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Hwang Jini: An Examination of Life as a Joseon Kisaeng

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Hwang Jini: An Examination of Life as a Joseon Kisaeng

Hwang Jini was a famous Joseon Dynasty kisaeng, likely to have been born around 1506 in the scenic city of Kaesong, now in modern-day North Korea. She was known also by her adopted kisaeng name of Myeongwol, meaning “bright moon”. Details of her birth are inconclusive at best, but it is generally agreed that she was born the illegitimate daughter of a yangban, who, having been seduced by her mother’s beauty and charm, had consented to relations¹. Growing up, she was noted for her exceptional beauty and musical prowess, and a story stands that a young man of the village, so distressed by his unrequited love for her, had died of heartbreak. This story is instrumental in the development of a picture of young Jini, because during the young man’s funeral procession, she laid her blouse on the casket as a sign of her regret and sorrow². This sensitivity to life and the needs of others, combined with her natural beauty and talent, made her an appropriate candidate to become a kisaeng. A kisaeng is an officially sanctioned female entertainer, trained in music, dancing, and poetry composition. This being said, there is a fine historical line between being a professional entertainer and being a prostitute for the very wealthy and powerful. In many ways, kisaengs were merely the playthings of the yangban, the ruling noble class of the time, and not respected as the highly trained performers that they were. Hwang Jini is considered the most famous of these because she stood out from the expected norm. Kisaengs in general had more freedom than the average women of the time, due to the nature of their job. Jini, however, especially refused to be confined to the standards of her day, and had little regard for societal restraints. In shaping this

¹ Her mother, Chin Hyun’geum, was washing beneath a bridge when a handsome young man (Hwang Chinsa) appeared. They were immediately attracted and he returned that night, where they drank and had relations, resulting in Hwang Jini (Kim-Renaud, 98-100).

² The bier refused to pass by her house, and after relatives appealed she put her blouse on it and the funeral continued. She was so moved by his death that she decided to become a kisaeng (Kim-Renaud, 101).

unique worldview, Jini was influenced by the expected role of her gender, important worldly events, characterizing relationships, the class divide, her education and role as a kisaeng, and her life in both Kaesong and Hanyang.

Korea's Joseon Dynasty was heavily divided between the rich and poor, and male and female. Ancient Korean society relied largely on Confucianism as a moral code and way of life. This meant that, according to Confucian ideals, the woman's place was at home while the man was to be out participating in society. Promoters of this idea were members of the ruling class, the yangban, who had emerged from a group of literati. They held themselves in high intellectual esteem, living extravagant lifestyles funded by the government³. Kisaengs, while often taken as concubines or secondary wives by men of yangban status, were typically born into the lowest class, making them ineligible to be primary wives or hold any recognized power. Should a kisaeng rise to any sort of exemplary fame or attention, it was merely considered an indication of her ability to manipulate the heartstrings and purse-strings of the men she catered to, but it was still only a figurative role. In classical Korean thinking, this was almost shameful, because women of the time were, without resorting to obvious stereotypes, trained only to cook, clean, and raise children⁴. Where many kisaengs may have felt freedom from hiding behind a prettily painted face, Hwang Jini was a rare exception in that she often remained barefaced. Why Jini was so free from restraint is open to interpretation. It could be a combination of her instance of birth, the relationships she formed with forward-thinking men, or the innate power that comes from acknowledging one's own beauty.

³ The term "yangban" came to be used to designate members who served in either civil or military services, who directed the formation of an exclusive society with technically the sole profession of holding public office. They were afforded special privileges by the government, furthering the formation of an elitist class who closed the door to advancement to anyone of an outside social standing. Even within the yangban class there were distinctions, such as the superiority of civil order over military order (Lee, Ki-baek, 173-174).

⁴ Confucianism introduced the idea of "agnation", which made men the only relevant members of society by relegating women to social dependence (Kendall, 1).

In discovering what shaped Jini to be the noble character she was known to be, it is important to first discuss the crucial societal events in her life. She was born in a time of turbulence in the Joseon Dynasty. Around the time of her birth, a corrupt king (Yeonsan) was dethroned and replaced by his brother, Jungjong⁵. The Joseon kingdom was at a crossroads attempting to adapt to a new lifestyle brought about by the new king, and this provided Jini with a suitable stage to demonstrate her art. However, despite the changes, there were still struggles throughout the kingdom, including the purging of Neo-classical Confucianists when Jini was a young girl⁶. Joseon kings were ambiguous in their relationships with this group of literati, and throughout Jini's life she would see the tension that arose between the gilded old world of monarchic rule and the revolutionary thinking of modern Confucianists.

