



**EARLY MODERN KOREAN FEMINIST ACTIVISM:
THE ART AND LIFE OF O GWISUK (1906–1996)**

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Abstract

In this essay, I investigate the art and life of O Gwisuk, who was best known as a representative *gisaeng* (professional female entertainer) painter of early modern Korea. Existing scholarship on O, which is based on fragmented information, has largely focused on her artistic activities in the 1920s. Drawing on the newly discovered art and literary works of O, as well as interviews with her family and students, this paper paints a complex picture of an artist whose life and career manifested an intricate interplay of tradition and modernity, art, and gender. I compare the gendered discourses produced by O's male admirers, who viewed her as a relic of traditional Korean femininity, to O's own perception of herself as a modern woman artist who dedicated her life to advocating women's rights and education.

한국 근대 여성주의 운동 : 오귀숙 (1906–1996)의 예술과 삶

초록

이 논문은 한국 근대기를 대표하는 기생 화가로 알려진 오귀숙의 예술과 삶을 살펴본다. 현존하는 오귀숙에 관한 연구는 단편화된 정보를 기반으로 그녀의 1920년대의 예술 활동에 초점을 맞추었다. 새로 발견된 오귀숙의 서화와 글 그리고 그녀의 가족과 학생들과의 인터뷰를 통해 얻은 새 자료를 바탕으로 이 논문은 전통과 현대, 예술과 젠더의 상호관계 속에서 활동했던 여류화가의 일생을 조목한다. 또한 그녀를 한국 전통 여성의 유물로 여겼던 남성 추종자의 젠더화 담론과 자신을 여성 인권과 교육 옹호에 전념한 현대 여류화가로서 인식했던 오귀숙 자신의 논의를 비교 분석한다.

키워드: 오귀숙, 기생, 한국 근대 여성주의 예술 활동, 신여성

Keywords: O Gwisuk, *gisaeng*, early modern Korea, feminist artist activism, New Woman

**Who is O Gwisuk?
Model of Korean Femininity or Feminist?**

O Gwisuk was an iconic professional female entertainer (*gisaeng*) and painter in 1920s colonial Korea. O was a complex and controversial figure. Her sensational fame owed much to her background as a *gisaeng*. In a society under transformation by colonial modernity, *gisaeng*, who had been recognized as professionals in music and art since the 10th century, became increasingly viewed and stigmatized as sex workers. As an accomplished *gisaeng* painter–calligrapher, O was seen by the male audience of her day as the last beacon of traditional Korean femininity, combining cultural cultivation and moral integrity.

O, however, held a starkly different view of herself and her art. She saw herself as a modern woman who promoted and fought for gender and class equality. As a *gisaeng*, she was a vocal activist for *gisaeng* rights, and after leaving her career as a *gisaeng*, she continued to live as a social activist and women's educator. Art, for her, was a tool to educate and enlighten women, and she lived out her vision as a liberated and liberating woman.

A clash of discourse surround O, when considering the intricate interplay of tradition and modernity, art, and gender in early modern Korea (1910s–1930s). O was one of the few female artists of her time (1906–1996) who started as professional entertainers and moved on to establish their art careers. Scholarly attention has been given to the social and artistic contributions of early modern Korean female artists such as Na Haesök (1896–1948) and Pak Naehyön (1920–1976), working in the genres of modern art that originated in Europe (Yi, 2005; Choe, 2006). O's story, however, brings to light that women's activism on the art scene was also visible and momentous in the so-called traditional genres, such as ink painting and calligraphy. This study reveals the struggles that female artists such as O faced—more specifically, the systematic and cultural discrimination against the *gisaeng*—and their courageous efforts to contest and cross boundaries and discover their own identity and place through art, education, and faith.

Painting More than Eyebrows: Gisaeng Artists in Pre-Modern Korea

The gisaeng, who were professionally trained in various art forms to serve sophisticated male literati clientele, played an important role in Korea's cultural scene from the 10th through the early 20th century. The gisaeng formed a unique class in Korea's pre-modern society. Socially, they belonged to the lowest stratum, together with slaves and other entertainers. Yet, despite their low social status as women, they were allowed to participate in the activities of elite men and became an indispensable part of official government functions.

Talented girls from the commoner or slave class became gisaeng after many years of rigorous training. The career was also hereditarily transferred from a gisaeng mother to her daughter. In addition to music and dance, these female entertainers' training also included the literati's art of brush—namely, painting and calligraphy. While most gisaeng produced art as a pleasurable hobby, some became accomplished artists. In spite of their artistic achievements, however, the gisaeng artists have long been overlooked in the study of Korean art history primarily due to the lack of scholarly enthusiasm but also due to the shortage of extant examples because women's art was rarely collected.

