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## **Café Waitresses and Disharmony: “Erotic Grotesque” Aestheticism in 1930s Colonial Korea**

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***Abstract:** In this article, I examine how popular media and writer constructed a new gender type in early 1930s Korea. I trace transition of female gender types by examining how popular media constructed the new erotic sexuality of modern girls (modan gŏl) in the early 1930s. After the Great Depression, Korean popular culture initiated its own crusade of eliminating disharmony in the midst of global surge of fascist culture. In particular, urban, working-class women drew public attention as icons of decadent eroticism and morally-bankrupt modernism. Café waitresses were a case in point. In this article, I aim to scrutinize how and why café waitresses became popular cultural icons and targets of male violence in the decade. Korean male audiences gazed on these women with two conflicting views of captivation and resentment. Café waitresses, therefore, were a new gender type which stood for Western modernism, consumerism, and eroticism. Facing the highly commercialized eroticism, Korean males wished to purify and discipline them in domestic and public space through brute force. I argue that Korean mass/popular culture restored masculine power and male heroism by demonizing modern girls in the post-Great Depression Korea.*

### **1. Introduction**

In this article, I examine how popular media and writers constructed a new gender type in early 1930s Korea. The Great Depression severely struck the Japanese economy in

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the late 1920s, and colonial Korea also fell into unprecedented economic crisis, uprooting the rural population and disintegrating the previous agrarian society. After 1931, the economy showed steady signs of recovery. The Japanese invasion to China coincided with the end of the Great Depression. Colonial Korea was deeply tangled in regional politics, since the Japanese Empire utilized the colony as the major military base to invade China. The Japanese soldiers marched to the north and landless Korean peasants also came along with the Japanese army to Manchuria in the 1930s. Indeed, this decade of the 1930s has been understood as the years of the dark valley: the downfall of liberalism, military adventurism, and wartime mobilization. In Japan, party politics tumbled because of the growth of militaristic and fascistic movements; prominent politicians and ministers were assassinated by right-wing terrorists and young military officials. The state's control and management over the youth and women grew tighter than before, as the wartime empire prepared for total mobilization. So, writers and philosophers of anti-modernism hammered malicious effects of Westernization and called for direct actions. The Japanese took on many radical methods which resembled European fascism.

In a similar but slightly different context of colonial Korea, we can discover that Korean popular culture in the 1930s also initiated its own crusade of eliminating disharmony. In particular, urban, working-class women drew public attention as icons of decadent eroticism and morally-bankrupt modernism. Café waitresses were a case in point. In this article, I aim to scrutinize how and why café waitresses became popular cultural icons and targets of male violence in the 1930s. Korean male audiences gazed on these women with two conflicting views of captivation and resentment. Café waitresses were a new gender type which stood for Western modernism, consumerism, and eroticism. Facing the highly commercialized eroticism, Korean males wished to purify and discipline them in domestic and public space through brute force.

So far, many studies on Korean gender history have centered on the issues of female education, Confucian

ethics, and the conflicts between the two. Indeed, the term “new women” (*sinyösöng*) of the 1920s characterized the voices of Korean women who demanded gender equality and the reform of Korean traditional ethics. In contrast to the term “modern girls” (*modan göl*) in the 1930s, “new women” was much more positive, meaning the women who had received new education at colonial public schools or Western missionary schools. Their new education characterized the unprecedented empowerment of young women by training them for new careers as school teachers, nurses, or journalistic writers. On the contrary, modern girls of the 1930s were less oriented toward their education than toward their lifestyles and consuming patterns. While new women aggressively problematized the traditional gender hierarchy and inequality, the situation changed in the 1930s when modern girls were deemed as a serious threat and a source of social discord in Korean society and domesticity.

Therefore, in this article, I trace such transition of female gender types by examining how popular media constructed the new erotic sexuality of modern girls in the early 1930s. Anti-modernism became a significant part of Korean popular culture, especially as the Westernized erotic sexuality provoked wide antagonism and even sadistic desires. Indeed, there existed a wide spectrum of how to deal with the erotic sexuality of the 1930s literary culture. Yet, I demonstrate that Korean popular literature (and mass culture) often had no mercy in dehumanizing modern girls and beautified the destruction of erotic bodies as the solution of disharmony. Such reactions were motivated by male sexual desire and frustration which, in the beginning, created the eroticism and then destroyed it. By examining the complicated interaction among café waitresses, media, and popular writers, I argue that Korean mass/popular culture in the 1930s restored masculine power and male heroism in the midst of the global spread of fascist culture.

## **2. Female Night-strollers**

Beginning in the 1930s, Seoul’s night scene changed due to young women. Some Korean women stayed late in the commercial districts. They were neither streetwalkers nor people just taking a stroll at night. They were café waitresses (yōgūp). Korean cafés were modeled to be replicas of Japanese cafés. The term “café waitresses” also came from the Japanese neologism jyōkyū. As a historian of modern Japan, Miriam Silverberg has mentioned that the café was different from Western cafés. In Japanese cities, male customers visited cafés for the purpose of enjoying food and drink with female employees of the shop. Both jyōkyū and yōgūp were “a form of sex worker.” Minor physical touch was allowed when they danced together and flirted. One should not, however, confuse them with prostitutes. Yōgūp did not sell their bodies for sex, legally speaking, but they commercialized the erotic womanliness. In order to keep their customers, café waitresses had to dress up well, and develop their conversational skills. It was a rule of thumb both in Japanese and Korean shops.