Understandably, the life of a kisaeng can be devoid of meaningful relationships, due to the near-prostitution element of the position⁷. But this is perhaps part of what drove Jini to become a kisaeng. It is said that when she was young, her beauty, much like her mother's, had attracted a young rich man (the son of a yangban). The two fell madly in love, but because of Jini's status as an illegitimate daughter and of being the lowest class, their relationship was ill-fated from the start. But tragedy struck with the early and untimely death of this young nobleman. This was a defining moment in Jini's life, and indirectly shaped her views on men and love thereafter. However she was not completely disillusioned with men, because later she

⁵ Prince Yeonsan (Yeonsan'gun) grew accustomed to a life of luxury and squandered much of the state's financial resources, and in order to regain some, attempted to confiscate the land and property of the elite. Due to this measure and eliminating those who challenged his kingly authority, he was removed from the throne by the remaining resistance and replaced by his half-brother Jungjong in 1506 (Lee, Ki-baek, 205)

⁶ In 1519, Jungjong, pressured by the meritorious elite (threatened by the growing power of a Neo-Confucian literati sub-class), sanctioned death sentences for many leading scholars and their followers.

⁷ There has been an exaggerated emphasis throughout history on the prostitution aspect of being a kisaeng, which is partly why there is such a negative connotation and social stigma associated with the profession (Lee, Insuk, 71).

met the most influential person in her life: the scholar Seo Kyung Duk. However this time, unlike many others, it was she who experienced unrequited love.

Seo Kyung Duk was a famous scholar who led a simple life engrossed in the study of human philosophy⁸. He had a small group of students, among whom “Hwang Jini was a rose among thorns. He loved her as a beautiful flower – gazed upon but not picked”⁹. Hwang Jini aptly titled him as one of the “three wonders of Kaesong”, along with herself and the famous Pakyon Falls. Kyung Duk was the one man who wouldn’t fall prey to her gentle charm and grace, which attracted Jini even more. She liked to tell him how she was able to seduce a hermit who had meditated celibately for 30 years, but Kyung Duk never wavered, and this nobility of character endeared him to her. It is said that her true love was the previously mentioned ill-fated son of a yangban, and perhaps she latched onto more of the idea of Kyung Duk than the actual person because he was unwavering and predictable. After her traumatic loss, she must have felt betrayed, especially by the yangban class who looked on her with disdain. In her pained confusion, Kyung Duk, provided a welcome contrast and provided a stability that she was unused to. Whereas with the son of a yangban she first had him then lost him, with Kyung Duk she never had anything to lose.

Throughout her career as a kisaeng, Jini was to encounter many different men. None would prove to capture her attention as much as Kyung Duk, but her relationships with each played an important role in further shaping her image as an independent woman. The first is So Seyang. Seyang was convinced that “a man who allowed himself to be captivated by a woman

⁸ Seo Kyung Duk (1489-1546) was widely known by his pen name, “Hwadam”. He also lived at a mountain retreat called Hwadam, the meaning of which is “flower pool”. He studied the three lives of human philosophy (Tae, 17)

⁹ Tae, 17

was not a man at all”¹⁰, and he said he would live with Jini for a month and then leave with no regrets. However he proved no match for the famed kisaeng, who, with no grief herself, composed and sang a poem¹¹, causing him to regret his words. This shows her as a woman independent of the wants of a man, free to come and go as she pleases. Next she met Yi Sajong, a famous Seoul singer and musician. The two made an agreement to live together for six years, with each one providing provisions for three years. Again Jini left without looking back, perhaps knowing that every subsequent relationship would be devoid of meaning because her true love was forever unattainable.

Jini experienced many men in her years as an accomplished kisaeng, but her prior relationships when she was first stepping out as a young woman also influenced her. When she was young she traveled to the famed Diamond Mountains with a sort of body-guard figure, Yi Saeng. This trip is a clear picture of the development of Jini’s unadorned character. They traveled like commoners, without servants or money. They begged for food, and at one point she even sold sexual favors to a monk in exchange for shelter. Throughout the trip Yi Saeng acted as a fatherly figure, something that was missing in Jini’s life. This missing father figure is not overly dramatic (due to the historical father-offspring relationships not being loving but authoritative), but her father’s role in essentially trapping her in a shameful caste would shape the entire course of her life.

