

# Study of the Geisha Figure in Japanese and Hollywood Cinema (1954-2007)

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**Abstract.** This paper touches on the theme of geisha in both Japanese and Hollywood Cinema from 1954 to 2007 and analyzes both the film language and social and historical settings of the cinematic work. By discussing the history of geisha and depiction of geisha in various films, the paper discovers the broader significance of film in the cultural and diplomatic relationship between countries during the post-war era.

**Keywords:** Geisha; Geisha Customs; Japanese Mythology; Yellowface Films; Post-war Artworks.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of geisha first appeared in the 17th century as “doriko and shamisen players” in the pleasure quarters of Edo (Toki, 2021), and spread to the rest of the country in the Meiji period (1868-1912). During the Edo period, “all the classes of society were motivated by the relentless and ruthless pursuit of profit” (Yanaga, 1955). By imposing restrictions on the movement between all classes, the Tokugawa policy ensured the stability of people's class and financial freedom, allowing them to freely devote themselves in work and to promote national economy. With the rise of the chonin, as soon as they were satisfied by materialistic goods, they no longer craved higher social status, but rather turned to pursue pleasure in real life, expressing their inner desire for power through a life of debauchery. Most chonin became the “producers and consumers as well as patrons” of all practices of arts, giving rise to literature, drama and music (Yanaga, 1955).

Such rise of artistic and spiritual preferences contributes to the appearance of geisha. At first sight, the word geisha carries a sense of mystery, for its combination of romance and frivolousness, as if geishas are meant to offer erotic entertainment of a certain level to men. However, it would be an intrinsic misunderstanding to merely interpret geisha as sexual workers. The “Edict for the Liberation of Geisha and Prostitutes” promulgated in 1872 that categorized geisha as “female entertainers” instead of prostitutes, providing them legal support and freedom of residence (Stanley, 2013). Geishas are known for their beauty and artistic practice. Instead of selling their bodies, they owned “a minimal level of artistic accomplishment” (Stanley, 2013). Most geishas undergo years of training to become eligible to work at a professional geisha house, including but not limited to practices of shamisen, traditional Japanese dance moves of Mai, and gestures as simple as sitting and standing still.

Geisha “as a symbol of Japan, tradition, or “Oriental” femininity”, has long attracted the attention of the cinema world (Stanley, 2013). Yet among the films that portrayed geisha as the main character, there lies a huge difference in which such femininity is represented through both thematic and visual language. The difference in the way the geisha figure is portrayed in Japanese and Western cinema reflects the internal connections between Japan and its culture, as well as the diplomatic relationship between Japan and the West in the post-war era. By examining the cinematic world of both Japanese and American films from 1954 to 2007, this research paper aims to consider geisha's historical and social impact on Japan as well as the Western understanding of Japanese culture.

## 2. The Emergence of Japanese Geisha Culture

The emergence of geishas appeared to be a product of a combination of historical and social factors: urbanization and religious practices. Edo Yoshiwara, known as a “city of men”, was an overcrowded urban space for prostitution (Weber, 2014). The rapid development of the district attracted many members of the upper classes, businessmen and politicians to profit from the money that entered the

area. It also increased opportunities for merchants and artisans to “cater to and support the upper classes” (Weber, 2014). Under an extreme patriarchal structure in Japan, people who poured into the city were mostly men, who were responsible for working and supporting their households, which were back home in other cities, taking care of the entire family. As a result, the distance that separated the men from their families weakened the bonds between them and their wives and children - many claimed to be bachelors in Edo (Weber, 2014). Most satisfied their needs for both entertainment and emotional outlet by geisha.

The main difference that separates geisha culture from prostitution is the entertaining skills the geishas acquire: basic courtesies, dancing, reciting poetry and playing the instrument shamisen (Greenwood, 2013). A geisha ought not to show her back when bowing, step on the side of the tatami, or lean on the table at any time. In *The Tales of a Golden Geisha* (1990), Nayoko starts practicing from a relatively young age - after she enters junior high, her foster parents entrust her to a geisha house - in order to acquire skills and courtesies to be a geisha. To become a true geisha, one needs years of practice from a young age to learn these skills, starting from working as maids in teahouses and imitating how their “older sisters” work and perform to becoming a maiko in the geisha house where they continue the training and observing their seniors, and finally to be introduced as geisha after putting a lot of effort into being a professional courtesan (Greenwood, 2013). Besides customs, they also need to familiarize themselves with knowledge of the past and present, as well as international and domestic news. Geishas obtain the skill of observation and empathy, as they learn to ingratiate themselves with their customers. As a result, geishas are required to have not only innate comprehension, but also acquired practices and hard work.