The general attitude of the male literati toward gisaeng artists was that of admirable fascination; they remarked that these women could “paint more than beautiful eyebrows” and that their hearts could not be easily won (Hwang, 2007, p. 70). Male artists represented the gisaeng as objects of desire in their paintings of romantic themes, while gisaeng artists themselves painted traditional subjects in literati art, such as flowers-and-birds and landscape.

Between the Traditional and the Modern: Gisaeng Artists in Early Modern Korea

The modern age in Korea commenced in the early 20th century with the fall of the 500-year-old Joseon dynasty and the ensuing colonization by Japan. Modernization eroded traditional class hierarchy and ushered in new colonial capitalist hierarchy. Modernity was a masculinist

construct in which the female assumed the negative position. As Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe have pointed out:

This negative connotation of the category ‘female’ in the modern is due to the fact that the gender dichotomy male:female has been engaged in conjunction with other modern dichotomous frameworks such as modern:traditional, West:East, colonizer:colonized, rational:emotional, mind:body and public:domestic. (Tanabe & Tokita-Tanabe, 2003, p. 1)

In the context of colonial modernity, the issue of gender became further complicated as both the colonizer and the colonized struggled to create their versions of modernity and explain its relationship to tradition. The problem of women often occupied the center stage in this contentious negotiation between tradition and modernity. Determining the proper place for and image of women became a paramount task in the construction of colonial modernity in Korea. Both the colonial authority and indigenous patriarchy produced policies and discourses to regulate and control women—often framed in the binary of traditional and modern—and, more than others, the gisaeng, came to represent and embody quintessential colonial subjects.

Under the modern colonial capitalist economy, the traditional gisaeng system was put to an end. In 1908, the Japanese colonial authority introduced the Gisaeng Regulation Order, which stipulated that all gisaeng be registered with the colonial police and affiliated with guilds, transforming them from a professional class to gendered producers of capitalist service. The reshaping of the traditional agricultural economy and the harsh exploitation of the rural population led to the displacement of many, making the gisaeng career a desirable option for young women from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Gisaeng schools were set up to train professional female entertainers to serve both Korean and Japanese clients, and the gisaeng eventually became commodified and were routinely featured in industrial exhibitions organized by the colonial administration, which used these women to promote consumption and provide entertainment (Sin, 2014).

As their social functions expanded and visibility increased,

concerns and criticisms of the gisaeng also grew. The colonial Korean society's attitude toward them was dualistic. On the one hand, the Koreans took pride in the gisaeng, regarding them as representatives of refined Korean cultural tradition. The Japanese also prized them highly and displayed them in world exhibitions as a spectacle of their imperial bounty. Yet, at the same time, the gisaeng were viewed as undesirable remains of the feudal era and, despite being publicly managed, were blamed as causes of corruption and immorality (Park, 2012). The society, while enjoying these women, endlessly denied them respect, deeming them a threat to both modern patriarchy and modern womanhood.

In this paradoxical colonial social environment, the gisaeng strove to find their place and identity through the arduous negotiation between tradition and modernity, and elite and popular culture. Defying the essentialist and Orientalist perceptions of them, many gisaeng endeavored to transform themselves into modern women on their own terms, despite the numerous challenges that the society imposed upon them. They protested fiercely against the colonial administration when they were classified in the same category with street prostitutes and forced to take regular health examinations to check for venereal diseases. Countering the criticism that they had degenerated into vulgar entertainers, many gisaeng actively sought further professional training, which included painting and calligraphy.

The *Joseon miin bogam* (*A Handbook of Beautiful Joseon Women*), published in 1918, identifies 34 of the 605 registered professional gisaeng as specialists in painting and calligraphy (Choe, 2013). The first gisaeng artist to be introduced in a newspaper was Ju Sanwol (1894–1982). The 1913 report on Ju comments on her art as well as her elegant physical attributes and her refined aura. Some gisaeng artists received training from renowned artists of their time. Kim Neunghae (b. 1894) studied under master calligrapher–painter Kim Gyujin (1869–1933), and Kim Wolhui (b. 1897) left her gisaeng career and entered art school to become a professional artist. Other gisaeng artists, such as Ham Insuk and Jeon Chunhong, were featured in 1920 at the Industrial Expo in Fukuoka, Japan. Yet, after enjoying a vigorous artistic career in their late teens and early twenties, these gisaeng artists disappeared into oblivion, with the exception of O Gwisuk.

