

Prolegomenon to Geisha as a Cultural Performer: Miyako Odori, The Gion School and Representation of a “Traditional” Japan

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I would like to present an aspect of geisha that has been largely ignored in English literature. That is the geisha's professional identity as a “performer” of Japanese culture. The common-run image of geisha is exotic, mysterious, and sexual, but is not sufficiently cultural. In the West, the image of geisha has been created through stage performances, films, and novels. Puccini's famous opera *Madame Butterfly*, John Huston's film *The Barbarian and a Geisha* (1958) and Jack Cardiff's *My Geisha* (1962) are the famous examples that have helped to formulate the image of geisha. People recognize geisha as a hostess who serves alcohol at banquets and entertains her guests with witty conversations and heart-warming care. Sometimes, a geisha is recognized as a high-class prostitute who seeks a chance to become a mistress of a wealthy man. I do not mean to say these images are incorrect, but I would like to emphasize that they alone cannot capture the whole picture of a woman who works as a geisha.

2. Dominant Image of Geisha

There is one example that has shown this strong bias. In 2001, an ex-geisha, Mineko Iwasaki sued the novelist Arthur Golden and the publishing company Alfred A. Knopf for defamation, breach of contract and copyright violation.¹ Golden is the author of *Memoirs of Geisha*, which was the 1997 best-selling novel. Golden referred to Iwasaki in the acknowledgments as the most helpful informant for the novel. Iwasaki accused Golden that he had discredited her reputation in the geisha community because he revealed her real name. Golden claimed that he had never agreed not to use her name or had he never asked to keep her identity secret.

Although the novel, *Memoirs of Geisha*, itself was set in the 1930s, it was the 1960s and 70s when Iwasaki was one of the most celebrated geisha. When she became a geisha, Japan had already passed the Anti-Prostitution Law and nobody could legally force a geisha to sell her body to customers. The author seems to have been dissatisfied with the actual depiction of geisha after the abolition of the prostitution practice, and instead of writing a real life of a geisha in her own era, he tried to stick to the common Western image of Geisha. This seems to be the reason why he set the novel in the 1930s. In his novel, he especially focused on the ritual called “mizuage,” a ritual in which an apprentice geisha sells her virginity at an unbelievably high price to her patron. Golden also emphasized other sexual aspects of geisha. In other words, he tried to reinforce the sexual image of geisha once again with his writing. This kind of representation was not acceptable to Iwasaki and others in the geisha community.

This persistent image dominated the discourse about geisha on the whole. I will show you another example. In Liza Dalby's ethnography, *Geisha*, which is based on her doctoral dissertation for the department of anthropology at Stanford University in 1978, she wrote about sisterhood and rituals in the geisha community. Surely, she also mentioned dance and music that were performed by the geisha, but by focusing on their personal lives, she in turn emphasized the commonly believed aspects of geisha. I would like to mention one more work. Lesley Downer's *Women of the Pleasure Quarters: the Secret History of the Geisha* (2001). She says that Golden's *Memoirs of Geisha* and Dalby's *Geisha* have inspired her to write on this topic. Downer used the word “secret” to represent the close-knit characteristic of the geisha community and the unwritten rule to keep secret. She also emphatically described the lives of past geisha. Here again, it was not the actual geisha in person, whom the author described, but rather the geisha of the past, who more comfortably fit the image that I mentioned above.

There is an example from a video. In 1999, a documentary video program, *The Secret Life of Geisha* was made in the United States. From the very beginning, there is a series of cuts that provokes a certain image of geisha in the viewer's mind. The program starts with a scene where a geisha is walking on the narrow street in Kyoto, a

banquet of *samurai*, a close-up of geisha's mouth, a scene from World War II, a street of contemporary Japan, *kamikaze heroes*, and Japanese prostitutes walking with American GIs. The sequence of these cuts has no apparent meaning. It seems incoherent. Despite this arbitrariness, each cut seems to provoke certain images of geisha: archaic or retrospective like *samurai*, mysterious and incomprehensible like *kamikaze heroes*, and sweet, meek, sexual and coquettish like prostitutes who walk with American GIs. When I showed this video to people in one of the geisha quarters in Kyoto, they were disgusted because the geisha was represented as being equivalent to the prostitute. As I mentioned in Iwasaki's lawsuit, geisha themselves strongly react to being portrayed as prostitutes or sex workers. Prostitution has been prohibited in Japan and of course geisha is not a prostitute at present.

