



SONGS OF THE KISAENG:

COURTESAN POETRY OF THE LAST KOREAN DYNASTY

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Introduction

I. The Identity of the Kisaeng

The poems translated here as Songs of the Kisaeng were written primarily in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by an unusual group of Korean women called kisaeng, who were a combination of professional entertainer, performing artist, and courtesan. A few poems in the collection were sung by kisaeng from the fifteenth through the eighteenth century, when they were collected and written down. The kisaeng (sometimes called “skilled women”) were selected from the lower classes for their beauty, youth, and talent and were forced to work for what was, in effect, the government performing-arts bureaucracy. A number of the kisaeng wrote with a rare blend of emotional freedom, ironic perspective, and technical mastery, which enabled them, with fewer than a hundred poems, to establish an enduring tradition of love poetry.

A kisaeng’s creative performance in music and dance was of the moment only, not considered worthy to be part of the officially recorded culture of her time. Even her less ephemeral artistic expressions, her poems, survived only against the odds. Those that did survive were passed on orally or through private collections before they were compiled into anthologies by scholars, often, it seems, a century or more after the death of the poet. These poems survived initially because of the personal (as contrasted with scholarly) concern of individuals. Therefore, the lack of precise dates for the poems and their poets is the rule. Yet it is possible to place them historically, albeit very roughly. Some historical information has been gained about these poems through references to them made by the company the kisaeng kept. That the poems were kept alive at all, against the overwhelming odds established by Confucian

ideology, attests to their strength and the poetic genius of these women.

A number of the *kisaeng*, who lived as quasi-persons, are known to us today as women of strong identities—that is, as woman poets. Although placed near the periphery of Korean society, these *kisaeng* poets managed, paradoxically, to reposition themselves to the center of Korean culture. How was this achievement possible?

Let us consider some of the personal details from the common lot of the *kisaeng*. A *kisaeng* was taken away from her family and schooled for a career that prevented her from having a normal marriage and family. However, she had more economic independence than other women of her time and freedom to associate with men of power and learning. To a significant extent, she could become her own person, able to cultivate her identity through her skills. She could not help knowing the lowly person she was socially, of course, but her dance, her music, and her poetry enabled her to define her unique personality, with few upper limits on her sophistication, learning, or general cultivation.

The primary audience for the *kisaeng*-performers was the king (and, occasionally, the queen). The secondary audience was exclusively male and included the prime minister, provincial governors, the powerful class of scholar-bureaucrats (poets, painters, calligraphers), idle aristocrats, and foreign envoys. Soldiers were also included, both the aristocratic officers and the more common rank and file. Placements for the *kisaeng* ranged from the royal palace, where they might perform refined rituals at feasts of greeting and farewell to the king, to border guard military posts, where their principle role was probably sexual. [1]

A *kisaeng*'s paradoxical identity as a socially despised yet popularly (unofficially) acclaimed artist in music, dance, and, at times, poetry may well have given her the kind of sustained self-consciousness necessary to the search for a unique identity. Through reflections on her disciplined exertions and on her separate status, she would

have been able to attain a sense also of the boundaries of selfhood. Her skills established her individuality by allowing her to exist within a culture in her own way. Her personality was given birth and survived by being identified with the way she used her skills—that is, with her style.

Those kisaeng who wrote the poems in this volume were thus allowed to be more “themselves” than most other women of the time. This is not to suggest that the house bound pains and pleasures of other Korean women during the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910) were somehow less their own; the point is, rather, that the Confucian social order had effectively denied women a legitimate medium for expressing their experiences and feelings in their own way. Although lower-class women were somewhat freer, Korean women in general, who had feminine “virtues” stringently imposed on them, were denied almost any skill (other than for pure physical labor or household tasks) and were thereby denied the most developed, accomplished, and refined form of themselves. The kisaeng, however, were allowed the means to be articulate and to become more fully human than even their female social superiors. It is in this context that these collected kisaeng poems may help suggest some ways of understanding the interrelations between selfhood and creativity.

As an artist, a kisaeng remained anonymous. However skilled and accomplished her poetic compositions were, they could not bring to her any societal or official acknowledgment in her lifetime. Neither did they bring any change to the existing social system. The highest recognition she could receive was a reputation among the men she entertained, which might have brought some attendant increase in work and financial comfort. But she could never attain sufficient standing as an author in her time to have her essential biographical data recorded. Yet the kisaeng poets’ influence on the lyrical tradition of Korean poetry and on popular culture is indelible.

What can we conjecture about the current appeal of kisaeng poetry? Can a

contemporary American woman compare herself to a kisaeng? Despite their emergence from widely differing cultures and histories, one cannot help noting a certain ambiguity that is creatively endured by both groups of women. For instance, a kisaeng's skills and her freedom from many "feminine" social rules allowed her to develop her own personality. In much the same way, a "postmodern" American woman, responding to the collapsing models of femininity, often develops her sense of identity based more on talents and skills than on socially imposed roles. Both women may come to an appreciation of a self founded on a creative life rather than on a life created for them.