O Gwisuk: Defying Entertainment with Art

My investigation of O Gwisuk¹ was sparked after I came across two of her later works, dated 1968 and 1976, in the Korean collection of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Canada (Figures 1 and 2). The discovery was a surprising one because she appeared to have disappeared from the public radar since the 1930s. The newspapers, from the 1920s, identify O as the most celebrated gisaeng artist of the time. She was a three-time winner (1924, 1925, and 1926) at the Chosen Art Exhibition, a prestigious national art exhibition organized by the colonial Japanese government in Korea. The June 2, 1924 issue of the *Maeil Sinbo* (*Daily News*) reported O's first success at the exhibition in great detail, including an interview with the artist (*Maeil Sinbo*, 1924). According to the news, among the 50 paintings in the category of the Four Noble Plants,² the most outstanding work that attracted the attention of many was O's monochrome ink painting entitled "Orchids" (Figure 3). The article also provides information on O's personal life and artistic training.

Born in Incheon in 1906, O lost her father at a young age. She attended Yeonghwa Girls' School in Incheon for three years but could not continue her studies due to financial difficulties. At age 14, she joined a gisaeng school to become a professional entertainer. From the beginning of her training, she set her mind on learning calligraphy and painting, and she studied under three masters of calligraphy and painting: Kim Eungwon (1855–1921), Kim Gyujin (1868–1933), and Kim Yongjin (1878–1968). Regarding her prize-winning painting, O reportedly said that she had spent only 30 minutes on it and certainly had not expected to win any recognition. Following this surprising success, O told the reporter that

1. O had three courtesy names—Yeonngong (Ink Play), Sanhong (Mountain Red), and Hongwol (Iridescent Moon)—which was customary within the art and literary circles at that time.

2. *The Four Noble Plants* (plum blossom, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum), also known as *The Four Gentlemen*, were popular subjects in the traditional literati painting. They represented moral virtues desired of respectable literati, namely, strength, elegance, uprightness and reclusive spirit. While both male and female artists painted *The Four Noble Plants*, working in the genre of traditional ink painting, O actively appropriated and reinterpreted traditionally masculine virtues.

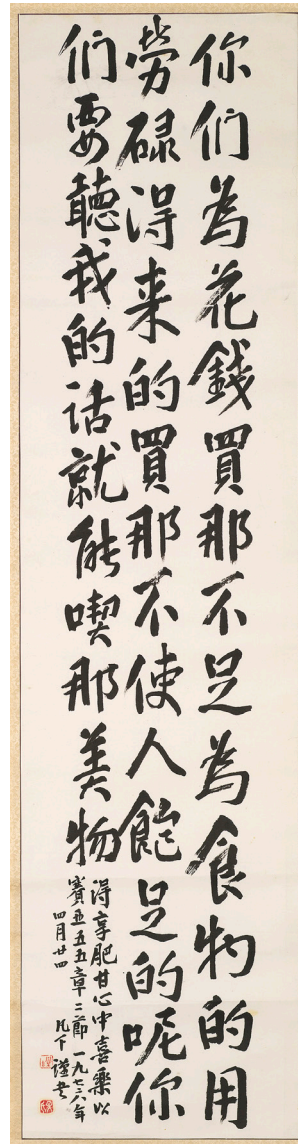


Figure 1. *Lotus Flower and Calligraphy* by O Gwisuk (1968). The Collection of Royal Ontario Museum, Canada (989.164.3). The painting of the lotus plant shows O's bold yet graceful washes of ink and color. The calligraphy in Chinese characters is a passage from the Bible, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (John 1:18, New International Version).

Figure 2. *Calligraphy* by O Gwisuk (1976). The Collection of Royal Ontario Museum, Canada (989.164.2). This is a good example of O's Christian calligraphy. The text in Chinese writes, "Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare" (Isaiah 55:2, New International Version).



Figure 3. *Orchids* by O Gwisuk (1924). The Third Chosen National Exhibition Catalogue. This was O's prize-winning painting at the 1924 Chosen Art Exhibition.

she would pursue an artist profession in calligraphy and painting. The news article also stated that O's work impressed the Japanese juror, Taguchi Beihō (1861–1930), who, after learning about O's background, invited her to demonstrate her calligraphy and painting before an audience. It is said that the audience was utterly amazed by her excellent brushwork. Taguchi, himself a famous calligrapher and a scholar of Chinese southern-style paintings, gave O a new courtesy name, "Hongwol (Iridescent Moon)," in place of her previous one, "Yeonngong (Ink Play)," as a sign of appreciation; and he promised to send her exemplary works of calligraphy and painting every week to aid in her study. Overall, the news report makes it clear that as the first gisaeng to win a prize at the national art exhibition, O quickly became a nationwide sensation.

In the following year, O's painting titled "Autumn Chrysanthemum" once again won at the national art exhibition. On May 25, 1926, covering her third-time success at the exhibition, the *Donga Ilbo* (*East Asia Daily*) introduced O as a "woman artist" for the first time (*Donga Ilbo*, 1926):

In the past, calligraphy and ink painting were a part of gisaeng's art. Besides singing lyrical poems, playing the zither, and dancing, a good gisaeng had to write decent calligraphy and paint ink orchids and plum blossoms, and only then was she able to participate in the noble art of love. Because the gisaeng had such sophisticated interests, a popular expression "gisaeng prime minister" (referring to the gisaeng of the royal palace) appeared, which shows that they were a respectable class.