If we compare the size of Korean cafés with Japanese cafés, the former was much smaller than the latter. Yet, the cultural impact of the night entertainment cannot be underestimated in colonial society. From the 1930s onward, Seoul began to have cafés which served ethnic Korean customers by hiring Korean women. This resulted in great cultural shock to the masses. Since colonial Koreans had experienced the institutionalization of licensed prostitution since 1905, the sex business itself hardly surprised Koreans. Astonishing were the visibility and publicity of female sex workers. A reporter of a Korean popular magazine *Pyōlgōngon* lamented that Seoul turned into “an erotic city” every night. According to him, one could encounter a parade of several thousand young Korean women, strolling on dark streets around two or three a.m. They were café waitresses (yōgūp). One reporter named Ko Yōng-han did not hide disgust toward the scene. He interpreted the presence of female night-strollers as the sign of “the degradation of Seoul.” “You can tell,” he wrote, “that the entire boulevard is filled with the wave of women who just finished their work at café.” In an agitated tone, he emphasized the immoral eroticism which the women represented. “Some women enter

a cuisine open all night with their boyfriends to fill their empty stomach. Some drunken ladies walk reeling up streets from one side to the other, thinking that no one else can share the path with them.” This angry pundit blamed the café waitresses as “destroyers of the Korean family.” He believed that these sex workers endangered the wholesome Korean domesticity. He even did not hesitate to spread a rumor that some waitresses were arrested by police for their illegal prostitution. The café waitresses as a whole were “a group of obscene women,” he argued.

His morally-charged judgment easily reminds us of many bourgeois critics in other countries. In the 1910s and 1920s, working class women in North America and Europe also were put in scrutiny for their “undisciplined” sexual activities. As industrialization and urbanization progressed in colonial Korea in the 1920s and early 30s, social and cultural tension likewise arose regarding gender ethics of working class women. Licensed prostitution houses (called kongch’ang which literally means “public brothels”) barely provoked similar kinds of anxiety in Korean society, because the state and police legitimized the sex business and controlled it as the key concern of public hygiene. Moreover, Japanese military bases in Korea often lured pimps to open new shops in the colony to hire poor Japanese and Korean women. As a result, licensed prostitution harmoniously existed in Korea as a necessary evil. At least, “public brothels” never became a topic of public debate, partly because the colonial state created it and partly because licensed prostitutes were quarantined in red-light streets. As in Japan, licensed prostitutes in colonial Korea were generally poor and uneducated women. In many cases, teenage girls were sold to brothels by parents or brokers. They were forced into the sex trade, believing that they sacrificed themselves for their poverty-stricken family.

Café waitresses were somewhat different. They not only lived in an open public space, but also empowered themselves by embracing modernism. As we can see from figure 1 illustrated in 1930, the Great Depression created two different gender types. Korean men lived lethargically, only staying in one room without a job. By contrast, Korean

women actively adopted modernism (which the illustrator tried to depict with the subject’s short hairdo and nudity). Although the illustrator sarcastically drew her as a premature adult, it is striking to see the imbalance between two genders in the end of the Great Depression. While Korean men still struggled to survive economically, café waitresses seemed to prove the better adaptable in modern era. The waitresses looked sexually attractive while simultaneously they were seen as unbalancing the traditional gender relationship. Unlike prostitutes who were subjected to the police and pimps, café waitresses appeared equal or even superior to men. These aspects surprised and scared bourgeois spectators.

However, it was rather a display of erotic sexuality, than a reality that Korean females could stand equally with males at the cafés. To sell their bodies, waitresses had to wear fancy clothes of Western fashions, and be able to dance to jazz music, to flirt with male customers as if they were their modern girlfriends. In another popular magazine, *Samch’ölli*, we can see how the café waitresses molded and exhibited their bodies and personas sexually to meet the fantasies of the male customers. The interior atmospheres of cafés were especially designed to satisfy the erotic illusion of males. Under the artificial light of a chandelier, waitresses sat together with customers and sometimes danced on the floor. A reporter described one night of a café as follows:

Café! They are full of liquor, women, and grotesques. Red and blue lights illuminate the inside. Under blurry chandeliers, the space is filled with footsteps, the rustling of clothes, cigarette smoke, and liquor. With loud laughing and excitement, young men and women are dancing to loud jazz rhythms. They seem to forget all sorrow and bitterness of their life and enjoy this moment. ... Young men and their waitresses all shout “Let’s eat and drink.” And, they gaze each other, holding the arms of their drunken partner.

Indeed, the café represented the *fin de siècle* amusement of Seoul in 1932. It is surprising that, in the same year, Japanese Kwantung Army occupied Manchuria and built the

puppet state of Manchukuo. As far as we can tell from the nightlife of these men and women, the fierce war in the north hardly affected their everyday life and their flamboyant parties continued at night. Korean cafés provided an exciting shelter for Korean men who had no obligation to fight in the war. It seems that this new space of socializing and entertaining gave males a new pleasure of enjoying modern culture on their own terms. The Korean reading public could also glimpse the new world due to the increase of journalistic coverage on urban culture.

As the colonial Korean economy was recovering from the Great Depression, the number of Korean cafés increased steadily. The most successful club was Café Paradise (Nakwön). In total, fifty-three women worked there as waitresses. It was a common practice that the cafés commercialized female sexuality by dressing them up and making them up like non-Korean modern girls. A short story, *Butterfly*, written by Yu Chin-o provides us a chance to see the everyday life of a café waitress. Published in 1939, this short story features a woman named Myōng-sōn. She works at Café Bana in Seoul and she is called by her customers “Flora.” The exotic name stands for the erotic fantasy which she presents to others: that is, she was an ethnic Korean woman, but pretended to behave like a non-Korean. If we refer to other contemporary reportages, many waitresses adopted Western or Japanese names for this purpose. Having the exotic identity, Flora always moved from one man to the other like a “butterfly.” In Yu Chin-o’s fiction, she had liberal and active sexuality, having eight different boyfriends.

So, café waitresses were seen as modern girls. They wanted to differentiate themselves from prostitutes who came from poor peasant families and who worked in public brothels. For instance, a woman named Chitsuko was a waitress at Café Paradise, dressing up like a Japanese woman and speaking in Japanese in the club. Other women such as Hōsin and Imayai hime marketed themselves as former cinema actresses. Mariko, Mary, Mineko, Aiko, and Yukiko were all famous ethnic Korean café waitresses in Seoul. As Miriam Silverberg argues, such erotic exoticism had the effect of provoking sexual desire and curiosity

among males. The artificial non-Korean identity served the fetishism of male customers who longed for romance with foreign girls. So, it is questionable if the waitresses were really modern girls as generally assumed. By and large, their motivation to work as a sex worker was similar to prostitutes. Most, if not all, chose the profession for economic reasons. But their “eroticism” was constructed by the male audience, and the “immorality” of café waitresses was also part of the male illusion.

