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THE EMERGENCE OF EARLY VISUAL MATERIALS IN KOREA

Nodira Nazarkulova

Researcher at Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT: This article explores the introduction of the first cameras to the Korean peninsula, the creation and utilization of early visual materials, their diverse forms, and associated considerations. Additionally, it examines the impact of Western tourists on the emergence of visual materials in Korea, focusing on their perceptions of "exotic" and "native" cultures. Key figures such as Hulbert and Carpenter are highlighted for their contributions in this context.

KEYWORDS: Visual materials, Western tourists, Choson dynasty (1392-1910), photographs, exotic cultures, native cultures, Hulbert, Carpenter.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of visual materials on the Korean peninsula is closely linked to the advent of recording equipment and the influx of early Western tourists. The proliferation of photographs, films, and phonographic materials among the local population was significantly influenced by the activation of Japanese colonial policies and the substantial number of Japanese immigrants. Visual materials gained widespread use due to their superiority over other media in propagating colonial ideologies and aligning with other objectives of the Japanese administration.

One of the notable factors driving the increase in photographic materials was the colonial government's goal to develop tourism. This objective led to the publication of visual materials not only as photographs but also in various other forms, including newspapers, magazines, postcards, advertising posters, and more, all of which were distributed widely. Regardless of their intended purpose, the majority of photographs from this period depict a range of subjects, including kisengs , yangbans , middle-class women, and Korean women of various ages and attire.

Imprinting the history of everyday life through visual materials, captured on paper with the help of clear images, enhances their importance in historical studies focused on events and processes from the last quarter of the 19th century onward.

The influx of photography into Eastern countries, which were either colonized or deemed "backward" and "underdeveloped" by Western imperialists, occurred for several reasons. One reason was the desire to "discover" new lands and peoples, conveying knowledge about their history and culture, geographical and climatic features, not limited to dry text but also presented in visual form. Additionally, posters and maps designed to attract people interested in unique "exotic" trips from developed countries played a role. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, tourists in East Asia were particularly drawn to decaying ancient historical monuments.

The introduction of cameras to Korea coincided with the "opening" of the country in 1876. From this time onward, many foreigners began entering the peninsula, resulting in the creation of

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hundreds of photographs. When studying the visual materials of this period, they can be categorized into three groups based on their creators:

1. Local Koreans
2. Foreign Tourists and Official Diplomats
3. Japanese Colonial Administrators and Businessmen

These groups differ from each other by presenting three distinct perspectives and approaches in their visual materials.

By the end of the 19th century, both individual and collective publications were producing postcards en masse. These postcards, designed in a variety of themes and styles and easily accessible to everyone, formed a significant part of the visual materials in Korea. For over a century and a half, the commodification of the country's visual image and ethnic identity through photographs became a specific facet of the cultural and economic policies implemented by imperialist countries in their colonies. This trend was particularly evident during the period of Japanese colonial rule in Korea (1392–1910, during the Choson Kingdom era).

From the 1880s, Western technologies and culture began to enter the Choson Kingdom through China and Japan. During this process, photography equipment and tools were introduced to Korea, leading to the establishment of the first photo studios. Simultaneously, global tourism and colonialism facilitated the dissemination of images and knowledge of "exotic" and "native" cultures. An examination of the photographic archives from this period in Korea reveals that kisengs were frequently the focus of the camera. This can be attributed to travelers' attraction to traditional cultural elements, from garments to people, as opposed to the emerging modern Korean culture that increasingly displayed contemporary elements.

This article compares and contrasts photographs taken by Western tourists with those taken by Japanese tourists to illustrate their differing perspectives. Through this analysis, it becomes possible to answer questions regarding photographic production, the organization of its creation and spatial context, and the public reception of photo subjects on the Korean peninsula from the late 19th to the early 20th century. Specifically, it examines the extent to which kiseng women were involved in the photography process and how these images appeared in other photographic materials.

The research found that the relationship between the visual materials and their creators varied depending on their origins and purposes. For instance, unlike American tourists' photographs, Japanese photographers focused on portraying the image of "Choson beauties" or "Korean beauties," seemingly intending to reinforce the concept of "Koreana" and support Japanese imperialism. This series of photos highlights Choson's popular tourist spots, natural scenery, traditions and rituals, local entertainment, culture, and education.

To create the ideal traditional Korean female image, kisengs were often beautifully dressed and photographed standing proudly in elegant jewelry and Korean hanbok. Some images depict kisengs demonstrating their talents, such as painting, playing musical instruments, or dancing. In many photo portraits, kisengs are shown against backgrounds that mix traditional Korean cultural elements with Western-style furniture, wallpaper, carpets, and clothing. This assimilation indicates the process of receiving Western cultural products through the "Japanese lens."

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Unlike the initial visual materials, photo studios are primarily associated with Japanese activities on the peninsula. According to museum staff working with early photographs in Korea and Japan, the first two Japanese-owned photo studios were located in Nansan (South Mountain) in the newly renamed Korean capital of Keijo. The oldest, Gyokusendo, was founded in 1889 by Fujita Shozaburo, a student and follower of O. Kazumasa (1860-1929), one of the most renowned photographers of the Meiji period and the official photographer of the imperial court. M. Kojiro, another prominent photographer, owned two studios named Namaeikan and Hosenkan. Murakami's photographs were also published in the Hwanson Shinmun newspaper.

By the early 1900s, Japanese-owned photography studios were not limited to serving the local Japanese population; they also collaborated with foreign diplomatic missions. Notably, Mrs. M. Scranton (1832-1909), an American missionary and a leading figure in establishing women's education in Korea, and the founder of Ehwa Girls' School in 1886, was among their clients. Additionally, Italian Consul-General K. Rosetti (1876-1948) acquired a substantial collection of postcards depicting Korea and Korean life from Murakami's studio in 1902 and 1903. About 65 of these photographs were included in Rosetti's travel book "Corea e Coreani" ("Korea and the Koreans," 1904). Choi I. Fujita, a well-known collector of Korean photos and a prolific author, conducted extensive research on these visual materials. Along with others, he brought Murakami's work and activities to Korea through souvenir photos and postcards, thereby introducing the people's customs and uniqueness to the world.

In traditional Korean society, only kiseng women were allowed to appear in public, which is why they are predominantly seen in photographs from this period. Kisengs typically did not adhere to the prohibitions on covering their faces or restricting their outdoor activities to "women's hour" as upper-class ladies did. Consequently, as observed in the Hulbert and Carpenter collections, these images were not taken outdoors or on the streets but in specialized studios. These photographs were prepared for sale as postcards to attract Japanese travelers from the peninsula and tourists from the West. Unlike postcards printed during the colonial period, they were produced on high-quality paper, enhancing their value. The fact that they were printed by Japanese publishers contributed to the widespread use of kiseng photographs from the Hulbert and Carpenter collections as visual elements in commercial postcards by other Japanese publishers.

CONCLUSION

In short, the introduction of visual materials, especially photographs and the means of creating them, to Korea is connected with the official "opening" of the peninsula to the outside world with the signing of the Kanghwa Agreement in 1876. The annexation of the peninsula by Japan in 1910, among other innovations, adapted photography to the interests of the colonial regime. As a result, the visual materials that have been preserved to this day have become a kind of historical source that reflects the unique blend of Korean, Japanese, and Western cultural elements.

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