The great differences between the women of such different eras and traditions are of course easier to note. The creative life of the kisaeng was linked with her social degradation, whereas, today, it is no longer necessary for women to enter the demimonde to achieve self-expression. When a kisaeng excelled in poetic achievement, her authorship was often ignored because of her insubstantial social status. By contrast, an American woman today has a social position close to that of men, albeit often without commensurate economic power.

Still, one of the simplest and most cogent reasons for the current interest in the kisaeng poems is more than political. The kisaeng left us good, moving poems with a direct and timeless lyrical voice. By contrast, many of the poems written by men of the Chosun Dynasty are historical, topical, and thus, not as accessible to the contemporary reader.

A kisaeng's poem can make the difficulties of her life seem universal, and actually enables the reader to experience some of the same problems. For instance, the problem of securely placing oneself within a shattered social and emotional context is as much a problem now, in the west, as it was several hundred years ago for the kisaeng. For another, her profession, which demanded her infidelity (and the infidelity

of respectably married male bureaucrats), ironically defines a universal condition of romantic love, for a kisaeng in love is a lover obsessed with abandonment. A kisaeng must have been prepared to abandon her lover physically for the male participants of the next feast she was summoned to. She must also have been prepared to see her lover abandon her in the future, to recognize that her lover had abandoned her, indeed, to understand that her lover, in a sense, had always abandoned her.

It is easy to imagine that the typical encounter between kisaeng and guest was contingent upon, or defined within, the limits of infidelity and abandonment. In this context, it was as though an experiment in love were being conducted by the kisaeng. The usual elements of exclusivity, permanence, and vowing are “factored out” to see what’s left as part of love. The very act of vowing is used by these kisaeng poets to uncover the confusion in the notion that exclusivity and permanence are part of love. That is, if love “naturally” includes vowing, it can not “naturally” include exclusivity or permanence. If vowing is necessary, exclusivity is not automatic. The notion that love is purely natural (whatever else it may be) is also effectively questioned. Artifice and art are both seen to be essential ingredients. An anonymous kisaeng poem from the seventeenth century illustrates some of this analysis of the state of loving:

An anchor lifts, a ship is leaving.

He goes this time, when to return.

Far over the sea’s vast waverings one can see a going as return.

But at the sound of that anchor lifting,

the night could feel her insides turn.

In this poem, the universal theme of abandonment in love is developed through a narration, partly biological, social, and emotional, of a kisaeng who is parting with

her lover, perhaps a lover of one night. She sings of the lover's absence in terms of the ordeal of parting, waiting, and despair. A lover visits and departs, a permanent relationship does not exist. In a kisaeng's life this fact, which few women willingly espouse, is accepted as a matter of course. However, this does not negate her love, which, like postmodern love, is assumed to be precarious. Her song also affirms a love that, although in part a delusion, is an authentic reality, an artistic achievement: "Far over the sea's vast waverings/ one can see a going as return." This created reality, this artificial aspect of love is finally seen (in the identification with the night: "the night could feel her insides turn") as part of the natural order and the "natural" state of love.

A kisaeng could sometimes talk (and write) as an intellectual equal to the men she served. Although stigmatized by her Confucian culture because of her knowledge and never considered socially respectable, she could be respected by individuals and as an individual, even loved and longed for by scholar-poets. There are legendary love stories about kisaeng and famous men of the time. The greatest poet in our collection is Hwang Jini (1511?—1541?), whose fame reached a mythic status soon after her death and continues to fascinate Koreans. She is supposed to have had a number of famous lovers, among them, a sage, a scholar, and a young man who, the legend says, died of his love for her and during his own funeral procession refused to move from her doorstep until graced with some of her undergarments for his trip to the grave. Im Je (1549-1587), a respected scholar-poet, left a tribute to her in sijo form, which gives a small measure of her great influence:

Are you napping or just hiding, lying
still in this gully of wild blue grass?
Where is the high color of your face?

Only white bones lie here.

I hold a cup you can never fill
that I cannot raise to my sorrow.