But what has become of the gisaeng in recent years? Even those who cannot sing even one lyrical poem or perform one dance well, let alone [do] calligraphy and ink painting, as long as they have pretty faces and know segments of vulgar songs such as "Nanbong song" and "Yangsan song," they would be dragged here and there until their bodies are torn.

Is this because the decadent society corrupted the gisaeng, or did the decadent gisaeng corrupt the society? But, fortunately, among

over 500 gisaeng in Seoul, we finally have one named Hongwol, Ms. O Gwisuk. Anyone who has seen her ink painting of orchids at the art exhibition cannot but be amazed by her refined brushwork. That she is currently a registered gisaeng particularly draws our attention.³

The report effectively summarizes the negative perception of the gisaeng, which was prevalent at the time. The author reproaches contemporary gisaeng for failing to train in the arts of traditional male elites and holds them accountable for degrading from respectable professionals to vulgar entertainers. The abuses and exploitations the gisaeng suffer from their clients and the larger public, therefore, are presented as well-deserved retributions fit for evil corruptors of society. In the eyes of her male admirer, O symbolized the last of the now extinct class of traditional beauties.

O's fame as an accomplished artist grew. She set up her own art salon, the Orchid Studio, which was frequented by celebrities and intellectuals for refined leisure of art and poetry. The studio was a place for O to practice her art, interact with contemporary artists and train younger gisaeng in the art of traditional painting and calligraphy. The name of the studio "Orchid" suggests O's own pursuit of cultured elegance and her

3. English translation by the author. Original text in Korean: 이전에는 글시를 잘 쓰고 목화를 치는것이 기생의 기예(妓藝)의 하나이었다. 시조를 잘 부르고 거문고를 잘 타며 춤을 잘 추는것과 가치 베투와 조화를 대하면 글시깨나 제법 쓸 줄 알고 란초나 매화 한 가지를 칠 줄 알아야 제법 행세하는 기생이었고 그래야 점자는 사랑노름에 참여할 수가 잇섯던 것이다. 기생에게는 이러한 고상한 취미가 잇기 때문에 "기생재상"이라 하는 속어가 잇섯고 점잔은 지위를 가지고 잇섯던 것이다. 그러나 근년에 이르러 기생사회는 엇더한가? 글을 짓고 목화를 치기커녕 시조 한 편을 잘 부르지 못하고 춤 한 가지를 배호지 못한 기생이라도 얼굴만 반반하고 난봉가가 양산도 가튼 잡가 부스럭이만 할 줄알면 예서제서 불느는 노름에 몸이 찍기게 되는것이다. 사회가 먼저 타락되어 기생을 이러케 타락식혔는가 기생이 먼저 타락되어 사회가 타락되었는가! 그러나 이제 다행히 서울 장안에 오백여명이나 되는 기생 가운데 오죽 한 사람을 볼 수가 잇스니 즉 홍월(虹月) 오귀숙(吳貴淑)씨다. 미술던람회에 가보신이는 다 아시려니와 씨가 그린 목란(墨蘭)을 볼때에 필치의 능란함을 놀나지아니 할 수가 업다 뿐만 아니라 현재 씨가 기덕(妓籍)에 일흠을 가지고 잇는 이만큼 우리의 이목을 끈다.

desire to distinguish her profession from mere entertainment for men.

The *Gaehwa baekgyeong* (*One Hundred Scenes of Civilization*) by Yi Gyutae, which highlights the signs of modernization in early modern Korea, features O's Orchid Studio as one of the notable cultural sites of the time. The book also comments on O's unique sense of fashion, saying, "O was always dressed in cuffless white skirts and white tops with a bright red, green, or blue breast tie" (Yi, 1973, p. 261). The book introduces her as a talented woman who practiced the elegant art of the traditional literati. Some of the poems written by O's literati acquaintances in her honor have survived, including the two below, which were written by renowned scholars Yun Huigu (1867–1926) and Yi Neunghwa (1869–1943), respectively:

A natural fragrance emanates from your brush-holding hand.
Breaking a man's heart with rouge and powder you regard with shame.
Don't be saddened at the sight of gray hair.
Avoid chasing the east wind that blows willow flowers into disarray.⁴

There is a true orchid in our eastern land,
in a hidden valley where no one knows.
As people suddenly see it,
her fragrant fame fills all under heaven.⁵ (Yi, 1984, pp. 260-261)

