



TEACHING THE

“Geisha”

AS CULTURAL CRITICISM

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The Courtesan, Gorisei. Woodblock print by Keisai Eisen, 1790 – 1848.
Source: www.degener.com, The Rolf M. Degener Gallery, Germany.

The Japanese Fan. By Claude Monet, 1840 – 1926.
Source: *The Art of Japanese Prints*. Copyright ©1997 Reed International Books Limited.

The late 1990s marked an explosion in the popularity of the geisha icon in the United States and elsewhere, fueled by Arthur Golden's 1998 best seller *Memoirs of a Geisha*. The novel has inspired spin-off vodka ads and a specialty tea, and Steven Spielberg's motion picture version, while repeatedly delayed, will reportedly begin production in 2001.¹ Visually, the image of the geisha has become more and more prominent. An image of a woman in kimono appears on the dust jacket of the U.S. edition of Golden's novel; this 1905 photograph is apparently in the public domain and has been reproduced on various knick-knacks.² Celebrities such as Madonna and Björk don "geisha-inspired" fashions, as did the "queen of the Naboo" in George Lucas's *The Phantom Menace* (1999). Even before the recent popularity of the geisha, however, one could find this figure represented in elements of popular culture ranging from tuna fish labels and chocolates to X-rated Web sites. It is rare to find a student who has not come into contact with one or more representations of the geisha.

Given the ubiquitousness of the geisha icon, we felt that a course dedicated to investigating various discourses of the geisha would be a timely contribution to undergraduate education. It could serve as (1) a gateway class introducing students to Japanese literature, theater, and film centered on a single, manageable theme; (2) an enticing way to make a connection between a seemingly antiquated and "exotic" figure and its relevance in past and present global contexts; and (3) an opportunity to pose larger questions about culture and gender. We created and taught such a course in fall 1998 at a large urban commuter university. One of us was teaching this course as an overload, so by necessity, we offered the course in the early evening, with one lecture session and one discussion meeting per week for a total of three hours of contact time. The course attracted about thirty students, seventy percent of them female. A third of the total were majors in Japanese, with a number of Women's Studies and American Studies majors as well. We designed the syllabus in three parts: a section on premodern Japan, in which we examined a wide range of textual references to professional women entertainers, with the geisha as a subcategory within that group; a section on modern Japan, in which we explored twentieth-century representations of the geisha as well as discourses of women who work in the contemporary "sex industry"; and a section tracing the various understandings of the geisha by people outside of Japan.

At first glance, it may seem that a course on the geisha, by acknowledging the topic as worthy of academic scrutiny, might reinforce certain existing European and American stereotypes about Japanese and Asian women in general. On the other hand, probably only a minority of students genuinely believe that Japanese (and by extension or conflation, Asian) women are submissive "Oriental pearls" whose sole purpose in life is to please men. If there were such students enrolled in the class, it would provide an excellent opportunity for the instructors to thoroughly challenge such views. In fact, what we found instead was that the vast majority of our students had encountered the geisha icon recently, and were eager to learn about the "truth" behind the geisha stereotype. This setting gave us the perfect opportunity to use the geisha as a point of entry into fundamental issues of cultural critique: what are "truth" and "authenticity"? How are cultural boundaries and definitions drawn, and by whom? Why are certain groups of people represented in particular ways at different times and places? Where does gender enter into this picture?

We had two main goals. First, we sought to engage the students with the notion that representations or icons are *always*

cultural constructions specific to a time and place: Japanese textual discussions of the geisha are not necessarily "more true" than an American one; Japanese examples manipulate the geisha's image just as often as American texts do. Second, we wanted to show that conversely, representations must also be constantly contextualized: given the history of European and American men writing about the geisha in a stereotypical manner, for example, the American audience's unquestioning embrace of *Memoirs of a Geisha* might be considered especially problematic. We felt that this two-pronged approach contributed to another crucial project: bridging the divide between Asian and Asian-American studies. By crafting a course around a single topic that exposes the complex ways in which both Asian and Asian-American texts invent and re-invent "the geisha," we hoped to point to a way out of the insularity of area studies while avoiding the pitfalls of empiricism, universalism, or imperialism on the one hand, and essentialism or nationalism on the other.

