

Geisha: A History of an Empowered Group

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ABSTRACT

The institution of geisha is synonymous with Japan. The connotation behind the word, however has become warped, particularly when it comes to the history of the institution. Geisha are first and foremost entertainers. As entertainers of men, they were, and still are, intensively trained in a number of different areas, including conversation. This paper examines the empowerment that geisha of the past received through their training at a time when education of women was not commonplace, and how their association with men of power and influence re-enforced that empowerment. The geisha remain empowered today through both their contact with men of influence and their choice of a career that no longer places negative demands upon them. The essay also attempts to dispel some of the misconceptions with which geisha has come to be associated over time.

When most people think of Japan, a number of images usually come to mind. These images include Mount Fuji, the *samurai*, *sushi*, cherry blossoms and *karate*. One additional image that seems to be synonymous with Japan is the exotic *geisha*. The *geisha* is a woman who has been classically trained in the arts of conversation, the *shamisen* (a classical three stringed instrument), and dancing. This education allows *geisha* to be better prepared to entertain customers, but their education does not stop there. Not only do they have to master these arts, but they also have to learn the workings of politics in order to connect with male clients. Often, a special relationship is formed with the men she entertains, allowing her to supply her own opinions about political issues that would have otherwise gone unheard.¹ The history of the *geisha* is one that is rich in culture and tied deeply with the history of Japan. The image of the *geisha* is iconic, but can we consider these women empowered? Did they, or do they now, have any influence with their male clients in order to better their station?

¹ Liza Dalby, *Geisha*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 45.

More than one thousand years ago, during the time of the Heian period, 794 to 1195 CE, Japan began construction of a new capital. Its name was once Heian-kyo, but is more commonly referred to today as Kyoto.² It was in Kyoto during this era that the model for *geisha* was first created. The women of the Heian court were articulate, literate, and highly educated. Owing to their renowned beauty, they were highly sought after by noblemen.³ To pursue these women a suitor of the Heian court would compose a thirty-one syllable poem, called a *waka*, and if the woman in question approved of the poem she would reply. This would later lead to a midnight rendezvous between the couple and the exchange of additional poems.⁴ This exchange reveals that the level of education these women received was on par with that of the men they entertained. In fact, many of the high court women kept such intimately detailed diaries that we can establish a sense of what it was like for women in the Heian era.⁵ After the Heian period Japan experienced a dark time of warring, which lasted for five hundred years.

The warring between the various warlords of Japan ended in October 1600 after the Battle of Sekigahara. Ieyasu Tokugawa emerged the victor and declared himself *shogun*. The emperor remained the official ruler of Japan, but it was Tokugawa who held real power.⁶ With the return of peace, artistic expression once again became important to the people. One art form that made a tremendous comeback was stage performing, particularly the art form of *kabuki*. In the beginning, both men and women were allowed to perform on stage and, much as with stage performers in London, the female *kabuki* actresses were available for hire.⁷ In 1629, however, hoping to reduce the incidences of men who paid for the patronage of the women, the government put a ban on all female performers and their roles were taken over by adolescent boys. This did not work as, since there was no taboo on homosexuality at the time the adolescent boys were made available for sexual favours much as the women had been. In order to prevent the *kabuki* from remaining

2 Lesley Downer, *Women of the Pleasure Quarters* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001), 26.

3 John Gallagher, *Geisha: A Unique World of Tradition, Elegance, and Art* (London: PRCPublishing Ltd., 2003), 98.

4 Downer, *Women of the Pleasure Quarters*, 27.

5 Ibid, 26.

6 Ibid, 33.

7 John Gallagher, *Geisha: A Unique World of Tradition, Elegance, and Art*, 106.

a source of young male sexual partners for hire, the government in 1652 restricted the stage to adult males.⁸ In the 1660s, wealthy merchants of Japan were seeking entertainment in Yoshiwara and Shimabara, where the female counterpart of *kabuki* was often performed. It was here that they would attempt to woo the courtesans for sex.⁹

Despite the popularity of the all-female *kabuki*, it was not until the 1750s that the first true *geisha* made an appearance. The term “*geisha*” is literally translated as “arts person”; these women were desired by men not only for their beauty, but also for their wit and for being well versed in the arts.¹⁰ With time, the popularity of the *geisha* grew to such an extent that the authorities were unable to prevent the expansion of the practice. The answer to this problem came in 1779 when the first *kemban*, a *geisha* registration house, was established. These soon spread nation-wide and a number of rules designed to help protect the *geisha* were put into place.¹¹