3. Identifying Geisha

Then what is geisha? The geisha wears a classical Japanese kimono and she does her hair in a classical Japanese style. Why are their appearances like women in Edo period? They work as bar-hostesses do at banquets, but what are the differences between geisha and hostesses? To answer these questions, I present another side of geisha, which has been missing in the commonplace image. A geisha can be summarized as a person to "perform" arts, unlike hostess or prostitute. The geisha's identity consists in "performing" so-called traditional Japanese arts. Besides the way of dressing, the geisha practices dance and music. In addition, she shows her performance at banquets and gives public performances.

While presenting cultural aspects of geisha, I do not intend to conceal their sexual aspects. Before the abolition of the prostitution practice, geisha used to be forced to sell their bodies to customers. Geisha were definitely victims of the sex industry at that time. Mizuage also took place for most of the geisha apprentices.

Now, I turn to my research in one of the geisha quarters in Kyoto. Because I was interested in the Japanese classical dance, I did a research in Gion. Gion is a district in Kyoto. It is famous for hosting special teachers of the Japanese classical dance and is the most celebrated geisha quarter in Japan. Japan has many geisha quarters throughout the country, notably in sightseeing spots including hot springs. Kyoto is the most attractive city for foreign and domestic tourists, and has five geisha quarters mostly in the downtown area. Each quarter has its own private school for geisha to learn dance, music and so on. Only the school of Gion has been officially recognized, but not others. Whoever wants to become a geisha is registered as a student of this school. Until she stops working as a geisha, she must keep going to the school. The school provides classes in Japanese classical dance, varieties of Japanese classical music, calligraphy, Japanese painting, flower arrangement, and tea ceremony. These subjects belong to supposedly traditional Japanese culture and a geisha is expected to show her skills in these arts.

Kenji Mizoguchi described the school of Gion in his film, *A Geisha* (1953.) A teacher of tea ceremony tells her pupils, "As you know, foreigners who come here find Mt. Fuji and geisha, symbols of the beauty of Japan. And the most beautiful geisha are the maiko of the Gion in Kyoto. Like Noh and the tea ceremony, they are works of art. One could even call them national treasures. You should be proud of this. And should consequently be aware of it always, and study hard every day." Then this film describes a class of tea ceremony, several musical instruments and dance. Even now, the same subjects are being taught at the school in Gion.

To make their skills known to the public, the Gion association holds two public performances every year. One is *Onshu-kai* that lasts for six days in early October, and the other one is Miyako Odori that continues during the whole month of April. Both performances take place at the stage in Gion's own theater, *Kaburenjo*. Dances for the banquet and the one for the stage are vastly different. That is why, after a program is arranged, geisha have to go through very hard training to practice stage performance, besides their usual work at banquets. During this season, their life is very hectic. Especially during the Miyako Odori, a tea ceremony is held everyday in the theater, so that she cannot skip the tea ceremony classes, and her works such as calligraphy, paintings or flower arrangement are also displayed in the lobby of the theater. Miyako Odori can be described as a cultural festival performed by geisha.

4. Occasion for Obtaining Skills

Then why does geisha work so hard to obtain these skills, especially the ones in performing arts? There are mainly two reasons: external and internal. The external reason is the governmental policy, which has compelled the geisha community to represent the Japanese culture and entertain others. The internal reason is related to geisha's identity as contrasted to women of other profession in gay quarters.

a). External Reasons

The external reasons are deeply related to Japan's modernization and militarism. Modernization of Japan as a nation eventually brought modernization in the geisha community. And the geisha community invented a new style of dance performance, which was free from the tradition of Japanese classical dance stage. And because of the challenging performances, geisha could succeed in getting a good reputation. Their reputation tempted the Japan's militarist government to appropriate them and their performances for its own end. Utilization of geisha as propaganda and publicity of Japan remained even after the militarism government had collapsed. For the external reason there are four factors: modernization, newly created dance performances, militarism, and the cultural publicity of geisha.

