

Geisha

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Geisha have enchanted both Japanese and foreigners alike for centuries. With their unique beauty and exceptional skills in the arts, they are difficult to overlook. In the west, geisha rival Mount Fuji and the bullet train as the most recognizable emblem of Japan. Despite their widespread appeal, true understanding of what it means to be a geisha remains elusive for the majority of westerners. The Japanese and American perception of what a geisha is and what they actually do remain two very different entities. The geisha's similar physical appearance to courtesans, the Japanese sensitivity over the subject of geisha, the fabricated bitterness between geisha and wives and the exaggeration of their complete servility to men all strengthened the western belief that they are prostitutes. This misunderstanding of geisha was only further reinforced following World War II, with American GIs bringing home tales of steamy encounters with "geesha girls." Ever since the Second World War, Americans tend to view geisha as primarily sexual or erotic beings, while the Japanese view them as representations of their rich past and culture.

The word *geisha* translated into English means *artist*. Thus, a geisha is a woman trained in all of the traditional Japanese arts for the entertainment of men. A geisha must study such subjects as dancing, singing, flower arranging, poetry, tea ceremony, traditional Japanese instruments and conversation.¹ To excel in her career, a geisha must train in all of the traditional arts indefinitely; a level of perfection simply does not exist in the eyes of a geisha.² Geisha daily life consists of making appearances at private parties held in *ochaya* or teahouses. They also participate regularly in public dance performances

and festivals. A geisha party is most usually only attended by men because of the erotic element in the atmosphere present at a gathering involving geisha.³ However, women may attend the dance performances or festivals they participate in.⁴ A geisha is always expected to liven up the atmosphere of a dull party, even if the men she is entertaining are intolerably dull. It is a geisha's duty to see to it that everyone enjoys themselves in her company.

Geisha are so often confused with courtesans because of their comparable appearance to each other to the untrained eye. If one were to have a geisha stand next to someone dressed as a courtesan, most Americans would likely have difficulty distinguishing which was which. However, any similarity that exists between geisha and courtesans is merely skin-deep. Upon examining the history of the geisha, the differences between geisha and courtesans become much more pronounced.

It may surprise many Americans that the very first geisha were actually men. Geisha were originally court-jester types that would dress up and dance and play instruments to entertain at parties.⁵ The very first female geisha emerged soon after the male geisha came into being. The first female geisha was originally a courtesan from the eighteenth century whose number of clients was rapidly declining.⁶ Nevertheless; she remained determined and came up with the idea of becoming a female geisha. She took to practicing singing and dancing and started calling herself a geisha. Men became intrigued by this idea and her number of clients started to rise.

Female geisha began to rise in number and stature. They were famous for selling their skills rather than sex. In no time, geisha began to grow in popularity and started to overshadow the courtesans. To further prove the difference existing between geisha and courtesans, there always existed a strong rivalry between the two. In a way, it is ironic

that Americans often label geisha merely as prostitutes, when historically they were initially defined as totally different women than courtesans.

Differences in terms of cost also noticeably distinguished geisha from courtesans and prostitutes. Due to the fact that geisha are such extensively-trained professionals, the amount of money to be paid in order to be in the company of a geisha is extraordinarily high; much higher than that of a prostitute.⁷ This fact may surprise many foreigners who previously thought paying for sex would be much more costly than to pay for the company of a highly-trained woman of the arts.

It must also be noted that the steep price one must pay to win the privilege of a geisha's company does not include the promise of sexual intercourse. If a man hires a geisha, what he is purchasing is her skills in the arts for the evening and to be in the presence of her wit and beauty. Despite this, there is a certain sexual element in the atmosphere at any gathering involving geisha. It is, however, subtle such as flirting or crude jokes; Japanese men know not to expect anything more.⁸

Japanese and foreign men both find geisha to be endlessly appealing, but there are some that wonder what exactly makes them so appealing. Shuko, a geisha from the Simbashi district, was actually asked what makes her and her comrades so enticing. Shuko replied that a geisha's requirements made them universally appealing: "First, to be beautiful, but not too beautiful. Next, to be able to hold one's drink, but never get drunk. Third, to devote oneself to one's art. Fourth, to be good at talking, but better at listening."⁹ Shuko confided that this was her secret to excelling in the art of conversation. In addition to these admirable qualities, a geisha must have a pristine reputation throughout the geisha community. Unlike a prostitute or courtesan, one's reputation and

prudence was vital. If a geisha was known for being promiscuous, business would decline drastically until she had no source of income at all.¹⁰