The first poem by Yun praises O's inner beauty, which originates from her sincere dedication to art. The poem also extols O's strong integrity reflected in her refusal to use her feminine qualities to charm her male admirers. Yun tells O not to be minded by the disappearance of her physical beauty, which comes with age and not to succumb to romantic

4. English translation by the author. The original poem in classical Chinese: 腕下天然一種香。羞將脂粉斷人腸。見儂頭白休惆悵。免逐東風柳絮狂。

5. English translation by the author. The original poem in classical Chinese: 東土有真蘭。幽谷無知者。世人忽相見。芳名滿天下。

passion, which, like the willow flowers in the spring wind, will only be ephemeral. The second poem by Yi celebrates O as a "true orchid," a genuine embodiment of cultured elegance. Yi describes how O's quiet cultivation of herself through art earned her great reputation not just from her male audience but also from the society at large. All these accounts draw attention to O's gender, moral qualities, and cultural training, and they portray her as a visible guardian of traditional Korean femininity, which, according to the male writers of her time, was quickly disappearing under the influence of colonial modernity.

O Gwisuk: In Her Own Voice

An in-depth look at O's own life and writings, however, reveals that she envisioned herself and her art very differently from her male aficionados. Contrary to the widespread characterization of gisaeng as the preservers of traditional culture and values, many gisaeng were in fact modern women who adopted the modern European fashion and lifestyle. Recent studies have highlighted the activities of gisaeng who reinvented themselves as popular modern entertainers in Broadway-style shows (Sin, 2007). While many in O's time assumed that the gisaeng like O, who wore traditional clothes and practiced traditional arts, also held more traditional views in comparison to the so-called *modern gisaeng*, who wore bobbed hair and performed jazz dance, a close look at O's life reveals such understanding did not reflect the complex reality of modernity and its impact on women in Korea.

O was part of a growing trend among accomplished gisaeng who, through education, sought to develop individual and artistic professionalism. Their financial independence and broad networks granted them greater social mobility, matching or even surpassing what only elite women in Korea at the time were entitled to, such as access to higher education and open participation in various social and cultural activities. Many gisaeng entered girls' schools, and the number of educated gisaeng grew. School administrators were fearful of gisaeng students transgressing the established social boundaries and hierarchies. Bolstered by the social rhetoric of protecting "innocent" students from the evil influence of gisaeng, some schools banned the gisaeng from enrolling and expelled

gisaeng enrolled (*Sidae Ilbo*, 1924). While the society continued its effort to separate and distinguish the gisaeng from the noble and modern New Women,⁶ by, for instance, introducing visual identification methods (*Maeil Sinbo*, 1919a, 1919b),⁷ undeterred female entertainers persistently challenged the status quo by advocating women's liberation, and class and gender equality.

From the media, the Korean public came to learn about the stories of these women's daring struggles. The most sensational example was Gang Hyangran, a former gisaeng, who disguised herself as a man to go to school. Gang's male masquerade was exposed and she was expelled. She was able to continue her education at a local training school, yet circumstances moved her to attempt suicide. She then went to Shanghai and Tokyo, and later returned to Korea and found her career as a journalist and later as an actress (*Donga Ilbo*, 1922, 1925, 1926). The stories of Gang's dramatic life, which flourished in the newspapers and magazines of the time, clearly demonstrate her unyielding efforts toward creating her own life. Indeed, in many aspects, the gisaeng acted as leaders of New Womanhood.⁸ The kind of education offered at contemporary women's schools often reflected the values of modern patriarchal society and, therefore, faced increasing criticism from the liberal sector, which pointed out that instead of contributing to women's liberation these schools focused on producing ideal housewives (*Dongnip Sinmun*, 1920). In fact, in spite of the widespread stigmatization of the gisaeng, even graduates from women's schools chose a gisaeng career, which offered them greater individual freedom and creative professionalism as an alternative

6. The "new women (*sinyeoseong*)" referred to urban middle and upper class females who received modern education and adopted modern fashion and lifestyles. Their emergence in 1920s Korea was inspired by a similar movement in Japan. While many "new women" in colonial Korea advocated women's rights and freedoms, the male-dominated society tried to constrain and, at times, vilify them as threats to established order.

7. The *Maeil Sinbo* articles discuss various ways to make the distinction between the gisaeng and the non-gisaeng more visible, such as, introducing mandatory identification labels for the gisaeng, standardizing gisaeng's outfit, and banning modern-style clothes for the gisaeng.

8. The New Womanhood that women like Gang Hyangran belonged, represented women's freedom and independence through education and career.

to married life (Seo, 2005). Despite the society's attempts to contain and control them, the gisaeng was an open and evolving category; its members had shared but, also, markedly different experiences.