Below are the specifics of our syllabus in the three areas outlined above. We were very fortunate in having been able to team-teach this course, as we were able to divide the syllabus according to our areas of expertise. (Sarah Pradt specializes in modern Japanese literature and film and Terry Kawashima, in premodern Japanese literature, and we pooled our knowledge for the "outside Japan" unit.) But the course need not be team-taught, and each of us has subsequently re-worked this material in courses at different institutions. In the discussion below, we include both texts we have actually used as well as suggestions for expansion, and we conclude the article with some suggestions for further possible modifications of the course.

PREMODERN JAPAN

We wanted to begin by demonstrating that the so-called "geisha tradition" is by no means an unchanging, monolithic and "ancient" phenomenon, even though many contemporary representations might lead a student to believe in the geisha's timelessness. We therefore located the geisha as a relatively recent subcategory within a general and highly diverse group of professional women entertainers skilled in the performing arts who also often practiced sexual transactions, and we began the course with a look at early literary examples of women entertainers that predate the common usage of the term "geisha" by several centuries. This first group of short prose essays dates from the late Heian to early Kamakura periods (eleventh to thirteenth centuries).³ These essays exhibit a number of different views: one casts a woman entertainer as a divine incarnation, others are



The geisha, Shirabyōshi, dancing in the costume of a man dressed as a woman. She was popular during the Heian period (794–1185).

Woodblock print by Torii Kiyotsune, active c. 1765–1788.

Source: Japanese Prints, edited by Gabriele Fahr-Becker. Published by Taschen, 1999.

didactic Buddhist tales bent on condemning these women morally, and still others try to present themselves as “neutral” ethnographies. We supplemented these primary texts with selections from contemporary scholarship on women and Buddhism, such as “Women’s Image and Place in Japanese Buddhism” by Haruko Okano, and a lecture that historicizes the era and the specific texts.⁴ This unit is designed to encourage students to think about one of the most crucial questions of the course: is there really a single tradition or phenomenon of “women entertainers”? Who represents women entertainers, and for what possible reasons?

In the second unit, we compared two Edo-period works that feature different types of professional women entertainers, ranging from the *yūjo* (frequently translated as “courtesan”) to the geisha, who begin to make an appearance in this era as skilled musicians and dancers. After a lecture on the system of the Edo pleasure quarters, augmented by a selection from Cecilia Siegle’s *Yoshiwara*, we discussed Chikamatsu Monzaemon’s puppet-theater play *Love Suicides at Sonezaki* (*Sonezaki shinju*, first performed in 1703), and the ways in which this play represents the courtesan and the questions of love and virtue. This selection

can be replaced by another Chikamatsu play, *The Love Suicides at Amijima* (*Shinju ten no amijima*, first performed in 1720).⁵ The latter play could be supplemented with a screening of the 1969 film rendition *Double Suicide* directed by Shinoda Masahiro.⁶ In either case, a short video introducing the puppet theater would enhance the understanding of puppet plays as a performative medium.⁷

Next, we had students read the prose work *Love’s Calendar: First Blush of Spring* (*Shunshoku umegoyomi*, ca. 1832–3), a work of popular fiction by Tamenaga Shunsui featuring geisha as protagonists. This text contrasts sharply with Chikamatsu’s tragic mode and served as a good basis for comparison. Unfortunately, the translation of Tamenaga is available only within a typed dissertation, and reproductions are difficult to read.⁸ A more accessible alternative might be Ihara Saikaku’s *Life of an Amorous Woman* (*Kōshoku ichidai onna*, ca. 1686), which presents an array of occupations for women in the entertainment industry or pleasure quarters. As accompaniment, it might be productive to assign *Women and Wisdom of Japan* (*Onna daigaku*, ca. 1790), a lesson book for women commonly attributed to Kaibara Ekiken, and to discuss how women who worked in the pleasure quarters are represented in the puppet play and prose fiction as countering or conforming to these Neo-Confucian-inspired ideals. Finally, Joan Scott’s “Experience,” a dense but seminal work that critiques the privileging of experience as historical truth, would be a challenging but inspiring springboard for discussion in which students who insist on the question “what are or were geisha really like?” can grapple with notions of reality, history, and fiction.