According to the classic anthropological study, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1989), when Americans first came into contact with the geisha at the dawn of the twentieth century, they were quite shocked by their practices and traditions. The geisha caused Americans much confusion, because the only component in American culture they felt comfortable comparing them to was to prostitutes.¹¹ Obviously, the Americans could not comprehend the true nature of the geisha in the context of Japanese Culture. The Japanese became offended and defensive on this issue; which further proved them to be prostitutes in many Americans' eyes. The American assumption could not have been more inaccurate.

The Japanese have always been very anxious about how outsiders view their culture and way of life, especially westerners.¹² Ever since Commodore Matthew Perry first arrived in Japan to negotiate its opening to America in 1853, Americans have been quite critical of Japanese Culture and practices; this has never been truer than with the American opinion of geisha. The geisha subculture may be comparatively small in the context of Japanese Culture, but it is extraordinarily complex and has been a part of Japanese Culture for the past 400 years.¹³ So for westerners to belittle their valued tradition as nothing but glorified commercial sex is an outrage. Geisha represent all the best of the traditional Japanese arts as well as Japan's exquisite past and culture; to insult geisha culture is to insult Japanese culture. So, the Japanese were offended and defensive not because geisha were truly prostitutes, they were frustrated because westerners did not understand their important tradition.

The manner in which Americans view the entertainment a geisha provides says a great deal about how they perceive geisha themselves. In the past, some Americans have found the amusement of geisha parties quite bewildering. The songs and dances a geisha usually performs differ quite drastically from those in the west. Americans are not quite sure how to regard such dances and songs because they are uniquely Japanese.¹⁴ The dances performed by a geisha are meant to be enticing to men in a way some Americans had not previously anticipated. With pre-conceived notions of a geisha being almost synonymous with a prostitute, perhaps they were expecting the eroticism and sexuality of the evening to be more pronounced and flamboyant than it really was.

As can be expected, a Japanese man's perspective of a geisha party is quite different from that of an American. Japanese men have the benefit of being immersed in an environment that is comfortable and familiar to them. A geisha party reflects their own culture and thus, they can relax and enjoy themselves. These types of parties are often frequented by Japanese businessmen who wish to unwind with co-workers and friends. A geisha party promises to be a stress-free environment where businessmen and politicians can let loose and say whatever is on their minds.¹⁵ Japanese men know whatever they choose to say in the presence of a geisha will not be repeated elsewhere. Japanese men already know what to expect from geisha parties and have no misconceptions about them like their American counterparts. Japanese men may expect some flirting from the evening; however Americans often assume more scandalous events occur.

One of the many existing western misconceptions of geisha is that they are all young and beautiful. After all, if geisha were truly prostitutes as Americans believed, they would have to be young and beautiful in order to lure clients. Both of these western assumptions are false. While many geisha begin their careers when they are young and beautiful, a geisha's career does not necessarily end with her youth. Some geisha have

been known to carry on with their careers well into their sixties.¹⁶ In the documentary, *The Secret Life of Geisha* (1999), a geisha named Yumi is interviewed. Yumi confides that she is ninety-three years old and still entertains as a geisha. Older geisha are no less active in the geisha community, and are actually paid more because of their many years of study and practice in their trade.¹⁷

The matter of commercial sex is the single most controversial component in geisha history and culture. Even in this modern age, when vast amounts of information is readily available, so many Americans today still believe geisha to be little more than handsomely-attired prostitutes. Most westerners also think that geisha are also trained in sex; this could not be further from the truth. Full-fledged geisha, known in Kyoto as *geiko*, often take on a *maiko* (meaning: apprentice geisha, literally translated as: *dancing child*) as a sort of adopted “younger sister” or apprentice. The *geiko* advise the young, aspiring geisha on a daily basis; the *maiko* learns everything there is to know about becoming a geisha from observing her “older sister.”¹⁸

The only topic in which the *geiko* confides very little information (if any at all) to the *maiko*, is regarding the nature of sex. Even in the past, when the ritual deflowering ceremony of *mizuage* was practiced, the most *geiko* usually told their apprentices about how to behave in the ceremony was to “lie still.”¹⁹ This, naturally, resulted in countless *maiko* who were totally unprepared mentally in terms of what to expect from the *mizuage* ceremony. Thus, not only are geisha not trained at all in sexual intercourse, but many young *maiko* had no idea whatsoever how to behave or what was to take place.