(1). Modernization

In 1868, the Tokugawa shogunate came to an end, and the Meiji new government started to rule over Japan. The next year, the emperor moved to Tokyo from the ancient city of Kyoto. Following the emperor, the aristocracy and artisans who earned their livings by supplying purveyance to the royal family also moved to Tokyo. The city of Kyoto began to lose its former glamour. Seeing this decline, the Kyoto government tried to strengthen the modernization efforts of Kyoto. The Kyoto government stimulated industries in Kyoto such as textile, tea and tourism and with the aim of popularizing their products, it held the first Kyoto Exposition in 1871. But the attendance fell short of the expectation. Shortly afterwards, the cooperation for exposition was established. This company prepared much more carefully and another first Kyoto exposition was held in the following year. The first Kyoto expositions were held twice successively and much effort was poured into the second one. To gather spectators, several spectacles were organized such as fireworks, Sumo, Noh Theater, and dance performance of geisha including Miyako Odori. At the end of May in 1872, the Kyoto exposition successfully ended. The ranking list of the events was published in the next year and, among many performances and exhibitions, Miyako Odori enjoyed the highest esteem.ⁱⁱ Miyako Odori was thus initiated with the purpose of gathering people.

The Kyoto government appropriated women of the gay quarters to hold the spotlight of the exposition. After the success of the exposition, the Kyoto city government provided an enormous piece of land to the Gion association, the land that the government confiscated from the neighboring temple. The Gion association built its own theater, school and hospital. In effect, the Kyoto government encouraged the Gion association to make Gion more prosperous with these facilities. Gion became a very popular and well-organized gay quarter, after participating in the exposition.

In the same year the first Miyako Odori was held, the new Meiji government established a law, which prohibited the trade of human beings. At that time, women were sold to gay quarters. This new law did not intend to prohibit prostitution: it did not mention the abolishment of prostitution quarters. In order to evade the law the women now had to testify that upon their freewill they had sold themselves to their owners. So nothing changed in effect except that the condition of working as a prostitute deteriorated.

The Kyoto government enforced the law to the gay quarter. In accordance with the law, the Gion association established a school where women could obtain skills to hold proper professions, such as sewing, knitting, embroidery, writing and calculation. However, this school changed its policies few years afterwards.ⁱⁱⁱ It turned to be a training school for geisha and started to teach dance, music, tea ceremony in addition to providing secular education. The emphasis to prepare women for other professions than geisha has been repeated in the statement of the director of the Gion association, but it did not have an actual impact.

In the end, the Kyoto government succeeded in including women in the gay quarters in the modernization process. The school system looked modern and the hospital took care of the women's health, but in reality, the geisha was able to obtain the skills to entertain her customers so that she did not need to give up her profession as a geisha, and was also able to sell her body without worrying over her health. In this way, they were encouraged to work as prostitutes.

(2). Miyako Odori

Second, I will explain Miyako Odori as a newly created performance. Since Miyako Odori was free from the tradition of Japanese dance performance, directors could carry out experiments every year. They could set Western style chairs in the theater for the foreign audience, which was one of the earliest attempts in Japan. Because the audience was mostly tourists, who were busy sightseeing, the show was always one hour long. During this short period eight to ten acts were shown. Each act described a season and the whole performance represented the entire year from early summer to mid spring: greenery or cool evening in summer, red leaves in autumn, snow covered temples in winter, and the final act always presented the full bloom of cherry blossom in spring. This was the reason why Miyako Odori became known as Cherry Blossom Dance in the West. Scenes were chosen from popular tourist spots in Japan, in order to introduce the nation of Japan itself to the audience. The audience was given the sensation that they had visited several famous tourist spots by seeing Miyako Odori. Thus Miyako Odori, which had several innovations as a stage performing art, won a good reputation and has been held every spring since then.