### **3. Disharmony (pulhwa)**

Café waitresses were popular idols in the 1930s and male audiences admired them as sexual objects. At the same time, the Korean males also showed profound antagonism. This ambivalence can be seen in the attitudes of popular magazines. Journalists and pundits romanticized the waitresses as tragic heroines of modern life. There were indeed frequent cases of suicide and suicidal attempts by café waitresses. Whenever it occurred, popular media exploited sensationally. In 1932, for example, *Pyōlgōngon* reported the sorrowful ending of a waitress named Masako (Chōng-ja in Korean). The magazine attempted to unveil the private life of the dead waitress by publishing some pages of her diary. She wrote complaints about her customers, writing “K is a mean school boy who always shows off his rich father and their affluence. C always teases me for asking me out to a theater. ... They only long for a gracious, coquette, and innocent womanhood which they think erotic.”<sup>1</sup>

However, some journals broadcasted their suffering and death to giving a moral message to all other waitresses and modern girls. The most circulated daily papers, *The Orient Daily News (Tong-A ilbo)* and *The Korean Daily News (Chosōn ilbo)*, did not miss opportunities to exploit the deaths of “obscene” modern girls. *The Oriental Daily News (Tong-A ilbo)*, for instance, blamed the suicide of a café waitress on her dysfunctional domestic life. In 1933, the paper delivered her death as a kind of melodrama. The newspaper, without concrete proof, diagnosed that she died because of “domestic disharmony (kajōng pulhwa),” leaving untouched the



institutional problems of the so-called sex-business (including “public brothels”). *The Oriental Daily News* narrowly defined her death as due to her personal troubles. Though her suffering was actually the result of the structure of the sex industry, the paper claimed that it was solely her responsibility and the consequence which she might deserve for conflicts with family members.<sup>ii</sup> It was the basic claim of the newspaper on the issue that the café waitresses, and modern girls in general, were the cause of disharmony in society. Of course, Korean families in the 1920s and 30s were far from peaceful and affable groups. There were numerous cases in which a husband killed a wife, a mother-in-law killed a daughter-in-law, and a wife killed a husband. If Korean domesticity was in trouble, it was not because of café waitresses. What made these women particularly vulnerable to violence and public criticism, however, was that they were seen as extramarital partners in the public view. Mass media regarded them not as victims of impoverishment and domestic violence, but as victimizers who destroyed once-harmonious families. When *The Oriental Daily News* reported on another attempt of death in the next few weeks, it distastefully commented that “[Café waitresses] seem to be in a race to kill themselves.”<sup>iii</sup>

Mass media tended to be punitive and hostile to sex workers. Of course, the main focus was placed on the women who were trying to make ends meet, rather than on the men who bought the service. If we compare this situation in colonial Korea to China, the former had little chance to experience massive social movements such as May Fourth Movement of demanding the liberation of women and the reform of traditional gender ethics and stereotypes. As youth received new education at public and private schools in the 1920s, some female students and activists of religious groups began to criticize the gender hierarchy and the inferior status of women in a family. Yet, the liberalization of sex was hypocritical in colonial Korea. Many people knew that “free romance” was nothing foreign to the society, because female sex-workers represented “free romance” against their will—in other words, to the women, it was neither sex nor romance, but simply a difficult, but in most cases their only way of making a living. In Korean society

where prostitution was legal, the slogan of free romance received sarcastic reactions from the media, as something premature and childish (see figure 1).

Yu Chin-o, the author of *Butterfly*, showed us a more nuanced version of free romance in another short story, *Disgraceful Love* (*Ch'ijōng*). Published in 1938 in the magazine *Chogwang*, this story was basically an observation on a café waitress and her domestic disharmony.<sup>iv</sup> This fiction reminds us of a Japanese novel *Chijin no ai* (*Naomi* in English translation) written by a Japanese writer, Tanizaki Jun'ichiro. Yu Chin-o was significantly influenced by Tanizaki Jun'ichiro and other writers of the New Sense Movement (*shingangakuha*). The reason Chin-o indulged in the issue of sexuality and gender can be explained by his regular readings of Tanizaki Jun'ichiro.<sup>v</sup> Yu Chin-o carefully drew the gradual transformation of a Korean woman from a housewife to a café waitress in this story. While her husband appeared as a powerless man caged in the domestic space, the heroine earned bread for the family by working at a restaurant/café.<sup>vi</sup> This depiction of the unbalanced status of a man and a woman matches the cartoon of 1930 (figure 1). In the economic depression, the Korean man confined himself to private space, whereas the woman earned bread in the public space, working as a modern girl.<sup>vii</sup>

Yu Chin-o's *Disgraceful Love* best illustrates how a modern girl faced hostile and even violent response from her own family. Outside the home, the heroine lived an alternative identity under the Japanese name of Rie-san, her Japanese name at her working place. Once back at home, her commercialized sexuality completely turned into de-sexualized motherhood. She appeared as the mother of an infant. Despite her erotic sexuality outside the home, Yu Chin-o mentioned little about the sexual relationship between her and her husband. Her feminine gender was completely dichotomized into a non-erotic and an erotic one inside and outside home. Working at night, Rie-san was equipped with modern consumer goods: a Tokyo-style permanent wave, cosmetics, a fancy handbag, and Western clothes. To a limited degree, she could empower herself to be independent financially and to flirt with her customers

regardless of her marriage. Her husband became increasingly nervous and hostile to her new gender status outside domesticity. As Rie-san gradually replaced her old identity as a wife and a mother, the author sympathetically showed that she was no longer a harmonious member of the Korean family. The story ends with domestic violence in one night. Rie-san comes back to home at almost four a.m., and her husband slaps her face several times when she confesses that she stayed with her coworkers and a manager who was sexually interested in her. The heroine does not protest or defend herself, but endures the violence as if she thinks she deserves it.

