)* were printed on *kisaeng* picture postcards, establishing *kisaeng* in the role of introducing and representing Korea. A beloved tourist experience was a boat tour along the Taedong River (Taedonggang 大同江) in Pyongyang accompanied by *kisaeng* and their entertainment service. Some postcards present a mixture of *kisaeng*, boat tours, and Japanese tourists. A number of other postcards

¹⁷ Such maps can be found in the online database of the International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan.



Figure 11 Anonymous, *Kisaeng with the Taedong River and the Peony Platform*. Colonial period, Korea. Photography postcard. Collection of Yamamoto Shunsuke, Kyoto. © International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan

merge three elements – *kisaeng*, the Taedong River, and the nearby tourist site, Peony Platform – in a single postcard. In figure 11, eleven *kisaeng*, dressed up and arranged on a riverbank surrounded by rocks, have the Taedong River and the Peony Platform as their background [fig. 11]. The combination creates an unnatural and intentional performance. These postcards were sold to Japanese tourists as souvenirs to be collected or posted to Japan (Pai 2010). Through the circulation of these postcards, the imagery of *kisaeng* became bound up with important Korean natural and cultural sites, and thus the land and national identity of Korea.

Furthermore, *kisaeng* postcards served to manipulate the knowledge of famous sites and tourist attractions in colonial Korea. The *kisaeng* school was a conspicuous theme in photo postcards as evidenced by its frequent appearance. The *kisaeng* became one of the tourist attractions in Korea for Japanese tourists. It is striking that, as indicated by the Japanese and English texts on the postcards, the *kisaeng* school was regarded as a famous site of Pyongyang. For instance, on the postcard in figure 12 [fig. 12], the upper left corner reads, “View of the Famous Place, Heijō [Pyongyang]” (*Heijō Meishō* 平壤名勝). Its delineation emphasizes the entrance gate and *kisaeng* of the *kisaeng* school at Pyongyang. Moreover, the postcards combining *kisaeng* images with a symbolic site representing Japanese imperial power disclose the intention to implant Japanese identity onto a map of the Korean land.



Figure 12 Anonymous, *The Kisaeng School*. Colonial period, Korea. Photography postcard. Collection of Yamamoto Shunsuke, Kyoto. © International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan

For example, Chōsen Jingū (built in 1925), a Shinto shrine in Seoul for worshipping the Japanese emperor Meiji Tennō that was built in 1925 during the Japanese occupation, was represented in *kisaeng* postcards. Figure 13 combines a photograph of Chōsen Jingū and a photograph of a young *kisaeng* in *hanbok* surrounded by Korean drums [fig. 13]. Such a union of two originally unconnected subjects blurred the boundaries between place and the human figure, Japan and Korea, new and old. By establishing *kisaeng* as tour guides and a tourist attraction of colonial Korea, the Japanese transformed the subordinated female bodies of *kisaeng* into embodiments of their Korean colony.

3.2 *Kisaeng* as the ‘Chosŏn Beauty’, an Icon of Traditional Korean Culture

Colonial-period Japanese postcards almost always contained certain Japanese terms or *kanji* to explain the main themes of the pictures or scenes printed on them. The picture postcards with *kisaeng* photographs often bear the term for *kisaeng*, including “The *Kisaeng*” 妓生, “The Official *Kisaeng*” 官妓, “The Chosŏn Beauty” (*Chōsen Bijin* 朝鮮美人), and “The Korean Beauty” (*Kankoku Bijin* 韓國美人). The Korean government’s courtesan system was reorganized into a system of licensed prostitution after its official abolition

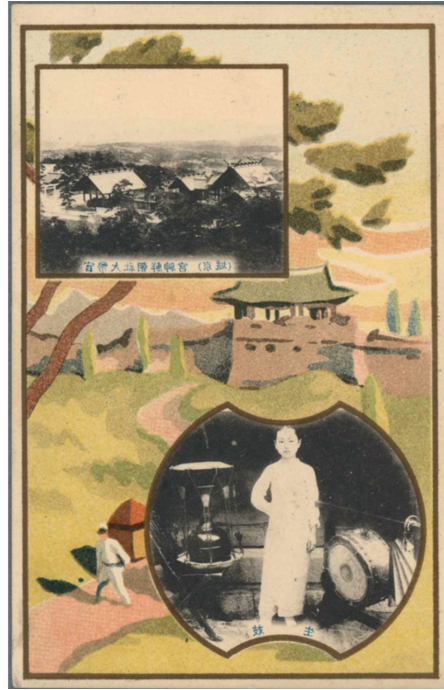


Figure 13
Anonymous, *Chōsen Jingū and a Kisaeng with Drums*. Colonial period, Korea. Photography postcard. Collection of Yamamoto Shunsuke, Kyoto. © International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan

in 1908. Although *kisaeng* belonged to the category of prostitutes, they were represented and considered to be decent and beautiful women who were not obscenely depicted on Japanese postcards. They were portrayed either individually or in a group. Scenes of their interactions with male clients were seldom shown (although there are exceptions). I argue that *kisaeng*, through their visual representation on Japanese picture postcards, were elevated into icons of traditional Korean culture during the colonial period.