Likewise, the geisha houses impose a strict requirement on their customers. Geishas usually serve the upper class, solely men of fame or wealth, while ordinary people can only witness their silhouettes in teahouses from far. In the 2007 film *Maiko Haaaan!!!!*, the main character, who is an Ichigensan (the newcomer), is not allowed in the teahouse. Even after he wore expensive suits and proved to the owners of the teahouse that he had enough money to enjoy their service, he was turned down by multiple teahouses, for that one who boorishly shows off their wealth at the door will not possibly understand a teahouse party. The film uses short, quick cuts of teahouse owners’ responses to the character in a humorous way to indicate such high requirements, that one should either have a high social status or enough connection to meet the geishas and enjoy their service. Instead of wearing luxury clothes or having enough money to pay for the service, an introduction speaks more for its recognized authority

Companionship is another key feature of geisha culture. In Japanese culture where men take on the role of working and supporting their families, they are expected to be strong, tough and responsible for keeping the family under control, whereas the trivial life of the wife has eroded their charm, no longer being able to obtain such instinctive ingratiation with men. As a result of such gender stereotypes, they usually have a hard time opening up to their family members, for that they lack a sense of intimacy between one another. Men desire the companionship of another woman, for that they need someone to share their feelings and burdens, whom they can drink freely in front of, share their innermost thoughts with, and relax both physically and mentally. Thus, geishas represent a secret outlet outside of the family where men can express all their emotions without having to worry that they will be judged, as the secrets of their life remain inside the geisha house.

Considering the strict qualification of customers and the emotional support they are able to provide, geishas resemble a form of empowerment of femininity, one that places them at equal footing to men, or even above men. Another feature that contributes to such empowerment is the concept of women in the religious aspect of Japanese culture. On one hand, people believe that only virgins are eligible to serve the gods, for that the purity of virgins overrides any other values in the materialistic world; but on the other hand, they claim motherhood to be the most superior aspect of life, for that they give birth to all human beings (Castel, 2002). Such a dilemma is depicted within Japanese myth, for that women take on a subservient role, in which it would only be proper if the male spoke first – “if the female speaks first, her behavior is worse than socially unacceptable” (Rosenberg, 1999). However,

according to Japanese mythology, the Japanese deity ruling the universe is female, represented by “the sun goddess Amaterasu Omikami” (Rosenberg, 1999). Thus, the perception of women is deeply bound by the two opposite concepts, resulting in mixed feelings toward women, especially reflected in men’s relationship with geishas. In a fixed space, the relationship between the male customers and geisha is a relationship of obsession and awe (Castel, 2002). Men indulge themselves with the idea of women being subjects of them when the courtesans entertain the customers with their skills, dances and bodies, which are considered licentious; but meanwhile, men also stand in awe of them, attracted by their maturity, and represented by the high social status of geishas. To men, they enjoy competing with their own kind to obtain the rare beauty on earth - even just for a short period of time - fulfilling their own desires and illusions. In other words, geishas are no longer the subject of humiliation and inferiority cast by men. Instead, they take complete control over men’s desires, thus building a sense of superiority as a real life goddess through the power of femininity.

### **3. The Image and Artistic Connotation of the Ex-geisha in Japanese Films**

Despite depicting geisha as only an enlightened and powerful figure, Japanese cinema took a different route to describe the complexity of such an icon in its culture, whether it be the withering of beauty after retirement, or the ambiguous future ahead when geishas finally gain their “freedom” outside of the geisha house. Behind such gorgeous beauty under the wing of the geisha house, it is worth pointing out that geisha culture is not always a life of debauchery, extravagance, beauty and intimacy. Outside of the geisha houses, the geishas were no longer the goddess of men, but rather ordinary women who faced burdens in life.