Before the anti-prostitution laws went into effect in 1957, most geisha used to partake in the *mizuage* ceremony. *Mizuage* is a term that traditionally referred to the virginity of an apprentice geisha. If a *maiko* already had a *danna* (patron), he would have

the honor of taking her *mizuage*.²⁰ If the geisha did not already have a *danna*, her *mizuage* would go up for auction and be sold to the highest bidder. Naturally, the traditional concept of *mizuage* was quite appalling to Americans; however one must understand the *mizuage* tradition in the context of Japanese Culture. A woman is not considered a woman if she is still a virgin, thus *mizuage* was also a gateway to womanhood.²¹ After 1957, *mizuage* had nothing to do with a young geisha's virginity. Ever since the anti-prostitution laws, *mizuage* was simply a celebration of passage from *maiko* to *geiko*.

The concept of a *danna* in geisha culture is misunderstood by westerners and continues to reinforce their beliefs that geisha are nothing more than glorified courtesans. *Danna* is the traditional Japanese word for husband, but a *danna* was not a geisha's literal husband. A geisha would be considered fortunate if a man expressed interest in becoming her *danna*. This meant he would cover all her expenses which included buying her new kimono regularly and paying for all her lessons. In the past, a geisha would become her *danna*'s mistress in return for his generosity. Still, this did not make geisha at all similar to prostitutes. A prostitute may have relations with a different man every night, but a geisha would be true to her *danna* and only have relations with him.²²

To be the *danna* of a lovely, young geisha was a major status symbol right up until World War II. Although government-licensed prostitution was a part of Japanese society since 1600, a law was passed outlawing it in 1957.²³ Thus, after that year, geisha were no longer required to have sexual relationships with their *danna*. The geisha of today have complete command over whom they engage in intercourse with and when; though they would take care not to flaunt such relationships and keep them low-key.

Especially during World War II, some Americans believed geisha promoted infidelity and immorality.²⁴ Much of the time, a geisha's *danna* would already be married to another woman. Historically, marriage and romantic love were viewed as two separate entities in Japanese Culture; very seldom were they one and the same.²⁵ A marriage was between two respectable Japanese families not two people hopelessly in love. For this reason, most Japanese men sought mistresses for sexual and sometimes loving relationships. This really has nothing to do with geisha; if a man could not afford becoming a geisha's *danna*, he would likely seek a mistress elsewhere.

Foreigners often assume there was an abundance of rivalry and competition between geisha and wives; which, if it were true, could support their thesis that geisha are prostitutes. Interestingly enough, any true altercations between geisha and wives were actually quite rare.²⁶ Wives would actually feel more threatened by the idea that their husband might have an affair with a bar hostess or a secretary; a geisha would prove a far more comfortable option for them.²⁷ This is because the wife's role was not threatened by a geisha mistress. Particularly in the past, a Japanese wife's primary domain was the domestic home, serving her husband and bearing and raising children. Although the role of a Japanese wife may be currently evolving the role of a geisha remains unaltered. A geisha's domain is the social sphere: she is meant to entertain and socialize with men, but by no means is she a wife or mother. Thus, either side rarely felt threatened by the other because the roles of geisha and wives were clearly defined and hardly ever overlapped one and other.

In the documentary, *The Secret Life of Geisha* (1999), a modern geisha client and his wife are interviewed. The wife divulges that she would not be happy if she found out her husband had an affair with any ordinary Japanese woman, but that she would not mind if he had an affair with a geisha. She actually said that if her husband had an affair

with a geisha, she would consider it as “an honor.”²⁸ When the woman’s husband heard this statement, he simply chuckled awkwardly in response.