While the life of the *geisha* may have seemed easy when compared to working in the fields, the truth is quite different. The training of a *geisha* started between the ages of ten and twelve. It was at this age when parents of the lower classes would sell their daughters to the *geisha* house mother, both in hopes of giving the daughter a better life and to gain money which the parents desperately needed. The girls would begin their training as maids in the teahouses, learning by watching their ‘older sisters’ work and perform.¹² Having to work only as maids during their first years of training to be a *geisha* was in no way easy. The mothers of the *geisha* houses felt that the suffering which the younger girls went through during this time helped them become stronger women in the end, allowing them to become good *geisha*. The girls spent long hours in forced study of the *shamisen* and of dance, coupled with the arduous work that they were forced to do in the teahouse.¹³ Through this study, and through careful observation, they would receive this training until the age of sixteen, at which time they were introduced to

8 Ibid,106.

9 Ibid,107.

10 Ibid, 112.

11 Ibid, 113.

12 Dalby, *Geisha*, 44.

13 Ibid, 45.

the patrons of the house as *maiko*. These *maiko* attended the parties more as decoration and diversion than anything else; they were not expected to interact with the patrons but, again, were expected to learn by observation.¹⁴

At the age of twenty the *maiko* was officially introduced to the patrons of the house as a *geisha*. It was at this time that a girl's virginity would be sold to any patron willing to pay for the privilege, and the house mother would regain the money that she had lost in purchasing the child in the first place, and in training her to become a *geisha*.¹⁵ Often there was little or no choice for the *geisha*, but she was able to exact some influence by expressing whom she preferred.¹⁶ In order to determine who would pay for the privilege of deflowering her, the *geisha* would pay close attention and be warm to the man she found most pleasing and, on the other hand, would be cold and standoffish to those with whom she did not want to sleep with. In order to attract a certain *danna*, or patron, a *geisha* would make sure to recite well-written poetry and play smoothly on the *shamisen*. To deter others, however, the *geisha* would recite poetry that was not well composed and would play choppily on the *shamisen*.¹⁷ Though this would not always have the desired effect, it was a well-thought-out plan and gave the women more power over their own lives. Ultimately, however, the choice of who would take the *geisha's* virginity was up to the mother of the house and, once decided, that particular *geisha* had little choice in the matter.

Another issue that the *geisha* had to face was the behaviour of the customers of their teahouses. Although men who came to the teahouses were usually well-behaved and of good social standing, customers would sometimes have too much to drink and act inappropriately, sometimes fighting over the affection of the girls.¹⁸ In order to prevent violence from breaking out, the *geisha* were required to learn how to distract those men who became too intoxicated or disorderly. These kinds

14 Jodi Cobb, *Geisha: The life, the Voices, the Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1995), 8.

15 Dalby, *Geisha*, 45.

16 Sheridan Prasso, *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, & Fantasies of the Exotic Orient* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 209.

17 Dalby, *Geisha*, 55.

18 Lesley Downer, "A World Behind Closed Doors" in *Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile* ed. Peabody Essex Museum, (Salem: George Braziller Inc., 2004), 27.

of distractions usually consisted of games that would be considered very *risqué*, full of innuendo and horseplay and designed to distract the man just enough to get him out the door and on his way home.¹⁹

The way of the *geisha* today is much as it was in the 1750s. The arts, music and *kabuki* for which the *geisha* are renowned are still in practice. The traditional white make-up, carefully painted lips, and the hairstyles that were worn then are still worn today.²⁰ That is not to say that there are no differences. Parents no longer sell their daughters into a *geisha* house; rather, it is more often the choice of the girl to enter the world of *geisha*. Training does not begin until the age of fourteen or fifteen, once the young lady has completed her basic education, and before entering high school.²¹ The suffering that the original *geisha* had to go through during their training has been abolished, and house mothers are now bending over backwards when a prodigy shows an interest in becoming a *geisha*. In reality, the girls are often pampered; the house mothers can no longer be as strict with the girls as they may have been in earlier times because there are not as many girls interested in becoming *geisha*. Girls can now officially be introduced as *geisha* at seventeen years of age, rather than twenty. When they are being introduced as new *geisha* they attend parties where the house mothers know that a television star or idol will attend. This is seen as a way of showing the girls how exciting the life of a *geisha* can be, and it is how house mothers entice the girls to continue on this path. It is thought that there will be enough boring parties with businessmen as time goes on and the new girls should get a taste of excitement early in their careers.²² Girls who become *geisha* are free to quit whenever they wish, without fear of repercussion.²³ Women in contemporary Japan have greater and expanded opportunities in business and other areas of public life and so being *geisha* is not looked upon in the same manner as it once was; the status of *geisha* is not as high as it used to be.²⁴