In the film *Late Chrysanthemums* by Mikio Naruse, which described the retirement life of four geishas, the director addressed the challenges faced by women when they were no longer in the role of geishas. While the film pays little attention to the women’s experiences as geishas when they were young, it leads the audience to exploring the decline of beauty, wealth and affection within the women. The story of *Late Chrysanthemums* revolves around the relationship between Kin and her fellow colleagues Tamae and Tomi. Kin, who owned an impressive amount of wealth, develops a sense of superiority over others, as indicated by their renting apartments under her possession. However, Kin’s wealth did not bring her happiness, but rather an increasing burden as she faced the dilemma of her own interest and the near-collapsing relationship with her former colleagues and customers. According to Kin, “if you have money, you will not starve to death” (Ima-Izumi, 2009). Despite having a high social status, geisha are still faced with financial challenges because most income went to the geisha house to support the business and to feed other geishas. Kin’s experience as a geisha led her to the realization that money was the only thing she needed in life, that it brought substantial benefits and improved her life quality as a retired geisha. Men, on the other hand, brought merely nothingness and unreliable hopes through their honeyed words, and she describes them as creatures who have “fed on women’s blood” (Ima-Izumi, 2009). What contributed to such realization of men was also indicated by Kin’s narrative of her relationship with a former customer. Despite being a ruthless, financially independent woman, she had kept her remaining hopes for love by keeping a portrait picture of a customer of hers, hoping that he would come back and regain a romantic relationship with her. However, their encounter outside of the geisha house was not romantic, but rather one in which a desperate man tried to borrow money from her as soon as he noticed her wealth. The climax of disappointment is reached when Kin burns the portrait, leaving no trace behind of the man she used to have such a passionate affection for. The ending of their relationship indicated a helplessness of love of the ex-geisha - in the end, despite that the relationship between the geisha and their customers are under the disguise of intimate interaction, its core was full of complex intentions and interests.

Similarly, the experience of being a geisha restrained Tomi, another ex-geisha, from building a healthy relationship with her children. Despite being unhappy about her son Kyoshi’s marriage and

her daughter Sachiko's engagement, she felt helpless as a mother who failed to fulfill her responsibility to her family when she was dedicated to her work as a geisha.

Another aspect of the geisha culture is the discussion of freedom. While one may think that the geishas are trapped in the geisha house, both physically and mentally, the 2006 film *Sakuran* points out the potential challenges a geisha faces when they are outside of their "greenhouse". The seemingly freedom seems to be another trap in life that confines their body and mind, for that they have long been the goldfish in a tank, unaware of the hardship of life without support from their patrons. The representation of goldfish constantly appears in the film for its similar pronunciation as "prostitute", indicating an underlying, inseparable connection between the two subjects, as well as the vulnerability and the inescapable fate for the women. By describing the goldfish which "can remain beautiful only in a glass bowl", *Sakuran* uses metaphor to stress the similarity between goldfish and geisha, with the latter being trapped in the geisha house at a young age. Within the glass bowl, the goldfish live a peaceful and relaxed life, not having to worry about food or a dirty environment. Their only role is to be pretty and to be appreciated by people. However, they are forever trapped in the small world of immediate pleasure and are blinded to restrained emotions, love and individuality. In real life, despite the fact that the geishas and oirans possess the strength of goddesses, as they try to resist the life of ease and comfort for free love and liberty, they end up flapping on the floor, struggling for oxygen in vain.

At the ending of *Sakuran*, the main character, an oiran named Kiyoha, eloped with her lover and ran away from her identity as a geisha. Yet having lived in the geisha house her entire life where there was no place for love, the couple was facing the unknown future. Kiyoha ended like the goldfish out of a fish tank – what came after a brief moment of happiness was endless struggle and suffocation. While the director did not specifically indicate the ending of the couple, the vast field of cherry blossom trees and the silent scene of the couple symbolizes the blankness hidden behind the freedom.

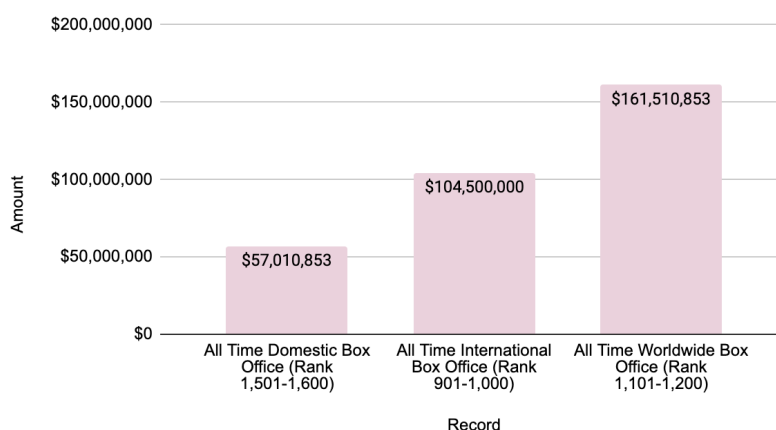
The luxury and dissipation within the geisha house are never long lasting. The geisha house was like a place where the geishas could freely embrace the power of beauty and awe from men, but when they took off the thick makeup and the exquisite kimonos, they returned to only the most ordinary women that suffered from a long-lasting oppression in Japanese culture. No matter how much or little wealth they owned, ex-geishas suffered from challenges in different aspects of life, whether it be love, career or family (Ima-Izumi, 2009).