(3). Militarism

Now I will turn to the third factor: militaristic appropriation of Miyako Odori. Miyako Odori was utilized as propaganda because of its power to attract people. Japan's invasion of China, most notably the fall of Nanjing City, was taken up in Miyako Odori.^{iv} The audience applauded when the Japanese national flag was presented from the besieged city of Nanjing. The audience did not care about how much they knew about Nanjing but was happy to see the presentation of Japan's occupation of the city. This act lifted the jingoistic spirit of the audience. Ironically, the theme of befriending with Chinese children was also presented.^v The theme was based on the idea that China was no longer a foreign country but was a part of Japan. Hence, it was believed Chinese and Japanese should get along with each other. The dancers who impersonated Chinese children and Japanese children danced together by joining hands with each other. During wartime, a writer of Miyako Odori seems to have been forced to add these propaganda acts in order to obtain a permission to present the performance. In addition, war veterans, wounded soldiers and family members of the war dead were frequently invited to Miyako Odori.^{vi} Thus, Miyako Odori conformed to the policy of militarism like other cultural activities during wartime.

(4). Cultural Publicity of Geisha

Miyako Odori became a symbol for the nation of Japan. State guests were invited to Miyako Odori. With such honored guests in the audience, in the final act, each dancer held the flag of the nation where the guest came from, instead of a usual cherry branch with blossoms. According to news reports, the crown prince of Manchuria was invited in 1939. He and his party were very touched when they saw their national flag being held by the dancers on the stage.^{vii} Waving appropriate flags became a tradition of Miyako Odori.

Moreover, not only Miyako Odori, but also geisha came to represent Japanese culture. When state guests visited, geisha were sometimes asked to entertain them at the reception. At such banquets, geisha showed their performances and then entertained guests by serving alcohol and by conversations. If they just served alcohol without performance, they were no different from professional bar hostesses, but bar hostesses had no opportunity to attend such formal and honored banquets. This seems to be true even nowadays. In November 2002, the general meeting of Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union was held in Tokyo and at the party geisha of Gion were invited to show their performance. After their performance, they went down from the stage, and began to

converse with the participants and served alcohol.^{viii} Even now, the geisha is a cultural performer who sometimes serves alcohol like a hostess.

Thus, the Japanese government has appropriated geisha as a tool to propagate its policy. Sometimes the government has strictly controlled the geisha community by law or by the wartime policies. On the other hand it arbitrarily set up the stages for geisha to perform for the state guest, and invited geisha to formal banquets. What has occurred to geisha could not be seen in other professions. Geisha has occupied a special place to represent the Japanese culture, and that is why geisha appear to represent good old Japan. During Japan's modernization in the 1920s and 1930s, the geisha community tended to be westernized. Geisha were dressed up like western ladies and dance halls were built in geisha quarters. However, this trend did not last long. Geisha found their own value by acting more like traditional Japanese. In other words, geisha found their own place in the Japanese society by acting up to the expectations of the Japanese government.

b). Internal Reasons

The internal factors appear to be much simpler. Geisha tend to compare themselves with other women in the gay quarter. This has been historically constructed. Geisha was not the sole occupation in the gay quarter. Gay quarters were originally established to restrict prostitutes from working in other public places. Geisha appeared after the establishment of the gay quarter and from the beginning, they have been distinguished from the prostitutes. The original meaning of "geisha" did not pertain to female but to a kind of male who made the rounds of banquets and showed humorous performance. Then female geisha appeared and she also did the rounds of banquets. She mainly played the shamisen and did the singing. Being a woman who worked around the gay quarter, she could not be excluded from the possibility of prostitution. Yet even when she sold herself, she was not a prostitute by profession and her main profession was still to entertain people with her performance.