Since Confucianism demanded women's absolute faithfulness to one man, the more thoughtful kisaeng are likely to have lived in moral conflict; even the most obtuse may have felt the pain of separation from all women not of their special institution. A condition of the survival of the kisaeng's moral sense would then likely be her forgetfulness of Confucian edicts. This condition may have helped, ironically, to strengthen her love poems by freeing her from the emotional and expressive constraints of Confucianism. On an important level, she sings of the strength of her loving, loving better than she is loved (Hwang Jini, "Whenever Did I"), loving a man less trustworthy than a sea gull (Hongjang, "Under the Cold, Pine Arbor Moon"). But on a more fundamental level, these are surely audacious poems. A kisaeng is professionally unable to give her own word or to pledge trust. Given that the strength of her lyric voice vitiates accusations of her own hypocrisy, what principles allow her to complain, albeit with resignation, of others? What secret has she discovered about the intensities of love that takes her beyond the common order of lies and betrayals? A kisaeng was, as mentioned, a professional betrayer, and yet some of them developed a genuine sense of betrayal that had nothing to do with exclusivity or permanence. These kisaeng poems suggest that our casual contemporary knowledge of love is not secure; our understanding is incomplete.

Another salient feature which gives characteristic shape to these poems, grown on the fringe of society, is a proudly defiant sense of humor. Songi, whose name literally translates as "pine-female person," sees herself as a special pine tree.

So, you can tell I'm a pine,
but what kind do you take me for?
I've grown tall and wide overlooking this precipice.
And you, prentice, from below the timber
road, wish a pruning blade on me.

She places herself above her work and crowd; she refuses to bend herself, at least, her sense of herself, to meet the common demands on a kisaeng. She chooses her lovers, though perhaps not her clients, as a poet chooses her words. Even when she complains about a lover, she is precisely defiant toward him, but much more interestingly, also defiant toward herself.

Everything you do, everything you don't do, deceives.
When I love, I make you
my enemy.
But the words you spoke
keep themselves within me.

Given such a complex sense of self and her relative freedom from the rigid codes of her society, she was able to maneuver her life through the conflicting norms her culture set up. Though rooted in and resigned to her social position, her poems show a sense of emotional freedom seemingly unbounded by her place and time. A kisaeng's status as an outsider gave her a privileged position from which to observe and reflect on life. Characteristically silent about historical events, institutions, and ideologies, she projects, instead, an image of a woman who is disciplined against the values of sentimentality but also disciplined to recognize and cherish authentic sentiment within

herself.

II. Historical Perspective

There is a good deal of historical information available about the institution of the kisaeng. The kisaeng were the only consistently well-educated group of women throughout Korean history, up until the early twentieth century. An elaborate system of schooling and training was established for them, replete with academic rewards and punishments, on a variety of subjects and levels. Individual achievement varied greatly, of course, and so did official educational policy toward the kisaeng over the 500-year course of the Chosun Dynasty. In all probability, though, among the kisaeng, almost regardless of the period, literacy was universal, and advanced knowledge of literature, social manners, and ritual music and dance was common. Further specialization was often possible for the apt or obedient in such areas as music, medicine, needlework, and, informally, prostitution.[2]

As a marginal woman, however, the kisaeng had to live in a situation painfully unfit for ordinary respectability. To understand her social position, it is necessary to compare it to that of other Korean women. In the Chosun Dynasty, during which all the poems in this collection were written, women (especially of the upper class) were effectively incarcerated during daylight and, even at home, were forbidden direct contact with any man outside the family. If, for example, a husband were away and his visiting friend were to find the wife alone, she would be obliged to use an indirect form of address, openly pretending to direct an imaginary maid to inform the guest of her husband's whereabouts. Within the family, too, contact between the sexes was severely limited. Furthermore, for the women of the upper class, "doing" often carried the stigma of having to do, the stigma of necessity. But for almost any woman, the training she received was rigidly limited to only the most essential tasks of a practical

home or farm life. Formal schooling was not provided. Book learning for a woman was discouraged and disparaged.

Confucianism advocated strict hierarchy throughout society, within the family, and between ages and sexes. Its patriarchal system of values extolled rationality and regarded emotional attachment and expression as weaknesses and threats to the social order. While a man who could afford it was expected to marry the woman chosen for him, and have secondary wives or mistresses whom he could choose for himself, it was demanded that once a woman married, she remain sexually and emotionally loyal to her husband during and after his lifetime. She was forbidden even to express jealousy and could be divorced if she did. Acceding to the Confucian ideal of feminine “virtue” resulted in near-helplessness outside a mandated physical and emotional confinement. Individuality for women didn’t issue from personal accomplishment so much as from class, gender, and family. In fact, women often lived with only a family name, that is, without a name of their own, without a formal individual identity.

A respectable woman’s family name, though unchanged after she married, had only a generic significance by virtue of her presumably selfless devotion to her family. Although her place in her new family as a wife and mother was supposed to be honored and respected, the “virtue” of selflessness made most conceptions of her self-identity logically impossible. This putative honor and respect conferred on her provided no terms for defining her as a separate being. (In fact, the mistreatment of the daughter-in-law is famous throughout Korean folklore.) The higher the honor and the greater the respect, the more conceptual, abstract, and remote became the identity of her person. The denial of skills necessary to survive outside her family meant a denial, to the traditional woman, of the means to survive as a fully developed and unique personality.

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