Although all Japanese women were not as enthusiastic about their husbands visiting geisha so often, rather cordial relationships existed between geisha and wives. The book, *Geisha* (1998) by Liza Dalby (the only non-Japanese or American to ever truly become a geisha) talks of a girl named Yuriko, whose father was a highly-respected geisha client. While she was growing up, geisha would visit Yuriko’s home a few times a year. The geisha would always bring gifts, not for Yuriko’s father, but for her mother. While giving the gifts to the wife of their frequent client they would say something like: “Thank you for your husband’s business throughout the year.”²⁹ To which to wife might reply: “I am indebted to you for taking care of things for me so well.”³⁰ Apparently, this interaction and gift-giving ceremony was not at all abnormal; at two separate occasions every year geisha would normally go to all their most valued costumers’ houses to deliver gifts and thanks.

Perhaps astonishing to Americans and the rest of the western world, on such a meeting as this one, the wife would act respectfully to the geisha in question, and she would treat them as she would any of her husband’s professional colleagues. The wife would always be certain to thank the geisha for assisting her by helping her husband socialize and have a pleasant time while unwinding. Dalby (who has an interesting viewpoint, as she is at once American and a former geisha) describes it beautifully as a “feminine division of labor, where neither side need be jealous because one identity does not overlap with the other.”³¹

Although most Japanese women have accepted the fact that their men find pleasure in visiting geisha; and hence spending time with other women, most American

wives would not look favorably upon such an arrangement. An American wife would likely feel hurt, frustrated or threatened by such a situation. The most obvious difference between the American and Japanese perspective is that in American society, wives are expected to accompany their husbands in social situations. Husbands and wives are also expected to receive sexual satisfaction from each other in the western world. In Japan, not only did wives never accompany their men to outings with colleagues, but their sexual relationship was one primarily for the procreation of children and not personal satisfaction.³² Even in modern Japan, wives and husbands who socialize together are not very common nor are “love matches” necessarily the majority of Japanese marriages.³³ This glaringly important difference makes the American and Japanese perspective on the husband’s relationships with geisha entirely different.

Though it may shock some westerners, if one examines the geisha community there is a certain amount of feminism to be found there within. It is true that up until World War II, many women did not truly choose the geisha profession but rather picked it from among their few options. Some young girls had no other option available to them and became a geisha from necessity. Young girls that trained to become geisha before the Second World War were mainly from very poor families who needed fewer mouths to feed. If a family could not afford to support all of their children, they would likely send a daughter (or sometimes more than one) to Tokyo or Kyoto to make a living as a geisha.³⁴ It was most common that these girls would never see their families again after becoming geisha. These poor, young girls would work very hard to be the best at dancing and singing, because if they failed as a geisha they had nowhere else to go.

Despite their humble and unfortunate beginnings, geisha had many opportunities which other Japanese women did not. Geisha were never permitted to marry, but then again they never had to worry about being a housewife either. Geisha were permitted to

study such subjects as literature, poetry and current events so they could easily converse with clients. Geisha had access to lessons in these, as well as all the traditional arts, for the entirety of their geisha career. In contrast, most other Japanese women at the time were not expected to be very educated at all; let alone witty and knowledgeable.

The very fact that a geisha was allowed to socialize with men is something to boast about. It would be seen as very strange if a man decided to bring his wife along to an evening out with fellow businessmen or prospective clients. Alternatively, geisha are not at all out of place at such a gathering and are most frequently the life of the party. Here, Japanese men feel that they can let loose and be themselves, even in the presence of the geisha. However, if they were in the presence of other Japanese women, they would choose to exhibit a different and more formal demeanor.³⁵ Geisha were allowed to freely flirt and make crude jokes with men which is also unique among Japanese women. If an ordinary Japanese woman did this she would likely be thought of as peculiar or indecent.