Even after the Meiji Restoration, this situation did not change for some time. A gay quarters' journal in 1893 showed that there were two ways to enter the Gion School.^{ix} Attending the school meant making a living in the gay quarter. The *shogi*, which simply means prostitute, could attend the school without entrance examination, while the geisha had to take an examination, testing her knowledge and ability to dance or play the shamisen. It meant that the geisha had to obtain skills while the *shogi* needed nothing. Furthermore one could only become a geisha with her skill of performance. In this journal, values attached to the geisha and those to the *shogi* were also reported.^x A *shogi*, a reporter described, was evaluated in terms merely of her appearance and character, such as being beautiful, pretty, tall, short, quiet, talkative, amiable, and the like. In contrast, as for a geisha, a reporter stated that a geisha's quality rested on her performance and the record of her public performances, in addition to her appearance and character. People looked on geisha in connection with their performance skills, and the geisha herself also crafted her identity with her skills and, by doing so, held herself from degrading to the level of the *shogi*. For this reason too, she tried to maintain her skills.

According to rapidly developing newspapers in Kyoto, geisha have become something of a star in those days. Photographs of geisha appeared in the newspaper like kabuki actors. Not only the activities of geisha, but also their gossip was reported. For public performances, such as Miyako Odori, the names of the geisha who would be on stage next day were reported everyday and reporters described dancers in Miyako Odori, performance itself, and minor issues about the performance. Thus the geisha community supplied a lot of topics to the newspaper. However, this did not last long. In the 1930s, movie actresses took the place of geisha. A motion picture became a much more powerful tool than a stage performance in terms of giving publicity. Less reported in the newspaper, the cultural image of geisha declined. In addition, in motion pictures, many actresses took roles of geisha, and without actual performance, only the image of geisha remained, which is sexual, oppressed, and pitiful.

These internal factors in a way show that the oppressed people too need superiority feeling over others. In other words, like the oppressor, the oppressed tends to oppress others. To make her own existence meaningful, geisha practiced arts, and because of her skills, she looked down on others. This is the strategy to survive her difficult circumstances, that were not protected by law or the social system and is replete with prejudice, contempt, and

pity.

5. Conclusion

I clarified two aspects in the construction of geisha's identity in relation to the performance of Japanese arts. One is external: the Japanese government and the Kyoto city government both forced and encouraged the geisha and geisha community to represent Japanese culture in order to orient the gaze of foreigners and also of Japanese tourists in a certain way (in something supposedly "traditionally" Japanese.) In addition to this, geisha were able to convey messages to a great number of people. The other reason is internal: a geisha herself is obligated to construct her own identity by acquiring the skills for performing arts. These two aspects can be also said of other representations of the Japanese culture such as sumo, kabuki, flower arrangement, and Japanese tea ceremony, in the context of securing their places as something "traditional" in contemporary Japan.

i Bookmagazine online: 17june01news.shtm

ii *Kyoto Nigiwai Mitate*. [吉田 1975: 125, Fig. 45]

iii 岡田 2001: 114

iv Nankinjo no Kyokko [The Rising Sun from Nanjin Castle], fourth act of 1938's Miyako Odori, *Kyokko Henki [The Rising Sun Shines Broadly]*.

v Nisshi Shinko [Familiarity between Japan and China], seventh act of 1939's Miyako Odori, *Kenmu no Minamoto [Origin of Emperor]*.

vi *Kyoto Hinode Shinbun*, 1938, Tataeyo Miyako Odori, April 2.

Kyoto Hinode Shinbun, 1938, Gunkoku no Haru o Utau, April 25.

vii *Kyoto Hinode Shinbun*, 1939, Furimaku Tairiku no Aikyo, April 15.

viii NHK TV program, *Geino Hanabutai*, 7 December, 2002.

ix Shin Geishogi no Shiken, *Karyu*, 8, 1 February 1893, 22.

x Shiki no Nagame, *Karyu*, 1-2, 7-8, 10, 16-17, 1893-4.

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This is based on the paper of a lecture, which I gave at Cornell University on February 24, 2003. Although geisha is usually called "geiko" in Kyoto, in order to discuss simply, I used a word "geisha" for geiko and "geisha apprentice" for maiko.