Men represented different things to Jini: some were playthings that she could exercise her womanly power over, some were protectors, and others were clients. This third category brings us to the yangban class, and the Joseon divide between the very rich and the very poor. Kisaengs,

¹⁰ Kim-Renaud, 99

¹¹ “Taking Leave of Minister So Se-Yang” (Lee, Peter H., 154)

for all their beauty and talents, were of the traditional outcaste professions¹², looked down upon until they were needed for entertainment purposes. The yangbans, however, served as civil or military officials, responsible for “[directing] the government, economy, and culture”¹³ of the Joseon period. In the most famous pansori¹⁴ of the Joseon Dynasty, the main character proclaims that “commoners and those of mean birth are no different in their human qualities than the yangban”¹⁵. The culture of the people, as well as their economic makeup, varied from the rural villages to the capital cities. Farmers, while very poor, were at least able to provide a reasonable living to sustain their families. The cities, however, were an amalgamation of different classes, all struggling to survive under the oppressive presence of the elitist yangban class.

Hwang Jini was the daughter of a yangban, but because she was illegitimate she was not of a vaulted status. Instead, had it not been for her unparalleled beauty and musical ability, she would have been subjected to the harsh life of a farmer’s wife. But she was special, known even from her birth, when a sweet aroma was said to fill the room. A man from her village also said that only in the realm of the immortals could so beautiful a voice be heard¹⁶. Because of her outward appeal and talent in the feminine arts, Jini would have left home at a young age to make use of her abilities. This step already differentiates a kisaeng from a traditional Joseon woman. Kisaengs were unafraid to exploit their natural abilities rather than confine themselves to the life of the ordinary.

¹² Along with jugglers, acrobats, contortionists, story-tellers, diviners, and common prostitutes, kisaeng lived outside the walls of social tradition and Confucian ideology in the “ch’unmin” outcaste (Kendall, 2, 16).

¹³ Eckert, 108

¹⁴ From *The Story of Ch’unhyang*, a pansori novel in which the mother of the main character is a kisaeng, and the themes of love, Confucian morality, and separation of the classes is discussed (Lee, Ki-baik 244-245).

¹⁵ Lee, Ki-baik 245

¹⁶ Said by Eum Su, a kayageum artist who would have known Jini in his youth (he was in his seventies when quoted) (Kim-Renaud, 98).

After leaving home, Jini would have gone to a *gyobang*, a sort of training institution for *kisaeng*. There she would have refined her musical and poetic abilities, learning to play classical instruments like the *geomungo*. Most importantly, Jini would learn to write *sijo*. She proved to be very talented in this field, becoming one of the most well-known female poets to ever come out of Korea. She then would have been assigned to a *hojang*, a sort of village headman in charge of keeping record of occupations and general activity. Once registered as a *kisaeng* (because it was a government sanctioned job), she was free to make use of her training. The job of a *kisaeng*, to put it succinctly, was to entertain. This meant going to parties hosted by the *yangban* and dancing, singing, and mingling for the pure entertainment of the men present. In some ways this could be seen as a demoralizing job, but when done right, it could provide far more freedom of expression than any other opportunity of the time.

Being in the position of a *kisaeng*, and essentially already the lowest member of society (above beggars and thieves), caring about Confucian ideals and other such proper niceties was not the priority. This meant *kisaengs* were free (or as free as Joseon women could be) to think and say what they wanted, without fear of repercussion¹⁷. Jini was known to be an unassuming woman, who appeared at parties free of makeup and fancy clothes. Not because she was so very naturally beautiful that she needed no adornments, but because makeup and accessories only served to hide her and further limit her expression of self. She was more concerned with her natural charms than with putting on a pretty face. And despite her lack of “polish”, she was still able to captivate every person in the room. There is an account of Jini attending a party hosted by a *yangban*, Song Sun, plainly dressed, yet Song Sun was still so captivated by her beauty and singing that his own *kisaeng* concubine became jealous and made a scene.

¹⁷ It is fair to acknowledge, however, that anything truly offensive and/or too outside the realm of plausible thought could result in death or banishment.

Aside from her natural beauty, part of Jini's allure came from her accomplishments in the courtesan arts, particularly in playing the geomungo and composing sijo. The geomungo is a long narrow zither-like instrument, also called the Hyun Geum, with six silk strings. It was one of the many classical instruments produced during the Joseon Dynasty. More important, however is the development of sijo poetry. Starting in the 15th century, sijo was one of the most popular Korean poetic forms¹⁸, typically having three lines and consisting of "certain images and microthemes...[to help] the Korean singer to act as the memory of society"¹⁹. Hwang Jini responded particularly well to this format, and is noted for her "depth of feeling, meditative rhythms, and rich symbolism"²⁰. Sijo were often sung in accompaniment of musical instruments (like the geomungo) at banquets and other entertainment venues. Sijo also played an important role in her relationships with men. She wrote one poem so beautifully that it warmed the heart of even the notorious misogynist So Seyang (as previously mentioned), and another sijo caused a member of the royal family to be so captivated that he fell off his horse.