A geisha also makes her own income which was entirely unique among Japanese women prior to World War II. After they have paid back all their debts (for kimono, lessons, etc.) in full to their *okiya* or geisha house, they are allowed to keep most of their own wages. A geisha who is earning money for herself still must give some of their earnings to their *okiya* for their sponsoring of said geisha.³⁶ The most successful geisha have enough finances to be able to move out of their geisha house and into their own apartments; they are able to afford every luxury for themselves. This may not seem like complete financial independence for women in the modern western sense, but this is far more self-reliance than most Japanese women could boast prior to World War II.

The *hanamachi* or “flower-towns” in which a geisha worked were also entirely operated by women.³⁷ Although a geisha’s clients would be entirely male, a “geisha

mother” would be in charge of her geisha house and make all of the most important decisions for the geisha under her roof. Much of the time, the “geisha mother” was a former geisha herself and had inherited the *okiya*; her role then would be leader and advisor of the geisha and to help them become as prestigious as possible. No males would ever be permitted to live in a geisha house or ever make any important decisions on behalf of the geisha. This may not seem like feminism or independence in the modern sense, but women who were geisha had arguably the most opportunities available to them and freedoms among Japanese women up until World War II. Today, geisha have even more independence and freedom.

One might attempt to rebuke all these claims of feminism and independence by falsely arguing that geisha are completely servile to men and their needs. After all, if a westerner believes geisha to be entirely subservient and submissive, then they would naturally overlook the feminism and independence that exists in the *hanamachi*. However, the idea of a geisha which is entirely servile and slavish to men is an utter fabrication devised and misconceived by westerners. Neither are geisha fancily-dressed waitresses as some westerners suppose. The most actual serving a geisha will do for a client is to pour him a cup of sake or tea. However, this action is a ceremonial act, not an act of necessity.³⁸ Part of the tea ceremony would also call for the client reciprocating the action by pouring the geisha a cup of sake or tea in return.

Geisha do not treat their clients as a humble servant would obey her or his master, but rather as a hostess treats her honored guests. A geisha’s costumers would be referred to the entire evening as *okyakusama*, meaning honored guest.³⁹ In any situation, a host’s main objective is to make his or her guests feel at ease and in good humor, which is precisely what a geisha does. A geisha is also expected to use her own wit, creativity and individuality to socialize and entertain; this would be impossible if a geisha were

truly meant to remain completely obedient and servile. Interactions between geisha and their guests demonstrate complete respect from both sides.

During World War II, a vast majority of Americans viewed the Japanese as an enemy that was at once harsh and mysterious. Americans did not truly understand Japanese Culture and their tactics in warfare. With the Japanese bombing in Pearl Harbor, it showed that Japan was unafraid to attack and were utterly unpredictable; which was very frightening for young American men fighting in the war. The American GIs were young and largely inexperienced with death and despair. If the psychological elements of warfare did not lower the men's spirits there were always physical ailments to be had such as diseases and dysentery. The brutality of war caused many of them to turn to more comfortable diversions such as alcohol, drugs and especially women.

Even before the young American GIs had arrived in the Pacific, they had already heard tantalizing stories about women and sexuality in the Far East. American GIs heard plentiful rumors and myths about Asian women who were at once amazingly gorgeous and liberal with their sexuality. There was a text circulated on Yap Island entitled: *The Guide to the Western Pacific*, in which it stated: "the sex lives of the natives have always been somewhat loose according to American standards."⁴⁰ Thus, young American GIs arrived in the Pacific with pre-conceived notions about Asian women and how they would behave; this likely contributed to the misunderstanding of the geisha and their profession.

The 1945 *Guide to Japan* attempted to enlighten those who remained mystified about the true nature of a geisha. The guide described a geisha of having little similarity to prostitutes. Geisha were defined in the text as "a highly-trained entertainer whose business in life is to make men happy."⁴¹ Obviously, not all young American men in

Japan read this at the time and still took the geisha to be prostitutes. Even so, it remains unclear if the men who read this guide actually fathomed what type of entertainment was meant in order to “make men happy.” The young, eager American boys may still have supposed that some sort of sexual encounter was still likely. Nevertheless, the description provided them still sounded fabulous to many American GIs and geisha were among the Asian women that they were most interested in and anxious to meet.