19 Ibid, 27.

20 Gallagher, *Geisha: A Unique World of Tradition, Elegance, and Art*, 47.

21 Liza Dalby "The Exotic Geisha," in *Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile*, Peabody Essex Museum, (Salem: George Braziller Inc., 2004), 75.

22 Dalby, *Geisha*, 45.

23 Ibid, 34.

24 Ibid, 45.

Another way of the *geisha* that has changed is in how their virginity is taken. If they are a virgin when they first become a geisha, their virginity is no longer handed off to the person willing to pay the most. Instead, a professional ‘de-flowerers’ are hired to introduce the girl to the ways of sex and train them how to please a man. The process of de-flowering only occurs with the girl’s consent and desire.²⁵ De-flowering can be very embarrassing for those girls who decide to go through with it because, not only do they have to sleep with a person whom they barely know and lose their virginity to him, once the deed is done they are made to wear their hair in a certain style that shows they were indeed de-flowered. Although most common citizens do not understand the significance of this, many mothers of other *geisha* houses recognize it and will come out and congratulate the girl, in public, when they see that particular hairstyle.²⁶ Being de-flowered allows the *geisha* to work more freely with her patrons and offers the girl a chance to attract and establish a long-term relationship with a desirable man.²⁷ The life of a *geisha* is successful enough today, however, that they no longer need financially to sleep with their patrons.

Contemporary *geisha* also have much more freedom when deciding with which clients they will associate or become intimate. Today’s *geisha* have the option of declining those patrons they do not find appealing or in whom they are not interested. As a contemporary *geisha*, it is now frowned upon to sleep with a man in whom you are not interested.²⁸ This freedom allows the *geisha* to be more selective and provides them better opportunity to find a man who will financially support them. Often *geisha* are taken in by one of their more wealthy patrons as a “number two wife” or mistress, although the practice is not generally well-accepted and there is no official marriage. They are given a home, allowance, and the *geisha* is able to live comfortably while seeing her lover.²⁹ The men who take *geisha* as mistresses are most often looking for a woman who will spoil them. When the man visits the home that he has set up for their *geisha*, it is often in order to forget the troubles that he faced that day before heading home to his real family. When

25 Downer, *Women of the Pleasure Quarters*, 131.

26 Ibid.

27 Downer, “A World Behind Closed Doors,” 27.

28 Prasso, *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls & Fantasies of the Exotic Orient*, 209.

29 Dalby, *Geisha*, 226 .

the *geisha* is alone with the patron, the *geisha* treats him like he is the only person in the world, stroking the male ego, making him feel more important or handsome than he actually is.³⁰ This can sometimes be a difficult situation for the mistress; she knows that nothing is really going to come out of the relationship.³¹ Her position as “number two wife” is precarious; often, in order to prevent being placed out on the street, it is not uncommon for the *geisha* to continue working while making time for her lover.³² *Geisha* who are taken as mistresses also have to be very careful about becoming pregnant. Often the man already has a family with children and is not looking for a second family. It would also be difficult for the man to claim the child of a *geisha* as one of his own because of the disturbance that it would cause within his first household. These men also do not want to have to deal with more children; they have selected a mistress in order to be pampered. Any child that the *geisha* has had would require attention, taking away her ability to spoil and pamper the patron.³³

