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Moving Pictures: postcards of colonial Korea

They seem like shards of flash-frozen reality compacted into two dimensions, putative proof of having been there and seen that. They move over various forms of distance and time, while carrying with them ephemeral yet precious moments or sights to be appreciated, and then possibly forgotten. Viewing postcards of colonial Korea as visual records, art objects, or propaganda has generated useful insights; at the same time, Hyung Gu Lynn suggests that postcards of colonial Korea encapsulate and embody the multiple notions of mobility that emerged in the early 20th century.

Hyung Gu Lynn

Picture postcards have been popular since the late 19th century, and many collectors' associations have existed for decades; however, the academic study of postcards has only really begun to grow in earnest since the late 20th century. Moreover, when postcards have been treated as the primary subject of study, there have been several notable tendencies. The first is to treat postcards as straightforward forms of communication, stationery with visual decoration, in effect. Although limited by their exposure to prying or accidental looks, postcards do in fact deliver information. The second is to approach postcards as simply a visual record of modern history. Indeed, postcards can be seen as a medium that captured everyday life, whether posed or natural, or as a visual record of images that appealed to consumers. The third is to focus on the aesthetic elements of the image at the expense of the larger political, social, and economic contexts surrounding the production, dissemination, and reception of postcards. Recent work in English on the art of the modern Japanese postcard, for example, emphasises the aesthetic of the postcard, a recovery of the medium for the field of art history. Postcards of colonial Korea might also be seen as examples of photographic art; some of the cards also used paintings by recognised Korean painters, or photographs from professional photography studios (fig. 3). The fourth tendency is the invocation of context, particularly in colonial or imperial settings, as the overriding explanatory factor that generated the images on the postcards. Notions of colonial hierarchy and Orientalist representations certainly infused the photographic postcards.

While these approaches greatly aid our understanding of the meanings and significance of picture postcards, postcards also occupied the intersection of new

forms of printing, photography, tourism, postal distribution, and consumption. Therefore, instead of seeing postcards as strictly art, archive, or propaganda, I propose that they might also be treated as concentrated nodes for various myths or fantasies of mobility. The fantasy of travel was inherent in the picture postcard, which invited the reader to share the visual record of new forms of physical mobility. Development and diffusion of photography propagated the myth that realities and recent pasts could be captured instantly, and transported home via the postal system. Also implicit was the sense of mobility through time, both past and present. The sender of the postcard was no longer present at the site portrayed on the postcard, or wherever they had purchased the card, by the time it reached the receiver. In this sense, the postcard allowed for a journey into the afterglow of the recent past. At the same time, postcards could also provide the basis for expectations of the future. When or if the recipient of the postcard travelled to the same destination, the expectation would be that the

destination should look like the image on the postcard. In fuelling anticipation, expectation, and imagination, postcards were – in a figurative sense – conduits for mobility into the future.

The material postcard

In material terms, postcards began to gain widespread popularity in Japan, as in most of the world, between 1900 and 1905. The government was the sole issuer of postcards in Japan from 1870 to 1900, after which the post office allowed private production and use of postcards. The medium skyrocketed in popularity during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Demand for updates and images from the war, coupled with developments in photography, printing, and the postal system, resulted in a postcard frenzy, with people lining up and crowds jostling for the latest prints.

The Korean Agriculture and Commerce Department produced the first known postcard in Korea in 1900, while the first Korean picture postcard followed in 1901. Most of the early postcards had an address side and a blank side without any images. Although Japanese, French, and other European companies produced photographic postcards depicting Korea in the 1900s, based on the numbers of extant cards in various collections, Japanese firms appear to have dominated the market especially after 1905, when the Japanese Protectorate of Korea was established.

During the colonial period (1910-1945), postcards of Korea were printed by various Japanese organisations that were grouped into four categories: government agencies, such as the Japanese Ministry of Communication, the Government General of Korea (in particular, the Railway Bureau), and Pusan Municipal Government; private printing firms, such as Keijō Hinode Shōkō (the largest producer of postcards), and Taishō Shashin Kōgeisho (headquartered in



Fig 1: Between 1907 to 1918 Korean postcards had one-third of the back reserved for writing, with the remainder left for the address.

Wakayama); individual photography studios, such as Pusan Kobayashi Photographic Studios; and smaller bookstores and firms.

Despite the array of different producers, the vast bulk of the postcards came in one standard size, which was 14.2 cm x 9.1 cm. There were some variations on the size, which were limited for the most part to specific periods. For example, panoramic cards that had two or more folds were produced up to the early-1920s, and stereoscopic postcards, ideally viewed with three-dimensional glasses, were made until around 1910.

Periodising postcards of colonial Korea in more detail is possible since all the producers followed the regulations for postcards issued by the Japanese Ministry of Communication. From 1900 to 1907, text had to be written on the image itself, since no writing was allowed on the back. Thus, postcards with writing on the photographic image are from this early period. Postcards from the second period, from 1907 to 1918, had one-third of the back reserved for writing, with the remainder left for the address (fig. 1). From 1918 on, the space was enlarged to around half. After 1933, the “ga” in “Yūbin hagaki” (Post cards) that was printed on the right edge changed from “ka” to “ga”, providing another method for dating postcards.