O's Art Education

O Gwisuk's life and art should be considered in this larger historical and cultural context. Prior to beginning her gisaeng training, O received a modern education at a girls' school. As she remarked in her 1924 interview, she approached her art with a sense of professionalism. She paid for her art education and was tutored by the best teachers of her time, which included three of the most celebrated painters in early 20th-century Korea. Her first teacher, Kim Eung-won, was renowned for his paintings of rocks and orchids. O's study with Kim was a brief one, as Kim passed away the year after O began her gisaeng training in 1920.

Her second teacher, Kim Gyujin, a master calligrapher-painter, was also a pioneer of modern art in Korea. He opened the first modern-style art gallery in Korea, in which he showcased his own works, as well as the works of contemporary artists. He was also the founder of the first modern art school in Korea, which offered a standard three-year program. O appears to have studied under Kim Gyujin for a few years. Kim Gyujin's greatest influence on O is seen in her active engagement in the contemporary art scene, including her participation in national art exhibitions.

O's third teacher, Kim Yongjin, appears to have had the greatest influence on her art. As a literati painter, who practiced art leisurely rather than for a living, Kim was different from O's first two teachers, who were professional painters. Thanks to her distinguished artistic training and network, O was able to establish herself as a dynamic member of the art community.

O's Feminist Art Advocacy

O's vision of herself and her art is most lucidly captured in her 1927 essay featured in *Janghan (A Long Suffering)*, a journal published by a group of progressive gisaeng to mobilize efforts toward social re-

form and to fight widespread discrimination (Figure 4). Her essay titled “Our Realization of and Resolution for a New Life,” published in the first issue of the journal, begins with a call for all gisaeng to examine themselves critically and to open their eyes to new possibilities:

We are also people: Oh, friends who are in the same situation and share the same stories! Let us recollect the road we have traveled and think about the possibilities of the future. We have walked truly deplorable and dreary roads. Therefore, we must, from now on, germinate new sprouts in the new ground. (Son, 2009, p. 218)⁹

Throughout the essay, O expresses her ideas about the role of the gisaeng and their profession in Korean society. She argues that while modern civilization is built on the ideas of the equality of all humans and the sacredness of all occupations, the gisaeng continued to suffer discrimination because of their gender, class, and occupation.

O attributes the cause of continuing prejudice to the persistence of traditional social values based on rigid hierarchy. A critique of hierarchical power structures continues to be a concern of feminists around the world. O states in her 1927 essay:

In the olden days, because of the four social classes of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants, people discriminated against people of different classes, regarding officials and scholars with respect, followed by farmers, artisans, and merchants, but this is a thing of the uncivilized past. This society certainly needs officials, scholars, and farmers, but how can the society be complete without industrialists and business people, and how can we lead a life of leisure without artists and musicians? Since they are all indispensable, with this realization and understanding, ordinary people—that is, everyone—must strive to let the light of their profession shine. (Son, 2009, p. 219)¹⁰

She goes on to argue that gisaeng as a profession fulfills the role of creating and delivering “tasteful pleasure” to the society.

Our profession concerns tasteful pleasure. A person will not be satisfied with his or her life just by enjoying gorgeous dress and dainty food in the palatial mansion. A cheerful and artistic life of tasteful pleasure—in other words, a kind of emotional life that makes one laugh as well as cry—is indispensable. Poetry and

10. English translation by the author. Original text in Korean: 전일에는 사농공상(士農工商)이라고 하여 관리나 선비가 귀하고 그 다음이 농민, 공장, 상민의 순서로 귀천의 차별을 하였으나 이것은 미개한 시대의 일이다. 이 사회에는 물론 관리나 학자도 업서서는 아니되며 농부도 업서서는 아니되겠으나 공업가와 상업가가 업스면 이 사회가 엇지 완성되며 예술가나 음악가가 업스면 취미있는 생활을 무엇으로 경영할 것인가. 그 업지 못할 점에 잇서서는 일반인 즉 여기에 대하여 누구든지 그 직업에 대한 자각과 관념을 가지고 그 직업에 대한 광채를 내어야 되겠다.



Figure 4. Covers of *Janghan*, vol. 1-2. Volume 1 (left) shows a gisaeng trapped inside a birdcage. The text reads “Friend, Think about this body inside a birdcage!” Volume 2 (right) shows two women—one in traditional dress and a New Woman—holding hands.