The question remains, though, were the *geisha* of the past, and are the *geisha* of the present, empowered? In the past, being sold at the age of eleven and forced to work as an indentured servant would have been hard for any child. Being forced to sleep with men in order to entertain them was not uncommon, and often a bidding war would take place over who would take the virginity of a new *geisha*.³⁴ These women, however, were also well-trained in the arts of conversation, dancing and *shamisen*. They were provided a level of education that was unavailable for the common women of that time, simply because of the conversations that they would have to have with their *danna*³⁵; the education was provided in order to better service their clients. Men of influence desired their companionship. The *geisha* would have had influence over the politics of the time.³⁶ Her education allowed her to keep up-to-date on political events. It was only the elite who were able to afford to visit the *geisha* houses and these were the people who

30 Downer, “A World Behind Closed Doors,” 26.

31 Dalby, *Geisha*, 160.

32 Ibid, 161, 200.

33 Cobb, *Geisha: The Life, the Voices, the Art*, 108.

34 Dalby, *Geisha*, 54.

35 Ibid, 44.

36 Ibid, 66.

would have political influence. Although the *geisha* would never presume to tell the *danna* what she may have wanted, she could subtly hint at the political direction in which she felt the *danna* should go. Often this nudging would be in a direction that would either benefit her personally, or one that would help all of the *geisha*.³⁷ This did not always work, but it did make a lot of the men reflect on various issues of that time.³⁸ Similarly, the *geisha* could have an influence on business. Although the *geisha* houses were places where the men would go in order to relax, it was not unusual for them to go in groups of three or four. Often when sitting with their *geisha*, the topic of work would be raised.³⁹ The *geisha* were well-educated and able to understand the nuances of business, and the men did not have the same restrictions with regards to talking about work at the *geisha* house as they did in their own home. Thus, despite everything that the *geisha* of the past had to go through in her years of training, she was empowered.

The *geisha* of today are empowered in different ways. Many of them have a basic education to fall back on if they decide that being a *geisha* is not for them, but for women in Japan having an education has become the norm,⁴⁰ so higher education does not provide a real relative advantage for the contemporary *geisha*. The real empowerment comes as personal choice. Unlike their past counterparts, contemporary *geisha* have a choice whether or not they want to be *geisha*. Some enter the profession in order to find a husband, while others find independence, and they have the choice to leave the profession at any time.⁴¹ The *geisha* have the ability to choose with whom they will sit and entertain, a choice that was not available or offered before.⁴² This allows them to see who the better *danna* are, and who will pay better, which makes their business more lucrative and suggests that the *geisha* are in a position of power such that they can be selective in those whom they choose to serve. The contemporary *geisha* is no longer required to be a virgin from the beginning of training. Many of the girls who decide to become *geisha* already have boyfriends when beginning their training, or

37 Ibid, 64.

38 Ibid, 65.

39 Ibid, 63.

40 Johnston, *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 42.

41 Dalby, *Geisha*, 226.

42 Dalby, "The Exotic Geisha," 74.

find a male friend while they are working.⁴³ Being able to give yourself wholly to a person of your choice, without repercussion, can be considered true empowerment. The virginity of a newly established *geisha* is no longer sold to the highest paying customer. She has control over her own body and does not have to worry about repercussions if she does not want to sleep with a particular patron.⁴⁴ In the past, although it was not officially expected, it was a common practice for the *geisha* to sleep with customers. Today, however, the *geisha* is in a prestigious enough profession that she is not required to sleep with her clients. Men who go to the *geisha* houses are satisfied with the drinks that are supplied and with the company that they receive.⁴⁵ The *geisha*, however, still must be able to converse intelligently with their clients, typically businessmen, thus they still have influence.

Many aspects of Japanese culture have changed over the years, but one constant since the mid-1700s is the way of the *geisha*. In the past, being a *geisha* opened the door to a world to which many women did not have access; today it is a way to have ties with the past while not living under the thumb of family as these women are independent.⁴⁶ The *geisha* are steeped in tradition and the position has become fused with Japanese society. The empowerment of the *geisha* still exists, despite the fact that their empowerment has changed. In the past, the *geisha* sacrificed their childhood in order to have influence in a male society; today they may still have that same influence but now with personal choice.⁴⁷ The empowerment of the *geisha* came and comes not only from the training that they received, but also through their ability to put that training to use to have influence over their important male customers in order to better their own lives.

43 Ibid.

44 William Johnston, *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star* 40.

45 Cobb, *Geisha: The Life, the Voice, the Art*, 14.

46 Johnston, *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star*, 51.

47 Dalby, *Geisha*, 41.

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