Yu Chin-o ended the story ambiguously, questioning why Rie-san should receive all the blame and responsibility in this tragedy. Yu Chin-o wished to draw a more complex picture than a simple dichotomy of a victim/victimizer in domestic disharmony and violence. In fact, her husband knew that his wife had become Rie-san in order to maintain their marriage and take care of their child. The legitimacy of their marriage itself was doubtful, because they were not an officially married couple. From the perspective of Rie-san, the marriage was illegitimate. And, the family pushed her out to work at night. Rie-san was a confident bread-winner of the post-depression Korea, while her husband still struggled to survive in the modern economy. Such a gap, however, only served as an excuse for domestic violence by males rather than resulting in weakened male authority in domesticity. Her sexuality was immoral just as was modernism. So, the logic was not simply based on traditional ethics, but on the frustration and anger against eroticism and everything modern. Men, rather than blaming their newfound impotence on the institutional structures of society which had caused it, saw women, with their new false power as the perfect target. To some men, violence seemed to have the temporary effect of restoring his masculine authority over her dehumanized body.

#### **4. Demonization of Erotic Women**

Mass culture of the 1930s imagined the crisis that eroticized women polluted wholesome Korean society and family. Such sense of insecurity was related to the broad reorganization of society and the economy: migration from rural communities to cities, industrialization, and the spread of the nuclear family in which a couple had to raise their children without collective care from kinship groups. The Great Depression and high rates of unemployment, of course, affected the growing anxiety about gender and sexuality. The eroticized women were visible and easy to pick on scapegoats for the Korean masses to release their fury. The logic was so simple; café waitresses were absolutely evil, and somebody must eliminate them.<sup>viii</sup>

It is of interest that depictions of physical assaults on café waitresses can be found in popular culture in the 1930s. If modern eroticism temporarily empowered these women in cafés as extra-marital heterosexual partners, their non-Koreanness (constructed by a foreign name and foreign clothes) exposed them to the threat from Korean males' violent heroism. One good example is a popular detective novel published in 1934. *The Korean Daily News* (*Chosŏn ilbo*), in which this serialized detective novel appeared, was a leading daily paper where many popular writers such as Yi Kwang-su and Hong Myŏng-hŭi often published their hit novels. The detective novel had the title of *Erotic Demon* (*Yŏmma*). Its author was a man named Sŏ Tong-san, but it is believed that this was the fake name of Ch'ae Man-sik, a graduate of Waseda University and a professional writer.<sup>ix</sup> *Erotic Demon* followed the common structure of a detective novel in that a hero or heroine does justice to a criminal who hides somewhere in society. A mission for justice in a detective novel often excites the reading public by its clear-cut dualism of good and evil; the good has to win and destroy the evil. And, the violence for justice is legitimized in itself. It was almost a small war between a modern Korean man and his perceived enemy—modern girls. The private detective in *Erotic Demon* engaged himself in the fight against an erotic woman who was trying to destroy the Korean family.

In Korean literature before 1930, male characters were often deprived of dominant power. As Yŏm Sang-sŏp and Yi

Kwang-su depicted the lethargy and frustration of Korean males in their novels of the 1910s and 20s, and Korean modern men were far from masculine heroes in print culture. Perhaps because colonial Korea was suffering from the traumatic experience of colonization, the masculine gender failed to transform itself into new men (*sinnamsōng*) in the same way of new women. Korean men were gradually expected to catch up with foreign civilized males such as the Japanese men. Yu Chin-o's *Butterfly* and *Disgraceful Love*, to a certain degree, succeeded such a literary style in that Korean men were depicted as oppressed victims. By contrast, *Erotic Demon* marks an intriguing turning point in the formation of new heroism. As I will analyze later, the heroism was a general trend of the 1930s popular culture in colonial Korea, influenced by Italian fascist movements. *Erotic Demon*, therefore, shows how popular heroism was taking root in Korean culture.

A Korean scholar Kim Ŭn-ha argues that *Erotic Demon* reflected the "schizoid vision of Korean males toward colonial modernity."<sup>x</sup> I agree with Kim's point that masculinity was distorted in the modern era under the Japanese rule. But, I rather want to emphasize that such psychic energy was driven by a complicated sense of crisis; not solely by the colonialism *per se*. First of all, the Korean superhero justified his power in his mission to eliminate the disharmony created by modern girls. The male detective distrusted colonial police and criticized of the state's indifference in such peril. The fight against modern girls was his war. Like Batman in Gotham City, the male character, named Yōng-ho, chased a female criminal, Sō Kwang-ok. The detective was an omnipotent, never-dying, and modernized hero. The author constructed this male modernism as a counterpart to the modern girl, Kwang-ok, who received a new school education and exposed herself to Western consumer culture. After she got married to an old man who had a sexual fantasy on a new woman, the villain then ran away with her lover after she stole money from her husband. Her morally deficient and erotically charged identity was substantiated for public view when she spent all her money in Shanghai, indulging herself in consumption and pleasure in the cosmopolitan city. She, therefore, crystallized the vice of modern girls: free

romance (presumably free sex), rampant consumerism, and a threat to the Korean family.

The author placed the male detective as the savior. When the villain returns to colonial Korea to steal more money from her husband, the male hero stands up to destroy her. Against the backdrop of urbanized Seoul, the two characters chase and try to destroy each other.<sup>xi</sup> In the novel, the male hero discovers many similar styles of eroticized female sexuality around the city. Modern girls looked all identical, the author states. In one scene the author claims that modern girls are a part of urban space as similarly to a model in a commercial advertisement or a mannequin in a show-window display in a department store. When the detective gathers clues about the villain, the first information about her outlook is given by one observer, as follows:

When sun had almost set in the west, [I was] standing at a trolley stop in front of \*\* shop on Chongro Boulevard. On the other side of the road, an automobile suddenly appeared and stopped. [I happened to notice] a gorgeous woman in her Western suit sitting in the car. At first, I paid little attention to her. But, [I soon realized] she looked familiar to me for some reason. So, I kept watching her over and over again. After all, I failed to remember exactly who she was. Soon, the car sped off to the direction of Western Gate.<sup>xii</sup>

The narrator constructs her with fragments of visual images. What mattered to him was not her real name or who she was, but her sexy and exotic outlook, with her car, Western clothes, and sexual attractiveness. She may be the villain or not. Modern girls looked all similar, because they shared the mass produced consumer culture of fashion, hairdos, and the car which the narrator perhaps learned about from a magazine, the cinema, or a display in a department store.