9. English translation by the author. Original text in Korean: 우리도 사람이다. 처지가 갓고 사정이 갓튼 동무들아! 우리는 지나온 길을 회상하고 모든 미래를 생각하여 보자. 우리는 너무나 한심하고 적막한 길을 밟아왔다. 그런즉 우리는 지금부터 새터 우에 새싹을 도치게 하여야 하겠다.

songs are essential. Nothing is more tasteless and bleak than a life that lacks tasteful pleasure. ... Though busy with work, people cannot be satisfied without experiencing the joy and pleasure of life, and I believe dance and music serve to make life joyful, pleasant, and radiant. Therefore, who can say that serving wine with poems about the snow and the moon and comforting the heart with songs about flowers and birds is a lowly profession! This truly is a life of tasteful pleasure. (Son, 2009, p. 219)¹¹

Throughout the text, O presents the gisaeng as the producers of refined leisure who contribute to the materialist modern society by meeting the deep emotional and cultural needs of the people living within it. She invites all gisaeng to recognize the value of their profession and to take pride in their work. More importantly, she calls all gisaeng to professionalize themselves through education and training to fully realize their potential. She concludes the essay by listing four areas of improvement that are necessary for the gisaeng to take an initial step toward a new life: (a) cultivating knowledge and artistry, (b) abandoning old and indifferent feelings and enlivening new and sensitive feelings, (c) resisting the oppressive present circumstances in order to fully express individual artistic personalities, and (d) uniting the power to protect the human rights of the gisaeng.

Her essay demonstrates that, as a leading member of the gisaeng community, O was actively involved in challenging the status quo by promoting feminist ideas through her writing and actions. Unfortunately, this journal, which sought to disseminate feminist values and bring about

11. English translation by the author. Original text in Korean:

우리의 직업은 취미적이다. 사람이 한 세상을 사러 가려면 다만 고대왕실에서 금의옥식을 누리는 것으로만 만족하지 못할 것이다. 유쾌한 예술적 취미생활 다시 말하자면 웃고 심기도 하고 울고 심기도 한 일종의 감정생활이 업서선 아니된다. 시와 노래가 업서섯는 아니된다. 몰 취미한 생활처럼 살풍경의 일은 업슬 것이다. ... 우리가 활동하는 반면에는 즐겁고 유쾌함을 맛보는 일이 업스면 만족하지 못하나니, 나는 가무나 음악이 사람의 생활은 유쾌게 하고 즐겁게 하고 광채 있게 하는 것이라고 생각한다. 그런즉 눈(雪)과 달을 읊퍼서 술을 권하며 꽃과 새를 노래해야 마음을 위로함이 그 무엇이 비천하랴. 실로 취미적 생활이라 하겠다.

real social change, was discontinued in 1927, only a year after its conception. Yet, the publication of such a journal testifies to the lively social and political involvement of the gisaeng in early modern Korea. The gisaeng were unionized and often staged strikes to demand better working conditions. They also regularly organized fundraising concerts to help the less privileged in society, especially elderly citizens and orphans. Progressive and resilient, they strove to create their own identities, realize their dreams, contribute to the society, and fight for their rights and the rights of other marginalized people.

On April 11, 1927, two months after the publication of her essay, O left for Tokyo to pursue further artistic training. The following day, the *Maeil Sinbo* (*Daily News*) reported the news of her departure under the headline “Yesterday morning Ms. Hongwol left for Tokyo to study the Southern School Painting” (Figure 5) (*Maeil Sinbo*, 1927). It stated that O removed her name from the gisaeng registry and went to study in Tokyo, where leading Japanese artists already recognized her talent. O ventured abroad in search of education like many New Women of her time.



Figure 5. *Maeil Sinbo* (*Daily News*) April 12, 1927. The newspaper article reports O’s departure to Tokyo in pursuit of professional art training.

But unlike most New Women art students and artists who pursued education in modern Western art or modern Japanese art in Japan, O travelled there to study the Southern School Painting, the most recognized school of traditional literati painting, which originated in China during the 10th century and later spread to Korea and Japan. The Southern School tradition emphasized the connection between the artist's moral and cultural cultivation and artistic production. O felt passionate about this school of art and wished to establish herself as a recognized artist in the field.

O's Mary Magdalene Identity: Woman of Repentance

Three years later, when the Korean public heard about O again, she had transformed into a very different person. Under the title "Woman of Repentance: A former gisaeng, now a Christian: Where did the famous gisaeng artist Hongwol go?," the author of the July 8, 1930, article of the *Maeil Sinbo* writes that O, now a woman evangelist, dressed in a simple white jacket and black skirt, sells copies of the Bible in the streets of Seoul. When questioned about her decision to choose a religious path, O replied:

As a child I studied the Confucian Analects. Recently, after reading Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, I came to a realization and joined the International Bible Students Association last June. My past life of wine and men's desires became strength for me to draw near God. When singing hymns, praying, and reading the Bible, inexplicable holy joy springs forth within me. I will dedicate my life to the truth of Christ like Mary Magdalene. (*Maeil Sinbo*, 1930)

The article includes a picture of O (Figure 6), with a halo behind her head, holding a stack of Bibles wrapped in cloth. The International Bible Students Association, which started in 1914 in Seoul, was an organization of Jehovah's Witness mission. The Christian sect was persecuted under the colonial government in Korea for its rejection of Shinto worship and criticism of the government's policies. O's identification with Mary Magdalene, a repentant prostitute who later became one of the key

followers of Jesus, tellingly describes her conversion experience.