Kisaeng on Japanese picture postcards were often staged to show their mastery of refined elite skills in calligraphy, poetry, ink painting, music, etc. The legacy of Korean elite culture from the Chosŏn dynasty was a dominant component in *kisaeng* photographs on Japanese postcards, and often labelled and categorized as “Customs of Chosen [Chosŏn]” (*Chōsen Fūzoku* 朝鮮風俗). Figure 14 focuses on a group of young *kisaeng* learning classical ink painting of the conventional ‘gentleman’ subject of plants, e.g. orchids and bamboo, at the *kisaeng* school in Pyongyang, under the instruction of a man, perhaps Japanese [fig. 14]. Likewise, their expertise in playing musical instruments was another merit in representations of *kisaeng* as ‘Chosŏn beauties’.

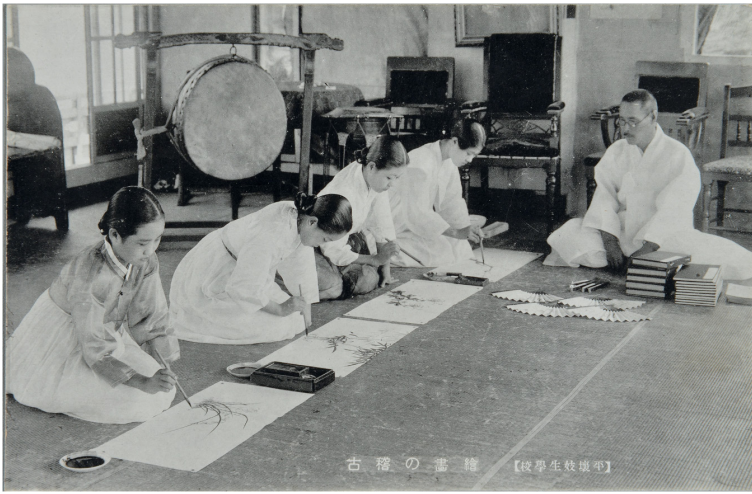


Figure 14 Anonymous, *The Training of Painting at Kisaeng School, Pyongyang*. Colonial period, Korea. Photography postcard. Busan City Museum © National Museum of Korea

Besides their expertise in Chosŏn elite culture signified by calligraphy, painting, and traditional musical instruments, Korean cuisine as representative of Korean culture and tradition was also combined with the imagery of *kisaeng* on postcards with titles such as *The Famous Cuisine of Chosen [Chosŏn]* (*Chōsen Meibutsu Ryōri* 朝鮮名物料理). This category of *kisaeng* postcards adds layers of olfactory and gustatory sensation and renders these *kisaeng* images more participatory and closer to daily life. Tasting local and ‘authentic’ food, after all, is an essential part of modern tourism. The photo postcard in figure 15 shows three *kisaeng* in *hanbok* sitting around a table covered with a tablecloth set with a potted plant [fig. 15]. They are all smiling and the one on the left is touching the leaves of the plant, probably smell it. The English text on the postcard specifies that the *kisaeng* were “famous singers” and they were “smelling the fragrance of flowers” at “a well-known Korean restaurant” in Seoul. The accompanying Japanese text gives the name of the Korean restaurant as “Garden of the *Dao* of Food, Seoul, Chosen [Chosŏn]” (*Chōsen Keijō Shokudōen* 朝鮮京城食道園). Meanwhile, a stamp of the restaurant appears on the surface of the *kisaeng* photograph. Another postcard promoting the same restaurant features a group of *kisaeng* performing a sword dance at the restaurant dressed in costumes and hats. The sword dance was a traditional performance during the Chosŏn dynasty, especially by government *kisaeng*, and can be found in earlier Chosŏn genre paintings.



