

Government Courtesans in the Northern Military Areas: State Power, Gender Politics, and Literary Culture in Chosŏn Korea

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The royal government of Chosŏn deployed government courtesans in the northern areas with military garrisons in P'yŏngan and Hamgyŏng Provinces beginning in the early fifteenth century. The government claimed that courtesans were needed by local government offices near the border specifically for the offering of song and dance performances in rituals and banquets for envoys from Ming China and the Jurchen. In practice, however, local government offices offered courtesan performances as special gifts not just to foreign envoys but also to Chosŏn government officials and military officers who had visited the areas. Despite the nominal prohibition by law, local government offices also had government courtesans engage in social, emotional, and sexual labor for their guests. My talk will critically engage with the least explored chapter of the courtesan culture of Chosŏn Korea by reflecting upon the intersections between state power, gender politics, and literary culture through travel writings and literary works that the government officials of Chosŏn who visited the military areas produced in relation to courtesans.