Thus, the erotic sexuality was the core identity of the female villain. In order to strengthen her powerful sexuality, the author briefly tracked her history. When she was a school student, she was so sexually attractive that “she made all her classmates [at her school] fall into homosexual

romance (tongsǒng yǒn'ae) with her.<sup>xiii</sup> Here, the author added homosexuality to the villain. But, we should not assume that it had any special connotations for her demonic image. Public discourse on homosexuality in the colonial period was relatively more liberal than in postcolonial period Korea. Regarding female homosexual romance, school dormitories often appeared as the main theater.<sup>xiv</sup> The homosexual relationship especially among modern girls was not a taboo, although popular magazines such as *Pyǒlgǒngon* uncovered such practices as an intriguing phenomenon. Male homosexual relationship had a different context, called “namsaek” (eros between males), mainly because such sexual practice had existed among elite males. Homosexual romance between females (including sexual intercourse), though, added an intriguing feature to the erotic woman who was believed to use her sexuality as an irresistible weapon.<sup>xv</sup>

In the story, the male detective showed contempt as well as curiosity toward modern girls in general. Being a detective was his informal job; he was obsessed with the desire to destroy erotic femininity and to save virtuous Korean womanhood from danger. One of his motivations in the mission was to protect another Korean woman who embodied conventional female virtues of filial piety, dependence on males, and innocent powerlessness. In several scenes, the detective curses the female villain and her sidekick, a café waitress, using swear words: “Damn, bitch!” (paeramǒkŭlnyŏn) and “How dare the little girl! How bold and arrogant!” (Chogŭmahan kyaejibi! Tamdaehagae kŭrigo omanhage).<sup>xvi</sup> In his mission for private justice, the detective, after all, enjoyed the delight of punishing and disciplining modern girls. When he captures a café waitress who had cooperated with the female villain (maybe her homosexual partner), for example, the detective privately imprisons her in his compound and peeps at her body and teases her. It was not at all problematic for him to keep the café waitress without any legal right, because he believed that he could purify the evil woman from the bad influence of the villain and restore her female virtue enough to be a good wife of a Korean man.

In the end, the female villain refuses to follow his masculine discipline, so she has to die in front of him. His

punishment is harsh and destructive; he gives her the death penalty. In the climax, the author dramatically describes their final encounter:

Kwang-ok [the female villain] drained a cup of whisky and filled it for Yōng-ho [the male detective]. She said, “Listen, I do not need your help to finish my story. I cannot run away alone, leaving all my pals and younger brother in jail. Even if I can escape safely, I have no money. I do not want to go to prison, either. Living in a cell would bore me to death. ... Hey, I will kill myself as you order me to do.” ... Saying that, Kwang-ok craved for a last kiss with Yōng-ho. He obediently followed her lead and let her to do whatever she wanted to do to him. Hot breath spilled out of her mouth for a while, and she sat apart from him. She quietly put white powder into her glass of whisky and poured the spirit. After she glanced at Yōng-ho calmly, she poured whisky into her throat. Yōng-ho desperately resisted the temptation to stop her. ... After one or two minutes, she suddenly grabbed a pistol and shouted, “Damn, no! Why do I have to die? I’ll kill you too.” Watching her, Yōng-ho did not try to evade the gun point. He just sat still. Bang, bang, bang.<sup>xvii</sup>

In this male fantasy, what the erotic modern girl could do subjectively was, indeed, the sexual service. And, this eroticized femininity justifies her death. The detective did not stop her suicide and her gun, because she was already conquered by the male hero. Of course, the superhero survived from the gun shots and returned safely. His mission was holy, and perfectly satisfactory for males. The threat of the erotic modern girl had disappeared through his masculinity. Also, the detective now kept two virtuous Korean women in his custody like booty: the virtuous woman who he had protected from the beginning and the ex-café waitress. It was the victory of machismo.

This story of a modern girl ends with suicidal death, as many café waitresses finished their life because of disharmony (pulhwa). The detective never considered any other options when he dealt with the erotic woman except using his own muscle. The Japanese colonial police were ineffective and unwilling to handle this threat, the detective



claimed. It seemed to him that only the death penalty was able to remove the source of crisis and disharmony. The detective watched her ending as if an executioner and cleaner of social evils. Although the author did not explicitly describe the bloody scene, the image of her corpse caught a moment when people began to think that death could be a solution to social evils and disharmony in the 1930s. In other words, Korean masses could taste the ecstasy from the destruction of the modern idol and the debris of modernity which they admired and hated.

## **5. Projecting Masculine Power**

In explaining the cultural revival of masculinity in colonial Korea, we can also historicize it as a product of the 1930s global trend. Mass violence against their enemy was related to the spread of the fascist movement, anti-modernism, militarism, and culturalism which we can find in contemporary Japan and the West. As H.D. Harootunian and Testuo Najita point out, cultural cosmopolitanism declined in the 1930s in the Japanese Empire. New trends of post-modernism sprang out of the Great Depression, as the Japanese explored the possibility of overcoming modernity and Westernization.<sup>xviii</sup> Modernism was under severe attack and Japanese party politics, the industrialized economy, and urbanized society were understood as the causes of the crisis. It is difficult to extend the same understanding to colonial Korea, mainly because Colonial Korea was still under the apprenticeship of the imperial master. Koreans could not claim the overcoming of modernity because of their colonial identity. At least, however, we can discover similar tones of anti-modernism in Korean popular culture in the 1930s.