#### **4. Geisha's Imagination and Cultural Mapping in Western Movies**

Films depicting East Asian culture, especially Japanese culture, have always been a part of Western cinema. Such early emergence and persistence of interest in Japanese culture can be interpreted in both historical and political contexts. After the end of World War II and Japanese surrender, the concept of comfort women and "war brides" appeared as the American troops stationed their army forces in Japan (Ikeda, 2009). What also appeared around the same time was the *Karayuki-san*, Japanese women who were sent to overseas brothels to earn money to support Japanese armies during the war (Mihalopoulos, 1994). Women were used as tools to show loyalty and patriotism to their country, as a result of the extreme patriarchy in Japan. As a result, instead of being a peaceful cultural exchange, the emergence of Japanese sexual workers led to the structural misconception of geisha, neglecting the rich history of Japanese culture and reducing them to merely objects of men. In local cities and towns, women were drafted into the "amusement associations" to serve not only the American soldiers, but the Japanese military as well (Sayuki, 2020). In these associations, many women were treated as sexual slaves, also known as comfort women. Their "body and sexuality were used to shape patriarchy, ethnic hierarchy and colonial power" (Ahn, 2020). However, instead of addressing the violence imposed on those women and fighting for their justice, the issue of Asian "comfort women" was never brought up to the international community, but rather kept as a mystery to the Western world, without any investigation (Ahn, 2020). The ignorance toward their own culture caused by military interference led to the fall of the geisha culture.

As a result of such negligence, the rise of yellowface films in the post-war era was a direct representation of the silenced culture. The inaction precipitated the exploitation and political suppression of Japanese culture, as the Western cinema was able to justify the creation of geisha-focused, or more broadly, Japanese women-focused films without receiving any form of denunciation, but rather numerous box office highs worldwide. According to Chan, as Western cinema reduced “the pleasures and effects of consuming aspects of a culture to such aestheticised features”, its audience, as well as the Western society as a whole, consumed such culture without bearing a sense of responsibility or obligation to the “agency of any representatives of the culture at large” (Chan, 2018). The *Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) and *My Geisha* (1962), both being American comedy films, explicitly portray the degradation of women in Japanese culture due to the influence of war. The *Teahouse of the August Moon* depicts a traditional, yet stereotypical geisha, Lotus Blossom, who “cooks, helps dress [the American officer], and teaches him Japanese language and culture, as well as making flower arrangements, playing koto or shamisen”, and dances (Ikewa, 2009). The distortion of historical facts on geisha was part of the measures America took to plant the diabolical Japanese image in people’s mind as part of the U.S war propaganda. In *My Geisha*, the director uses a different approach to describe the geisha culture yet fails to break away from the stereotypical ideas of an exotic courtship. By having a Western actress disguise herself as a geisha to impress her husband, the film touches on a seemingly irresistible attraction between an exotic subject and the Western man. The film demonstrates the absence and stereotypes of Asians actors and characters in Hollywood cinema, who would rather have a Western actress disguising themselves as a geisha rather than starring real Asians. The description of geishas in the film suggests how Japanese women, especially geisha, fit into the category of serving and entertaining American officers, which reflect on how Japan as a country is being viewed by the Western world - “the West’s absolute predominance over the East” (Ikewa, 2009). Ikewa argues that the conquering of an unknown land can be well reflected in the dominance over an unknown woman from that land. By depicting Lotus Blossom as an inferior subject to the American officer, the film implicitly shows the ambition of the West to conquer and dominate Japan as a superior power. With fear, but mostly curiosity, the Western filmmakers justify the action of colonialism as merely courtship, by imperceptibly placing Japan in an inferior position that is subject to the whim of others (Ikewa, 2009).

Long after WWII had ended, the urge to “explore”, or rather exploit the East continued. The 2005 film *Memoirs of a Geisha* brings the public’s attention back to geisha culture. Even though the film received worldwide recognition, indicated by the \$57.0M box office, the rampant commodification of Japan’s cultural icon in the film did not bring empowerment to the geisha community as it meant to do (The Numbers, 2006); rather, the imposed stereotypes and casting choices. *Memoirs of a Geisha* proves that it failed to justify the film’s underlying oppression and cultural appropriation of the geisha culture coming from a privileged outsider point of view.