Figure 15
Anonymous, *Kisaeng*
at a Korean Restaurant. Colonial
period, Korea. Photography
postcard. Collection
of Yamamoto Shunsuke, Kyoto.
© International Research
Centre for Japanese Studies,
Kyoto, Japan

3.3 Westernizing the Bodies of *Kisaeng*

The colonial period under Japanese rule was a period of modernization, although Koreans’ agency was limited and ambiguous under colonial rule. Picture postcards became a visual platform for representing and facilitating the process of colonial modernization and made it accessible to wide audiences in Korea, Japan, and beyond. ‘Western’ identity was in demand so that Japan could stand out from other Asian countries as a ‘modernized’ and superior empire. This concern was also passed on to its colonies, including Korea, and it was reflected in the colonial-period visual culture. The feminine and obedient bodies of *kisaeng*, mingling the Korean cultural traditions and the ‘Western’ dress, fashion, art deco, etc., were chosen to visually perform both coloniality and modernity on the mass-produced picture postcards for public purchase and extended transregional circulation along with the expansion of Japanese tourism in colonial Korea.



Figure 16 Anonymous, *A Kisaeng Resting on a Bed*. Colonial period, Korea. Photography postcard. Busan City Museum. © National Museum of Korea

Within the framed pictorial space on portable postcards, *kisaeng* were not only established as icons of traditional Korean culture but also staged to embrace and assimilate 'Western' elements through the objects surrounding and on their bodies.

At a basic level, 'Western' elements appeared in the background and settings that framed the *kisaeng* figures. The photo postcard in figure 16 depicts a *kisaeng* resting on a bed in her inner chamber. The room is decorated with a mirror, a Western-style clock, and a framed oil painting hanging on the wall [fig. 16]. To be photographed by the imported camera was indeed a 'modern' gesture. Most remarkably, the photographer, likely a Japanese man in a Western-style suit, and his large camera mounted on the tripod are visible in the mirror. The image captures a rare moment representing the *kisaeng*, the photographer, and the camera together in one photograph.

The next step was to 'Westernize' the body by altering costume and hairstyle. Clothing has a performative quality and social power to convey symbolic meanings and construct identities associated with gender, class/social status, ethnicity/nationality, modernity, etc. Jina E. Kim (2019, 150) indicates that 'Western' clothes became popular in Korea during the 1930s and 1940s, especially in the public sphere. Western-style clothing and accessories were incorporated into the body of *kisaeng* as part of their representations on postcards. *Kisaeng* in the early-colonial-era photographs mostly wore the traditional Korean *hanbok*. Yet, there was an increasing interest in representing *kisaeng* in Western-style costumes, or in a mixture of



Figure 17
Anonymous, *A Kisaeng in Western-Style Suit Holding an Umbrella*. Colonial period, Korea. Stamped date (on its backside): 10 May 1932. Photography postcard, 10.8 × 8.2 cm. Collection of Yamamoto Shunsuke, Kyoto. © International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan

Western-style attire and Korean *hanbok*. *Kisaeng* on postcards with stamped dates in the 1900s already incorporated certain ‘Western’ elements, e.g. Western-style hats, in their costumes. It implies that *kisaeng* might have led the embrace of Western-style clothing and hairstyles, at least on the mass-produced postcards. On a picture postcard with the stamped date May 10, 1932 [fig. 17], the *kisaeng* eschewed Korean dress for Western-style clothes, hairstyle, and accessories from top to bottom: a high-crowned and wide-brimmed hat, curled hair, one-piece dress decorated with a tie, and a laced umbrella.¹⁸ It is also worth noting that in the numerous widely-circulated *kisaeng* photographs, Japanese producers did not seek to replace traditional Korean attire with the Japanese *kimono* (though some *kisaeng* wore the *kimono*) but represent traditional Korean dress or the new Western style.

18 Although there is no text on the postcard indicating that she is a *kisaeng*, her face is identical to the renowned *kisaeng* Jang Yŏn-hong 장연홍 張蓮紅 (1911-?) who was often featured and acknowledged on Japanese *kisaeng* postcards.

4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined *kisaeng* photographs associated with both 'Western' and Japanese tourism between the 1880s and 1945. In a first period from the 1880s to 1910, when 'Western' travelers started to arrive in the newly open Korea with their cameras, four American travelers, for diplomatic, touristic, or evangelistic purposes, photographed *kisaeng* or collected *kisaeng* photographs available on the market, which they circulated to the outside world. As the 'invisibility' of Korean women was often noted in travelogues about Korea written by 'Western' travelers in this period, these photographs contributed to the early knowledge and visual imagery of *kisaeng* and Korean women as counterparts to the 'non-beings' and 'non-status' arguments found in their texts.

Second, during the Japanese colonial period (1910-45), a large quantity of postcards featuring photographs of *kisaeng* or the combination of *kisaeng* and scenic views were continuously produced by Japanese institutions and publishers to promote Japanese tourism in their new colony. At the same time, *kisaeng*, instead of being represented as debased low-class women, were carefully staged as 'Chosŏn Beauties' who embodied both the refined elite culture and heritage of Chosŏn Korea and the negotiated modernization in fashion, education, and lifestyle under the colonial domination. It was a means of visual propaganda to create colonial intimacy and to feminize and romanticize Korea. The analysis of the *kisaeng* picture postcards reveals the complexity of Japanese colonial visual politics in Korea. It illuminates how the colonized Other could have been exotized and Orientalized on the bodily and psychological levels within the Orient, while it also uncovers the ambivalent agency of the colonized and their visual representation in the case of those Korean women who entertained known as *kisaeng*.