First of all, Korean popular culture longed for the reconstruction of powerful and modern men as agents. Yi Kwang-su, a popular best-selling author, stood at the center of the new cultural movements. In November 1931, Yi Kwang-su published his poem "Admire Power" (Himūi ch'anmi) in the magazine *Tonggwang*. It is difficult to miss that the Japanese Kwantung Army was in the middle of occupying Manchuria by force when he published this

controversial poem. He exclaimed, “Power! Today’s aestheticism is coming from power” (Him! Onŭlŭi mi’nŭn himae itta). Yi Kwang-su was referring to military force as the essence of masculine power and subjectivity when he wrote “[Admire] muscle like pig iron. Throw away your neatness.” (Soemungch’i kattŭn himjjul! Yamjŏn’ŭl chipŏch’iŏra).<sup>xix</sup> Yi Kwang-su unequivocally led his audience to the beauty of fighting and killing. “Take off your white clothes, and wear red uniforms of soldiers. Arm your body and mind! Everyone longs for power today.” His heart pumped with excitement, when “an ultimatum is about to be sent out.” He admired the Japanese invasion of China, glorifying “the parade of soldiers armed with rifles and swords.”

Quickly, his poem received furious criticism from the literary world. Literary critic Kim Myŏng-sik was alarmed at what seemed like Yi Kwang-su’s fascist tendencies. Kim Myŏng-sik worried about the spread of the same thought in Korea, calling it “the masturbation of self-destruction and self-denial.”<sup>xx</sup> Critic Paek Ch’ŏl also defined Yi Kwang-su’s thirst for manly power as the sign of new “popular literature (t’ongsok sosŏl).” According to Paek Ch’ŏl, the so-called “t’ongsok sosŏl” had characteristics of “eroticism (aerosŏng), grotesqueness (kŭrosŏng), nonsense (nŏnsaensŭsŏng), and interest in detective novels (t’amjŏm ch’wimisŏng).”<sup>xxi</sup> This literary critic noticed that Korean popular literature was significantly influenced by European fascist literature. Paek Ch’ŏl claimed that the growth of mass culture originated from the failure of “bourgeois literature.” After they faced the artistic dead-end, Paek Ch’ŏl argued, bourgeois writers such as Yi Kwang-su tried to save themselves from bankruptcy by writing “vulgar popular literature which is related to low-level tastes of journalism.” Paek Ch’ŏl took it seriously as the crisis; “fascist literature (p’asijŭm munhak),” most of all, spread thoughts of destruction: “abandoning the desire for having property, the desire for romance, and even the desire for life.” Instead, fascist writers raised the banner of “warriors’ culture” (yongsajŏk munhak).

Indeed, the beautification of power gradually spread throughout popular culture in the following years.

Modernism and Westernization were under attack in the Japanese Empire after the foundation of Manchukuo in 1932. The surge of misogyny especially victimized the eroticized female sexuality. The popular literature such as detective novels often projected masculine power into the body of modern girls and café waitresses. In a popular magazine, *Pyōlgōngon*, for example, a series of detective novels show us how the new aestheticism of power ruled new mass culture. The author, Ch'oe Ryu-bōm, was not a famous writer. He suddenly appeared and quickly disappeared after these series of low-quality detective novels. Ch'oe Ryu-bōm published four detective novels from February 1933 to March 1934: "The murder of Sun-a", "Jealousy Demon," "Correct Answer of Professor K," and "Devilish fiancée."

If we compare his works with *Erotic Demon*, it is obvious that *Erotic Demon* contained a less violent tone about modern girls than did the cheap and short detective novels such as Ch'oe's. In these stories of Choe's detective novels, modern girls commonly appeared only as a corpse. Strikingly, the author showed a remarkable level of obsession about the beauty of female dead bodies which were destroyed by males' violence. His passionate description makes us believe that he even admired the beauty of killing as a way of purification. In his first work of "The murder of Sun-a," he closely observed the victim's body through the eyes of a detective:

The dead body seems to be abandoned in the bush for many days, but because of cold weather it does not decay badly. Her flesh is bright, soft, and elastic, since you can see it under her ripped clothes. If you move your eyes from her chubby ankles upwards, you can see the horrible scene which anyone cannot help but turn his eyes away. There is a stick under her skirt, something like an umbrella. Even a police officer is reluctant to look closely. Her upper body is buried under earth, so people dig up carefully. Her untidy hair is colored black as if she is still alive. But her chin is pale, thin and purple.<sup>xxii</sup>

If *Erotic Demon* described modern girls as the erotic and dehumanized objects, the author of this short story did not

even seem to care if her body was alive or not. The dead body looked even better for him to watch so carefully and to discover the beauty of a naked and destroyed idol. In another work of his, “Correct Answers of Professor K,” such sadistic gaze reached a climax. It was a scene in which a doctor was about to carry out autopsy. He writes, “A man [a doctor] is examining the corpse of a woman. ... Lying on a marble desk, the woman had already lost her life, but her glamorous body with her lips closed tightly makes people believe that she is sleeping.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

These pieces of grotesque detective novels in 1933-1934 may not represent the turn of Korean popular culture entirely. Such explicit expressions of death could be a general trend in the genre of detective novels. However, we should note that the projection of masculine power in colonial Korea often tended to assault the erotic sexuality and modern girls such as café waitresses more than anything or anyone else. The tolerance for the “Westernized” and “eroticized” body reached a low in that decade, since their sexuality was seen as causing disharmony. Their immorality legitimized the assaults, being ready-made targets for exercising masculine power. It is hasty to conclude that 1930s popular literature supported anti-modernism and culturalism, something like what happened in Japan. But at least we can discover evidence that the urbanization and commercialization of sexuality made certain types of women vulnerable to mass violence, hate crimes, and the imagination of Korean men as modern subjects, especially as soldiers/warriors. Although Korean males wanted to exercise their masculine power, they had little chances to fight in battles as the Japanese soldiers did. The incompleteness of Korean modern men twisted their attitudes toward modern girls. The new super-heroism in popular culture, hence, focused its energy on the vulnerable target: café waitresses and disharmonious women.