A great majority of the American misconceptions of geisha were founded during and immediately following the Second World War. Upon returning home, American GIs often told scintillating stories about “geisha girls” they had encountered and had relations with. Prostitution has been linked with Japanese history for centuries and the time of the Second World War was a time of mass prostitution.⁴² Countless Japanese prostitutes dressed themselves up as geisha in order to receive more clients. These prostitutes called themselves geisha, because they knew it was a term the GIs had heard before even if they did not truly understand it.

Young, lustful American GIs could not tell the difference between geisha and prostitutes; though they would not likely care too much to know the difference. Due to the many flings between American GIs and prostitutes masquerading as geisha, geisha began to carry the significance of a woman of low morality and abundant promiscuity in the western world. This unfortunate miscalculation still thrives in the American mindset today.

Unlike the inexperienced American GIs, men of higher ranking were aware that the women their young men were fraternizing with were not actually geisha. Geisha were extraordinarily exclusive and only men of power and prosperity could afford the means of accompanying a geisha at any rate. A geisha was simply beyond the reach and price of

the young American men fighting for their country. One geisha was quoted as saying: "Right after the War, we had lots of foreigners coming. The geisha refused to sleep with foreigners."⁴³ On the other hand, officers and other high-ranking officials were much more likely to be granted the privilege of attending a geisha party. These privileged few were able to truly experience the company of a geisha and brought home the only credible stories of interactions with geisha.⁴⁴

Although Americans often overemphasize the eroticism and sexuality of the geisha, this does not mean that geisha themselves are completely devoid of these qualities. The geisha community is known as the *karyukai*, meaning the Flower and Willow World.⁴⁵ This name has great meaning: the flower represents eroticism and the willow represents gracefulness. Hence, a true geisha must embody both of these entities simultaneously and flawlessly. However, geisha must be erotic and sensual in a more subdued and subtle fashion than Japanese courtesans or prostitutes.

In addition, an abundance of eroticism can be found in the very appearance of a *maiko*. As an apprentice geisha, a *maiko* must rely much more on her beauty and physical attractiveness than a full geisha would. At this point in her geisha career, a *maiko* has not yet mastered all of her required skills and so they are more lavishly attired to make up for it.⁴⁶ A *maiko* is considered to be the quintessential image of traditional Japanese femininity.

A *maiko* has her face painted white and her lips accentuated with a deep red. The hair of a *maiko* is done up elaborately so the nape of the neck is left exposed. The neck is painted white also, except a *maiko* must leave two or three thin stripes of skin unpainted and exposed to tantalize men. In the same manner legs or cleavage are regarded in western culture; the neck is thought to be extremely erotic and beautiful in Japan.⁴⁷

Naturally, geisha posses a certain amount of sexuality in Japanese culture as well; however it is far less ostentatious than westerners believe.

When one usually refers to a geisha, one usually is pertaining to the highly-esteemed and refined geisha of Kyoto or Tokyo; however there is another less commonly mentioned type of geisha with a questionable reputation: the *onsen geisha*. Kyoto and Tokyo geisha are known to be respectable and reputable amongst the Japanese population, the *onsen geisha*'s reputation is not nearly as pristine. Around the time of World War II was when the term *onsen geisha* began to carry such negative connotations. It seemed common knowledge to most that the term *onsen geisha* was nearly synonymous with prostitute.

The *onsen geisha* dwell only in the famous hot-springs resorts of Japan, such as Atami. In the past, *onsen geisha* placed little emphasis on the arts and more emphasis on pleasing men sexually. While, an evening with a Kyoto or Tokyo geisha does not include sexual relations; with an *onsen geisha* it was almost always expected.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, it remains unclear if all *onsen geisha* who worked in hot-springs resorts were of such low stature or if it was simply exaggerated. It is possible, that there was an overabundance of prostitutes in these towns marketing themselves as geisha. Despite this, there are many accounts of the seedy and scandalous events which occurred at *onsen geisha* parties during this era.

Sayo Masuda (b. 1925) was an *onsen geisha* who wrote down her tragic life in *Autobiography of a Geisha* (1957). In her shocking tale, she explains how she was trained in the art of sexuality and how her virginity was sold on four separate occasions.⁴⁹ Sayo Masuda was not rigorously-educated like the true geisha of Tokyo and Kyoto; she only learned to write *hiragana* script (Japanese) in her late twenties.⁵⁰ After her time as an

onsen geisha, she turned to prostitution for a time, and frankly; there appears to be little difference between the two professions. As an *onsen geisha*, Sayo Masuda was virtually a sex-slave in pre-World War II Japan.