**Fig.1** *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) box office  
 (<https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Memoirs-of-a-Geisha#tab=summary>)

The relationship between Chiyo, a famous geisha as the main character, and the chairman suggests a pedophilic affection for women as well as a false assumption of the geisha culture as a whole. The film seems to lead the audience to conclude that Chiyo's career as a geisha is mainly influenced and motivated by her first encounter with the chairman at a very young age, when the latter buys her a treat to cheer her up. The urge to "be able to stand by the side of the chairman" drives little Chiyo to become a geisha, trying to pay back his kindness and pleasing him using her skills as a geisha. Such motivation suggests geisha's inferior relationship to men, as the former seek approval from the latter, depending on their words to determine if one is a successful geisha or not.

Throughout the film, the settings of characters are particularly interesting. The women in the film are weak, delicate, and beautiful, being constantly observed by and dependent on male characters, as well as relying on the help from men in terms of changing their own fate. The men, on the other hand, were depicted as tough, independent, and privileged individuals, with most being entrepreneurs, doctors, politicians, etc., all of which were emerging professions after Japan absorbed from the Western culture after the Meiji restoration. The underlying message through such contrast implies that the West has brought prosperity and progress to Japan, setting an unequal relationship between the two countries with the former abusing its superiority over the latter.

The concept of Western patriotism is also shown in the plot toward the end of the narrative, where Sayuri plans to return to being a geisha with other former geishas to help gain Americans' financial support for Japanese enterprises in the post-war era. Yet time has changed people tremendously. When she finds her fellow Pumpkin at a Geisha House, Pumpkin has developed a playful and frivolous style that was not represented by traditional geisha customs. Yet Sayuri knows that geishas are attractive to the Westerners for their subtlety, weakness and delicacy, with a little mystery of their cultural background. Such plot design contributes to the stereotypes of the geisha culture as being an exotic matter for political or economic interests.

The production team's decision of hiring Chinese actresses also sparked great controversy both in Hollywood and worldwide. As the discussion of authenticity and representation comes into play, it should be acknowledged that the use of Asian actresses did "bring an extra degree of insight and authenticity to an Asian role" in the case of *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Yet a question naturally arises: to what extent did the Chinese actresses bring authenticity to Japanese roles? Can Chinese actresses represent Japanese culture? Despite facing backlash from Japanese audiences, Rob Marshall, the director of the film, claimed the "international" casting choice to be "a celebration of Asian community" (Beauchamp, 2016). Yet it is worth reflecting upon, whether it is a celebration of Asian community, or the dominance of a subaltern culture.

In the concept of comparatist imagology, geisha represents an "image of strangers" among the broad national image, in which they have an intimate connection with how the outsiders view Japan as a country. Geisha, as an exotic image, has become a utopian image in Hollywood cinema, and such image risks reducing the artistic value of geisha and the inheritance of Japanese culture.

From the novel to script adaptation, filming, and post-production, *Memoirs of a Geisha* is a good example of the global marketing strategy of Hollywood movies. However, it is more than just a purely commercial film – more or less, it reflects the bigger conflict between Eastern and Western cultural ideology, a microcosm of the cultural appropriation of Japanese culture in Western media.

## 5. Conclusion

In modern days, geishas have gradually distanced themselves from the pleasure quarters and have started to seek different job opportunities, but the idea of such feminine icon in Japanese culture has left a marked imprint of the past through a cinematic lens. Throughout the study of both Japanese and American films from 1954 to 2007, including *Late Chrysanthemums* (1954), *The Tales of a Golden Geisha* (1990), *Sakuran* (2006), *Maiko Haaaan!!!!* (2007), *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956), *My Geisha* (1962) and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), this paper dives deep into the history and customs of geishas, as well as their internal connection with Japanese culture and the country itself. In Japanese

cinema, for their rich history and understanding of its own culture, geishas are depicted as a complicated figure, whose beauty seems like a double-edged sword that empowers and restrains them at the same time. Most Japanese films about geisha aim to show the challenges faced by geishas - whether it be the forbidden love, lack of familial connection, or the burdens after retirement - in order to show the audience an authentic depiction of the culture. On the other hand, the Western cinema reduces geisha films to comedies that entertain people with an exotic figure and its love affair with the Western people. By setting such a plot, those films fail to take responsibility for the agency of a culture at large, but rather diminish its authority and increase the disparity in strength between Japan and the Western world.

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