## **6. Conclusion**

To summarize, the new imagination and fantasy about café waitresses and their life shows us how erotic sexuality was constructed and contested in the changing socio-cultural

structure in 1930s colonial Korea. The tension surrounding the female gender cannot be simplified as the conflict between new women and a traditional ethic. It was more complicated than that. Working women in the city, especially those who came to engage in the sex business, were the subjects of public scrutiny and debates. Even though they did not choose what they wore or how they behaved in front of male customers, because these ways were prefabricated and dictated by the male fantasies to which they were catering, their behaviors were explained only in terms of their individual morality. In other words, the image of an erotic and exotic sex-worker was artificial and not an actual expression of that woman's real sexuality. Popular media, writers, and pundits created a new stereotype of evil women by demonizing these modern girls.

This twisted consumption of eroticism features the intriguing turn of Korean mass/popular culture when the Japanese Empire began the war against China. The fascist tendency wished to restore masculine power in society, as Yi Kwang-su and many other popular writers imagined the Korean super heroes. Critics furiously reacted to the new mass culture. However, mass media drove the fantasy of the restoration of masculine force into unprecedented levels of grotesque sadomasochistic aestheticism. Modern girls should be purified by men's discipline and power. If modern girls refused the discipline, they must die by the hands of men. Some writers such as Ch'oe Ryu-bŏm admired such cleaning process as tolerable, even beautiful. As young Japanese military officials chose terror and murder as the way of fixing the disharmony in Japanese politics and society, Korean society shared the similar tendency of the fascination with muscle power. Most of all, modern girls and café waitresses became the first and easiest target of the projection of masculine fantasy.

**Figure 1. Illustrations of Korean men and women of *Pyŏlgŏngon* in 1930**

Café Waitresses and Disharmony:  
 “Erotic Grotesque” Aestheticism in 1930s Colonial Korea



**Sketches of New Year’s Day in Economic Depression by Yi  
 Sŭng-man (*Pyölgöngon* vol.35, 1930).**

**(Above) Everyday Economy—always staying in a room.**

**(Below): An erotic grotesque “modern girl.” Is she not merely  
 an infantilized woman?**



Figure 2. The detective and the café waitress<sup>xxiv</sup>



Figure 3. The Female Villain Kwang-ok<sup>xxv</sup>

## References

- <sup>1</sup> About the 1928-1929 economic crisis from Great Depression, see Soon-won Park, “Colonial Industrial Growth and the Working Class,” *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999) 133-135. The depression in agriculture pushed poor tenant farmers out of business and drove them to the cities.
- <sup>1</sup> From 1936 to 1944, about 320,000 Koreans migrated from colonial Korea to Manchuria. See Hyun Ok Park, *Two Dreams in One Bed: Empire, Social Life, and the Origins of the North Korean Revolution in Manchuria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 146.
- <sup>1</sup> Thomas R. H. Haven, *Valley of Darkness: the Japanese People and World War Two* (New York: Norton, 1978).

- <sup>1</sup> Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds: the State in Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), chapter three. David Ambaras, *Bad Youth: Juvenile Delinquency and the Politics of Everyday Life in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
- <sup>1</sup> Tetsuo Najita and H.D. Harootunian, “Japanese revolt against the West: political and cultural criticism in the twentieth century,” *Cambridge History of Japan*, vol.6 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- <sup>1</sup> About café waitresses in Japan, Sheldon Garon approaches them from the perspective of social reformers in his book, *Molding Japanese Minds*. Miriam Silverberg took a slightly different angle to comprehend café waitresses and their experience in her book, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: the Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
- <sup>1</sup> Violence against modern girls can be also found in Chinese popular culture. Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: the Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- <sup>1</sup> Regarding female gender in colonial Korea, previous scholarship tended to place primary focus on the dichotomy between Korean women and reformers. “New women” drew the attention as the icons of modern femininity which the colonial regime, Western missionaries, and Korean reformers tried to transplant in Korea. About the discourses about “new women” in English, see Hyaeweol Choi, ““Wise Mother, Good wife’: A Trans-cultural Discursive Construct in Modern Korea” in *The Journal of Korean Studies* 14-1 (2009) 4-12.
- <sup>1</sup> Regarding Korean masculinity, Seungsook Moon claims that the militarization of Korean male culture started after the Korean War. But it is necessary to rethink the origin of Korean fascist culture because 1930s mass media exhibited many signs of internalizing war fever and of admiring violence. See Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) chapter one and two.
- <sup>1</sup> Korean scholar Kim Hyo-sin depicts how positively European fascists were represented by Korean writers, especially by Yi Kwang-su. As a Korean magazine posted the slogan of “Viva L’Italia,” Kim Hyo-sin demonstrates that colonial Korea watched European movements with interest. However, it is still unclear how Korean mass integrated fascist literature as their own. Kim Hyo-sin, “Han’guk kũndae munhwa wa It’aria p’asijũm tanron: 1930nyõndaerũl chungsimũro,” *Pigyo munhak* 42 (2007).



- <sup>1</sup> Miriam Silverberg, "The Café Waitress Serving Modern Japan," in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Tradition of Modern Japan*, edited by Stephen Vlastos (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 211-212.
- <sup>1</sup> According to Elise K. Tipton, the café increased dramatically after the Great Kanto earthquake in 1923. In 1929, Tokyo had 15,500 waitresses. Its peak came in 1934 with 37,065 cafes in the city. More than 90,000 women worked at the cafes in Japan even on the eve of Pearl Harbor attack in 1941. Elise K. Tipton, "Pink Color Work: The Café Waitress in Early Twentieth Century Japan," *Intersections: Gender, History, and Culture in the Asian Context* 7 (2002).
- <sup>1</sup> Ko Yōng-han, "Chommōknūn Munhwadoshi!!" *Byōlgōngon* 71 (1934).
- <sup>1</sup> About the historicity of sexuality and class-based discourses about female gender, see Ellen Ross and Rayna Rapp, "Sex and Society: A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology" and Kathy Peiss, "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality, 1880-1920" in *Powers of Desire: the Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).
- <sup>1</sup> About the history of licensed prostitution in colonial Korea, see Yamashita Yōngae, "Sikminji chibae wa kongch'ang chaedo ūi chōngae," *Sahoe wa yōksa* 51 (1997). After 1916, the colonial government standardized the regulation on prostitutes by setting the minimum age to seventeen and by disallowing married women to engage in the business. According to Yamashita, the total number of licensed prostitutes increased from 2,854 in 1916 to 3,934 in 1940. The number of ethnic Japanese sex-workers remained stagnant, but the population of ethnic Korean female sex-workers rapidly grew to 10,169 by 1940. Korean prostitutes (84% in 1930 survey) received no school education. Yamashita Yōngae, *ibid*, 168-170, 173-174. Also, Song Yōn-ok, "Chōsen shokminchi siha ni okeru kōshō seido," *Nihonshi kenkyū* 371 (1993).
- <sup>1</sup> "Int'aeri yōgūb aesa," *Samch'ōlli* 4:9 (1932).
- <sup>1</sup> Rokangyōng, "Café yōgūb ōnp'ōreidū," *Pyōlgōngon* 57 (1932).
- <sup>1</sup> Yu Chin-o, "Nabi," *Hanguk taep'yo munhak sōnjib* vol.2 (Seoul: Munhak'kwa hyeonsilsa, 1993) 84-112.
- <sup>1</sup> Rokangyōng, *Ibid*.
- <sup>1</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>1</sup> *The Oriental Daily News*, 2 November 1933.
- <sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 November 1933.
- <sup>1</sup> Yu Chin-o, "Ch'ijōng," *Hanguk taep'yo munhak sōnjip* vol.2 (Munhak'kwa hyeonsilsa, Seoul, 1993) 68-83.

