

Visual Modernity

Screening Women in Colonial Media

During her travels throughout Korea during the late nineteenth century, the British traveler Isabella Bird Bishop noticed a “curious arrangement” in the streets of the capital. She wrote that when the bell rang signaling eight o’clock, men would clear the streets of Seoul thereby allowing “bodies of women with servants carrying lanterns” to occupy the dark streets.¹ But when midnight arrived, the bell would toll again at which point women would retire and men would return to the streets to go about as they pleased. According to Bishop’s accounts, an upper-class Korean woman confirmed this curious arrangement by stating that “she had never seen the streets of Seoul by daylight.”² Bishop went on to sketch upper-class Korean women as either being cloistered in the women’s quarters or heavily veiled and covered on occasions when it was necessary for them to leave their quarters. Women had “to go out suitably concealed at night, or ... in rigidly enclosed chairs.”³ Bishop’s attitude toward upper-class Korean women was not simply one of curiosity but was strongly tinged with bewildered condescension. But if Bishop expressed condescension toward the upper-class Korean women who were permitted to take to the streets only after sunset, she was equally vocal in expressing her disdain for the lower-class Korean women who were able to be seen outside their homes and on the streets during all hours of the day for work, especially laundering. Bishop describes these women as “ill-bred and unmannerly” and “far removed from gracefulness,” especially compared to Japanese women of the same social status.⁴ To be sure, post-*Orientalism* readers can readily recognize Bishop’s bias in her incredulity at the status of Korean women. After all, she is making her observations from the position of a privileged, worldly, British traveler who has not only toured extensively throughout the United States, Canada, Hawaii, Japan, Australia, and China (among many other countries) but also strolled

1 Isabella Bird Bishop traveled through Korea between 1894 and in 1897. She spent a total of eleven months in Korea during which time she had also traveled through northern China. Bishop, *Korea and Her Neighbors* (London: Reville, 1898), 47.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*, 341.

4 *Ibid.*, 339. Bishop had previously traveled through Japan before arriving at the port city Pusan, Korea.

through the streets of Seoul in broad daylight to see and to be seen. Despite the orientalist overtones of her description, I am interested in Bishop's role as a social historian (an ethnographer), not unlike the modernologists of the early twentieth century, who attempts to record the urban milieu of the late nineteenth-century Chosŏn dynasty and explore the questions of who was on the streets of Seoul at what times, where were they seen and what were they doing. Through her brief commentaries on the social position of Korean women, Bishop also describes Seoul's streets—the public space—as both a place of danger (for well-bred women) and endangerment (when occupied by “ill-bred” women). Although in the eyes of Bishop, Seoul streets did represent a site of hostility, both upper- and lower-class Korean women appear to have been part of street life and urban culture at the *fin de siècle*, although their role was limited.

If Korean women were becoming more visible in public in late nineteenth-century Chosŏn, then in the first few decades of the twentieth century they became hypervisible. They seemed to be everywhere and everywhere visible—going abroad to study, traveling outside Korea, strolling in the streets of Seoul, shopping in department stores like Mitsukoshi or Hwashin, sipping coffee in cafés, laundering along Ch'ŏnggyech'on, appearing on stage and in films, collecting tickets on the streetcars, writing under their own names, and being written about in novels, newspapers, and magazines. This new hypervisibility of Korean women was closely linked to the growth of colonial Kyŏngsŏng where physical, social, cultural, moral, and material transformations altered the everyday life and brought forth new styles, sensibilities, and attitudes. Two of the primary inhabitants of the city—key players in this urban narrative—were the New Woman and the Modern Girl, who materialized, both locally and globally, as important figures to enliven the formation of urban modernity. This excitement about newness and modernity, however, was coupled with an equal level of anxiety concerning the new and the modern associated with Japanese colonialism, capitalist modernity, and bourgeois middle-class ideology. The increasing visibility of women in the new urban landscape further stirred the disquiet.

In this final chapter, I am interested in exploring how Korean and Taiwanese women become visible and visualized in various media forms. I want to examine how being a female participant, observer of, or a social actor in urban life contributed to or agitated the visual modernity of the city. If, as Lewis Mumford has argued, the city is a “theater” where “social action” is performed, then Korean and Taiwanese women who had had only a limited access to the city until the early 1900s were not only participating in an “urban drama” but