The term in this essay's title, 'Chosŏn Beauties', is used to denote *kisaeng* as the subjects in photographs from the 1880s to the end of the colonial period. Through the circulation of *kisaeng* photographs and postcards, the imagery of *kisaeng* became the beautiful and decent public embodiment of traditional Korean culture and customs drawn from the refined elite culture of the Chosŏn past. The photographs of *kisaeng* expressed nostalgic inquiry while, especially in the colonial period, they also became representations of modernity exemplified by Western-style interiors, costumes, hairstyles, etc. Two aspects remain for further exploration: the first is to compare *kisaeng* images with Meiji-period Japanese souvenir photographs representing *geishas*, while the other is to analyse the text-image relationship through a close reading of the hand-written Japanese texts on *kisaeng* picture postcards.

Bibliography

- Carpenter, F.G. (1926). *Carpenter's World Travels: Japan and Korea*. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company.
- Freund, G. (1980). *Photography and Society*. Transl. by David R. Godine. London: Gordon Fraser Gallery.
- Glazebrook, A. (2020). "Hetairai". *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.3080>.
- Holmes, B. [1901] (1908). *Burton Holmes Travelogues: With Illustrations from Photographs by the Author*. Vol. 10, *Seoul, Capital of Korea*. New York: The McClure Company.
- Hulbert, H.B. (1906). *The Passing of Korea*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company.
- Kim, J.E. (2019). *Urban Modernities in Colonial Korea and Taiwan*. Leiden: Brill.
- Lee, Kyŏng-Min (Yi Kyŏng-Min) (2014). "The Development of Photo Studios in Korea". Transl. by Jeehey Kim. *Trans Asia Photography Review*, 4(2). <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0004.203>.
- Lowell, P. [1885] (1888). *Chosŏn, the Land of the Morning Calm: A Sketch of Korea*. Boston: Ticknor and Company.
- Pai, Hyung Il (2010). "Travel Guides to the Empire: The Production of Tourist Images in Colonial Korea". Kendall, L. (ed.), *Consuming Korean Tradition in Early and Late Modernity*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 67-87. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824860813-005>.
- Pai, Hyung Il (2013). "Staging 'Koreana' for the Tourist Gaze: Imperialist Nostalgia and the Circulation of Picture Postcards". *History of Photography*, 37(3), 301-11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2013.807695>.
- Pai, Hyung Il (2016). "Visualizing Seoul's Landscapes: Percival Lowell and the Cultural Biography of Ethnographic Images". *Journal of Korean Studies*, 21(2), 355-84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2016.0016>.
- Pak Ka-Yŏng 박가영 (2018). *Kŭndae inswaemaech'ee nat'anannŭn kisaeng ch'osangsajin yŏn'gu* 근대 인쇄매체에 나타나는 기생 초상사진 연구 (A Study of *Kisaeng* Portrait Photographs in Modern Printed Media) [MA thesis]. Seoul: Korea National University of Arts.
- Park, Hyun-suk (2015). *The Government Courtesan: Status, Gender, and Performance in Late Chosŏn Korea* [PhD dissertation]. Chicago: The University of Chicago.
- Peterson, J.L. (2013). "Varieties of Travel Experience: Burton Holmes and the Travelogue Tradition". *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film*. Durham: Duke University Press, 23-61. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822378914-002>.
- Schmid, A. (2010). "Two Americans in Seoul, Evaluating an Oriental Empire, 1905-1910". *Korean Histories*, 2(2), 7-23.
- Swanson, H.; Friend, M.K. (2010). "Frances Carpenter collection relating to Frank G. Carpenter, 1875-1960". Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc/mss/eadmss.ms010031>.
- Taylor Atkins, E. (2010). *Primitive Selves: Koreana in the Japanese Colonial Gaze, 1910-1945*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Yi Kyŏng-Min (Lee, Kyŏng-Min) 이경민 (2005). *Kisaengŭn öttök'e mandŭrjöyönnŭn'ga: Kŭndae kisaengŭi t'ansaenggwa p'yosangggonggan* 기생은 어떻게 만들어졌는가: 근대 기생의 탄생과 표상공간 (How *Kisaeng* was Created: The Birth and Representation of Modern *Kisaeng*). Seoul: Sajin Ak'aibŭ Yŏn'guso.