- <sup>1</sup> About Yu Chin-o’s education in contemporary Japanese literature, see Sang-ho Ro, “Print Culture in the Imagination of Modern Korea, 1880-1931: Knowledge, Literature, and Classics,” Princeton University Ph.D. Dissertation 2012, chapter five.
- <sup>1</sup> Yu Chin-o reversed the gender relationship of Tanizaki Jun’ichiro. In *Disgraceful Love*, the man was “a caged bird” while Tanizaki’s Naomi had an opposite role as the ex-café waitress caged by the man. Paul McCarthy, “Tanizaki’s Naomi and Nabokov’s Lolita: A Comparative Essay,” *The Grand Old Man and the Great Tradition: Essays on Tanizaki Jun’ichiro in Honor of Adriana Boscaro* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2009).
- <sup>1</sup> In postwar Japan, we can find a similar reverse of gender roles in public. While Japanese males were the conquered, some Japanese women, as partners of American soldiers, became icons of new culture of defeat. John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1999) 121-139.
- <sup>1</sup> David Leheny points out a similar phenomenon of politicization of criminal justice in contemporary Japan. After the years of economic depression, teenage girls, called kogals, became icons of moral degradation and premature, vile sexuality. See David Leheny, *Think Global, Fear Local* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).
- <sup>1</sup> A scholar of Korean literature, Kwŏn Yŏng-min, argued that Sŏ Tong-san was Ch’ae Man-sik’s fake name in 1987.
- <sup>1</sup> Kim Ūn-ha, “Modŏnit’i rŭl t’amsahanŭn kŭndaejŏk yisŏng ũi romangsu: Ch’ae Man-sik ũi Yŏmma rŭl taesang ũro,” *Kukŏ munhak* 47 (2009), 265.
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- <sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* 435.
- <sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>1</sup> About debates on female heterosexual love, see Ch’a Min-jŏng, “1920-30nyŏndae ‘Pyŏnt’ae’jŏk saeksyuŏlliti ae taehan tanron yŏn’gu,” MA thesis, Ewha Women’s University 2009, 64-66.
- <sup>1</sup> A reporter of *Pyŏlgŏngon* plainly described that lesbian couples often slept together at school dorms. It is unclear if the reporter recognized such practice as a kind of “sexual” intercourse or “non-sexual.” See *Pyŏlgŏngon* 15 (1928) 130-132.
- <sup>1</sup> Ch’ae Man-sik, *Yŏmma*, 468, 485.
- <sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 577.
- <sup>1</sup> Tetsuo Najita and H.D. Harootunian, “Japanese revolt against the West: political and cultural criticism in the twentieth century,” *Cambridge History of Japan*, vol.6 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 711-713.

<sup>1</sup> Yi Kwang-su, “Him ũi ch’anmi,” *Tonggwang* 27 (1931).

<sup>1</sup> Kim Myŏng-sik, *Tonggwang* 31 (1932).

<sup>1</sup> Paek Ch’ŏl, “1933nyŏndo Chosŏn mundane ũi chŏnmang,” *Tonggwang* 40 (1933) 72.

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<sup>i</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>ii</sup> *The Oriental Daily News*, 2 November 1933.

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<sup>v</sup> About Yu Chin-o’s education in contemporary Japanese literature, see Sang-ho Ro, “Print Culture in the Imagination of Modern Korea, 1880-1931: Knowledge, Literature, and Classics,” Princeton University Ph.D. Dissertation 2012, chapter five.

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<sup>vii</sup> In postwar Japan, we can find a similar reverse of gender roles in public. While Japanese males were the conquered, some Japanese women, as partners of American soldiers, became icons of new culture of defeat. John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1999) 121-139.

<sup>viii</sup> David Leheny points out a similar phenomenon of politicization of criminal justice in contemporary Japan. After the years of economic depression, teenage girls, called kogals, became icons of moral degradation and premature, vile sexuality. See David Leheny, *Think Global, Fear Local* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

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<sup>x</sup> Kim Ũn-ha, “Modŏnit’i rŭl t’amsahanŭn kŭndaejŏk yisŏng ũi romangsu: Ch’ae Man-sik ũi Yŏmma rŭl taesang ũro,” *Kukŏ munhak* 47 (2009), 265.

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- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.* 435.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xiv</sup> About debates on female heterosexual love, see Ch’a Min-jōng, “1920-30nyōndae ‘Pyōnt’ae’jōk saeksyuōlliti ae taehan tanron yōn’gu,” MA thesis, Ewha Women’s University 2009, 64-66.
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- <sup>xvi</sup> Ch’ae Man-sik, *Yōmma*, 468, 485.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 577.
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- <sup>xxiv</sup> *The Korean Daily News*, 17 September 1934.
- <sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 October 1934.