Many things influenced Hwang Jini's sijo, but she was especially influenced by her life as a professional entertainer, and by the natural world around her. She would have been well versed with Joseon court culture because of her position as a kisaeng, and the royal palaces of the Joseon Dynasty would have been familiar to her, providing her with a wealth of inspiration. This urban culture would have been a change from her home in Kaesong, where natural beauty abounded. Jini is known to have listed the "three wonders of Kaesong" as herself, Seo Kyung Duk, and the Pakyon Falls. The Falls lie north of Kaesong, and cascade from a height of ten meters into a wooded forest. As a scenic viewing point, a pavilion arch from an old Goryeo-

¹⁸ While sijo remained popular among the kisaeng, the poetic and song form of gasa was increasingly popular and practiced only among yangban women (Lee, Peter H., 104).

¹⁹ Lee, Peter H., 92

²⁰ Lee, Peter H., 92

period castle offers stunning views. Also growing up in Kaesong, she would have been familiar with the romanticized ruins of a Goryeo Dynasty palace, the remains of which stood on a hill north of the Kaesong city center, properly titled Manwoldae, or “full-moon hill”. This picturesque spot was “girdled by mountain streams on both sides and protected by the Songaksan, the Mountain of the Pines”²¹. The remaining rubble gave hints of the magnificent palace that stood there as the capital of the Goryeo Dynasty, and in the north-east beautiful autumn colors famously turned the landscape to gold, reminiscent of the wealth of the kings who once lived there. After becoming a kisaeng, however, the palaces she experienced were much more alive, though no less inspirational.

In entertaining the rich and powerful, Jini would have frequented both the homes of yangban and on special occasion, the palaces of the Joseon Dynasty. Her career would have led her far from home, because the capital of the major empire on the Korean peninsula had moved to what is modern-day Seoul, then called Hanyang. Here she would have spent time at some, if not all, of the five royal palaces. The official capital and most symbolically important palace was Gyeongbokgung, which was burned to the ground not long after King Jungjong’s death²². The name roughly translates to “palace of resplendent happiness”, and would have indeed provided that with its many rooms and scenic surroundings. Here, Jini might have entertained in the courtyard of the main audience hall. She more likely would have spent time at Changdeokgung, which, while Gyeongbokgung was the official palace, was the detached palace more frequented by the royal family and their informal guests.

²¹ Ha, 62

²² Gyeongbokgung, like many other structures, was destroyed in the chaos during the 1592 Japanese invasion. It remained vacant for 280 years (Shin, 152).

As previously mentioned, Hwang Jini was born during the coup of a corrupt king. The new king, Jungjong, was the previous king's brother and already aged when he took throne. As such, Jini would have experienced his royal funeral in 1544 due to her continued relations with men in power. She would have been witness to the grand displays of Joseon royal court culture normally, but the elaborateness of a royal funeral is starkly contrasted with Jini's own personal preference of burial. While burials are always grand and pompous for royalty, no matter the culture, they tend to treat death as an expression of wealth, with a minor emphasis on the cyclicity of life. Jini requested to have her body left on the bank of river in her native Kaesong, as both a warning to women of feeble mind and resolve, and as a representation of the give and take of nature. Jini, by virtue of being a *sijo* poetess and having grown up surrounded by nature, felt a connection with the mystical workings of the universe, and her burial emphasizes death's relation to life. This was perhaps her way of rejecting Confucian ideals, which treated death as a responsibility to society.

Confucianism dictated much of Joseon society, and it was Confucianism that deemed Jini, as a *kisaeng*, an unsavory part of society because of her lack of pure traditional values. It would therefore be natural that she would resist much of Confucian teaching, such as its detached view of death. But while she may have been a member of a despised class, that in no way meant that she herself was an unsavory person. In fact, her character is said to have been so refined that while she would eat with scholars and artists, she would not for any price sit with merchants. This resistance to her expected role and her personal dedication to "right" living has turned Jini into a symbol of freedom, and has presented her as a lost soul who found her calling in poetry as a rather modern expression of identity.

List of Terms/People/Places: Romanized and Hangul

Changdeokgung 창덕궁

Manwoldae 만월대

Geomungo 거문고

Myeongwol 명월

Goryeo 고려

Pakyon Falls (Pakyonri) 박운리

Gyeongbokgung 경복궁

Pansori 판소리

Gyobang 교방

Songaksan 송악산

Hanyang 하녕

Song Sun 송순

Hojang 호장

So Seyang 소세양

Hwang Jini 환진이

Seo Kyung Duk 서경дук

Jungjong 중종

Yangban 양반

Joseon 조선

Yeongangun 영안순

Kaesong 개송

Yi Saeng 이생

Kisaeng 기생

Yi Sajong 이사종

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