However tragic and unsettling Sayo Masuda's experiences were, it must be understood that *onsen geisha* and the artistically-talented geisha of Tokyo and Kyoto are two entirely different beings that have nothing to do with each other. During the era surrounding World War II, a geisha from Kyoto or Tokyo would be absolutely horrified and insulted if she were compared to the *onsen geisha*.⁵¹ An *onsen geisha* during this point in history would likely have only the most rudimentary skills in dancing, singing and instrument-playing. It would be far more profitable for *onsen geisha* to excel in the art of seduction. A true Kyoto or Tokyo geisha is famous for selling their skills, rather than their bodies. However, in many Japanese hot-springs resorts during World War II, the opposite seemed to be true for many *onsen geisha*.

Onsen geisha still exist today, though their role has changed significantly. Although the entertainment an *onsen geisha* provides is said to be more vulgar, seedy and in poorer taste than a geisha party hosted by Kyoto or Tokyo geisha, they are no longer considered to be the equivalent of prostitutes. However, they still do not have nearly the amount of expertise and education as the geisha of Kyoto or Tokyo. Their skills still remain rather basic and the *onsen geisha* seem to rely more on vulgarity and cheap thrills to entertain clients. Today, *onsen geisha* entertain tourists in large banquet halls in hotels, as many as sixty or seventy *onsen geisha* may be present at any given time.⁵² This tactic of entertaining is unheard of in regards to the geisha districts of Kyoto and Tokyo.

The iconic geisha are endlessly appealing to the Japanese as well as Americans, but they each clearly regard them in different ways. Westerners have put too much focus

on the sensuality and erotic nature of the geisha and tend to overlook everything but their physical beauty. Meanwhile, the Japanese realize their geisha are beautiful, but are much more intrigued by what the geisha have to offer in terms of their arts and skills. Having nothing similar in their own culture, Americans have difficulty fully comprehending that geisha are not prostitutes or courtesans. The geisha's similar physical appearance to courtesans, the Japanese sensitivity over the subject of geisha, the fabricated bitterness between geisha and wives and the exaggeration of their complete servility to men all strengthened western misconceptions about them. American GIs who served in the Pacific during World War II only reinforced the false American interpretation of the geisha. To this day, Americans have difficulty seeing the rigorously-trained professional artists behind the painted face and red lips.

Endnotes

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³Lesley Downer, *Women of the Pleasure Quarters: The Secret History of the Geisha* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 123.

⁴Downer, 123.

⁵Downer, 43.

⁶Downer, 45.

⁷Kyoko Aihara, *Geisha: A Living Tradition* (London: Carlton Books Limited, 1999), 45.

⁸Gallagher, 53.

⁹Downer, 233.

¹⁰Gallagher, 22.

¹¹Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (New York: Mariner, 1989), 184.

¹²Benedict, 187.

¹³Aihara, 21.

¹⁴Gallagher, 13.

¹⁵Gallagher, 14.

¹⁶Iwasaki, 216.

¹⁷Iwasaki, 217.

¹⁸Aihara, 19.

¹⁹*The Secret Life of Geisha*, DVD, (1999; A&E Television Networks, 2005).

²⁰Gallagher, 39.

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- ²²Downer, 88.
- ²³Downer, 31.
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- ²⁵Benedict, 137.
- ²⁶Liza Dalby, *Geisha* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 167.
- ²⁷Dalby, 168.
- ²⁸*The Secret Life of Geisha*, 1999.
- ²⁹Dalby, 169.
- ³⁰Dalby, 169.
- ³¹Dalby, 171.
- ³²Benedict, 179.
- ³³Benedict, 183.
- ³⁴Gallagher, 29.
- ³⁵Benedict, 190.
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- ³⁷Dalby, 158.
- ³⁸Dalby, 173.
- ³⁹Dalby, 174.
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- ⁴¹Schrijvers, 43.
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