In addition to dates from postcard regulations and specific historical events, changes in the urban landscape also help to date postcards. For example, the new Government General of Korea's headquarters were completed in 1926 (fig. 4), sparking a spate of new postcards that captured it from an array of angles. Some cards were issued to commemorate specific anniversaries. For example, the tenth anniversary of Japanese colonisation of Korea in 1920, seen here (fig. 5), features portraits of

Governor Saitō Makoto on the left and Vice Governor Mizuno Rentarō on the right. Furthermore, changes in specific buildings and squares, types of streetlights and tramcars, and other noticeable changes in landmarks provide specific hints about when the original photograph was taken.

The process of dating is complicated somewhat by the practice of using the same photograph in a multitude of variations. One of the more common changes was to take a black and white image, and hand-colour the plate. Another method postcard makers used to create variety was to take the photographic image and set it against a different background, or juxtapose it with another image on the same card. Printing a reversed image, or printing the same image with a different monochromatic tint, were other methods employed by postcard producers.

Although no detailed statistics record the total production and sales of postcards in colonial Korea, there are fragmentary accounts that indicate that postcards were very popular. For example, by the mid-1920s, demand was sufficient enough for Keijō Hinode Shōkō to operate four printing facilities in Keijō, colonial-era Seoul. According to one 1929 account, an estimated 10,000 cards a day were sold.

The majority of the extant postcards of colonial Korea that I have seen are housed in university libraries and research centres, museums, used bookstores, and private collections. The vast majority of these are unposted, which may reflect a bias in collecting. Many used postcards presumably remain in the possession of the recipient, rather than in collections sold to collectors, museums, and academic institutions. However, the preponderance of unused cards suggests that picture postcards were not purchased solely as stationery



Fig 2: An envelope for a set of postcards based on the theme 'Korean customs'.



Fig 3: painting by leading artist of the colonial period, Yi In-Sŏng



Fig 4: Completion of the Government General of Korea's headquarters in 1926 sparked a spate of new postcards.

to be used for communication, but also purchased as visual tokens, souvenirs that could be collected.

The antinomous postcard

In addition to the material outlines and the visions of mobility briefly discussed above, picture postcards also helped reinforce a discourse of backwardness and progress, often juxtaposing 'quaint' or 'traditional' Korean customs with the more modern forms of space and production that were introduced, according to the images, through colonial rule. Through this narrative frame, the implicit movement of Japan into modernity was often contrasted with depictions of the relative stasis of Korean society.

This trope was reflected in the various types of images mounted on the postcards – modern urban spaces introduced by the Japanese colonial state, contrasted with rural 'Korean' villages; the ubiquitous images of ancient historical sites, natural landmarks, and most commonly, people in 'traditional' settings; and the paucity of 'modernised' Koreans in Western-style suits and dresses. 'Korean customs' was a popular genre, usually depicting subjects in 'traditional' dress, ceremonies, markets, and play. For example, figure 2 shows an envelope for a set of postcards that is based on this theme.

At the same time, by collapsing the sense of space and reinforcing a myth of mobility, colonial postcards contributed both to the amplification of distance and the reinforcement of the boundaries of the Japanese colonial empire. On the one hand, colonial Korea was closer (to the Japanese metropole) than before, as implied by the postcards, by ship, rail, and post, and other material markers of modernity; yet on the other, the colony was liberally populated with people who were constructed as distant and different. Along with various other media, postcards thus helped portray

the colony as a place that was desirable because of its distance, its picture postcard exoticism.

Images of Korean women doing laundry (fig. 6) and *kisaeng* (female entertainers) (fig. 7), seemed to have held a mesmerising allure for postcard producers and consumers alike. Paralleling the Japanese "*bijin-ga*" or "beauties" postcards, the postcards of the *kisaeng* in particular catered to the ocular obsessions of Japanese male (and to some extent Korean male) viewers. This of course is not to suggest that all travellers to Korea expected the country to be populated with pliant and obliging *kisaeng*. Nevertheless, the power of the postcard images to guide future expectations and transport the viewer into a future of one's own imagining should not be underestimated.

Digital photographs sent as attachments and web-based photograph albums may eventually render the postcard obsolete. However, in looking at the postcards of colonial Korea, we are reminded that whether they were wending their way through the labyrinths of the international postal system, eliciting aesthetic responses in viewers, triggering a cascade of memories in recipients, or forging a template for future expectations for travellers-to-be, picture postcards were and remain, in many senses of the word, moving. ◀

For Further Reading:

- Pusan hyōndae yōksagwan, ed. 2003. Sajin yōpsōro ttōnanūn kūndae kihaeng. Pusan: Pusan hyōndae yōksagwan.
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Fig 5: postcard commemorating 10th anniversary of Japanese colonisation of Korea.



Fig 6: Postcard depicting Korean women doing laundry.



Fig 7: Kisaeng with Kayagum (a koto-like musical instrument). Korean female entertainers were popular subjects for postcards.