Figure 6. *Maeil Sinbo* (*Daily News*) July 8, 1930. This photograph of O, which was included in the newspaper article titled, "Woman of Repentance: A former gisaeng, now a Christian: Where did the famous gisaeng artist Hongwol go?," wonderfully captures O's new identity as a Christian evangelist.

After religious conversion in the late 1920s, O married twice and had a child from each marriage. Her first husband was a university professor who, due to serious health problems, retired from academics early in his career. Her second husband was an ethnic Chinese living in Korea. Both marriages were short-lived, and after surviving the Korean War, O supported her family by running a not very successful small business. O also made an income from teaching painting and calligraphy to students in her 50s and 60s.

The next media coverage of O, which publicized her solo art exhibition, came 33 years later in 1963. The July 12, 1963, issue of the *Donga Ilbo* (*East Asia Daily*) reported that O (then 57) had an exhibition of her calligraphy of biblical passages at the arts and craft store inside the US military base in Seoul. The article also stated that all proceedings

from the exhibition would be used to support the Baptist church mission in Korea. Although a brief report, it reveals that O continued her artistic activities after her religious conversion (*Donga Ilbo*, 1963).

O's painting and calligraphy at Canada's Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) were completed at the age of 62 and 70, respectively. Moon Okdong donated the two works in 1989 when she visited the museum as a representative of the Soroptimist International in Korea. More importantly, Moon had studied painting and calligraphy under O, beginning in the late 1970s and continued for more than a decade, and, hence, knew the artist and her personal life. Through interviews with Moon Okdong; Yi Gyeongsuk, who was another of O's former students; and Dr. Son Jibong, O's granddaughter, I was able to learn about O's later life as a highly respected professional artist.

Conclusion: A Life of Art and Activism

O never sold her art for money, in keeping with the spirit of the literati tradition of art, which stipulates that the practice of art should be for self-cultivation, not for material gain (Figures 7 and 8). Moon recalls that O lived in destitute conditions yet was not ashamed of her poverty, and always treated people with respect.



Figure 7 (left). Painting by O Gwisuk. Year unknown. Private Collection. The calligraphy dedicates the painting to her female artist friend, Jo Giyeong.



Figure 8 (right). Painting by O Gwisuk, 1993. Private Collection. This is another good example of O's work that combines painting of flowers with calligraphy of biblical passage. The passage written here comes from Matthew 55:2: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (New International Version).

Throughout her life, she remained an avid learner. Besides Korean, O was fluent in Japanese, Chinese, and English. She was fully versed in the Confucian classics, as well as in classical Korean and Chinese literature. She was actively involved in various scholarly and cultural activities; and was a member of the Association for Scholars of Classical Literature for many years after leaving the gisaeng profession. O was known in intellectual circles, and her friends included university presidents. She taught calligraphy, painting, and classical literature to many women as private tutor.

An important element of O's later works is their Christian content. Both her calligraphy and painting at the ROM feature biblical passages. In one of the seals printed on the calligraphy, O identifies herself as "Gakbi (Feeling Unworthy)," expressing her deep religious commitment. O later became a member of the International Baptist Church, which was located across from the United States military base in Seoul. Her involvement in the church explains the location of her 1963 exhibition. O dedicated herself to charity work and regularly hosted English Bible studies at her residence.

She passed away in 1996 (Figure 9). Interestingly, neither her family nor her students were aware of the fact that O was once the most celebrated gisaeng artist of early modern Korea. The news of O's former life as a gisaeng greatly surprised them. While the social stigma toward the gisaeng might have played a role in O's decision of non-disclosure, as her accounts reveal, O did not wish to be defined by her past and instead continued to create her future on her own terms.



Figure 9. O Gwisuk in her late years.
Image courtesy of O Gwisuk's family.

O's life bears witness to the long and tumultuous road traveled by a woman artist in 20th-century Korea. Living and supporting herself and her family throughout the colonial era, the Korean War, and the United States military occupation, and gradual democratization of South Korea, O held fast to her passionate dedication to art, education, and Christianity. As a modern woman who actively charted her own path, O subverted the gender and power paradigm imposed on her by the society. Her life and career as an artist, social activist, religious mentor, and women's educator challenge the stereotypes and characterization of a female artist, especially someone who came from the gisaeng background. Her life-long practice of and dedication to literati painting also illuminates how, through creative effort, she redefined the traditionally male-dominated art form as a channel for expressing her individuality and life experiences as a modern woman artist.

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