The third unit addressed the topic of *shunga*, or erotic woodblock prints, which feature courtesans and their clients engaged in explicit sexual activities. We first contextualized the very notion of pornography with a selection from the introductory chapter of *The Invention of Pornography*, edited by Lynn Hunt, and a brief discussion of the controversy over the sexuality of Edouard Manet’s 1863 painting *Olympia*. A broad lecture on *ukiyo-e* prints as a genre was followed by an in-class presentation of *shunga* slides.⁹ We considered questions such as “what makes an image erotic?,” “how are female and male bodies represented, and what are the effects?,” and “are women entertainers particularly sexualized?” The students enjoyed reading Sumie Jones’s article “Interminable Reflections”; an additional option would be to choose a portion of Timon Screech’s *Sex and the Floating World*, which appeared just after we finished teaching this course. The premodern section aimed to end on a note of skepticism—at this point, the students should be questioning supposedly established definitions and boundaries.

MODERN JAPAN

We began this section of the course by reading Kawabata Yasunari’s 1950s novel *Snow Country* and “Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself,” the speech he gave accepting the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968. We placed both of these works in a context of post-World War II efforts by both Japanese and Westerners to “rehabilitate” Japanese culture from the brutality that was seen to characterize it during the war, a move that resonates with Meiji efforts to cite Japanese aesthetics as proof that Japan was already civilized before contact with the West.¹⁰ In this segment of the course, we considered the reasons for the prominence of the image of the

geisha in postwar celebrations and representations of the “feminine” and “aesthetic” past and present of Japan. In the next segment, we showed excerpts from two films: Toyoda Shirō’s adaptation of *Snow Country* (1957), which serves as an example of the highly sexualized image of the geisha, and Mizoguchi Kenji’s *Sisters of the Gion* (1936), a very different film which offers a critique of the institution of the geisha itself, and yet, in its moral condemnation of the exchange of money for sex, condemns sexuality as well. We also showed portions of *Street of Shame*, a film Mizoguchi made twenty years after *Sisters of the Gion* about prostitutes in postwar Japan and, which like his earlier film, presents women as the victims of an immoral system.¹¹

Mizoguchi’s look at the system of licensed prostitution in the 1950s allowed us a transition to the next segment of this portion of the course, an examination of the modern “sex industry,” for which we read the anthropologist Anne Allison’s *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club*.¹²

OUTSIDE JAPAN

The questions raised by Allison’s ethnography of the “modern equivalent” of the geisha (the phrase in quotation marks comes from a Web site suggesting that readers of *Memoirs of a Geisha* read the novel in tandem with Allison’s book, which offers “more scientific conclusions”)¹³ provided an opportunity to move to the final section of the course, in which we examined “the foreign gaze” and considered the implications of Euro-American representations of the figure of the geisha. We began with that *locus classicus* of the Western gaze upon Japanese womanhood, Pierre Loti’s *Japan: Madam Chrysanthème*, and examined some similar texts, viewing portions of Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly*, reading Hwang’s play *M. Butterfly*, and touching on Schonberg and Boubil’s 1989 *Miss Saigon*. (The relationships among these texts are fascinatingly complex: *Miss Saigon*’s authors, for example, cite Loti rather than Puccini as the musical’s central source, insisting that because Loti was French, “everything came full circle.”)¹⁴ We tried to unravel some of these intertextual relationships and to show that Loti’s presentation of Chrysanthème and Puccini’s *Butterfly* are not the same, that this figure of the geisha does not construct a seamless sameness, but rather a genealogy which offers different instances of the same theme. Students found Hwang’s play an effective critique of the geisha image, but they pointed out how Hwang’s portrayal of the feminized Asian male stands in a mirror relationship to that image.

In the next segment of the course, we explored the phenomenon of the masquerade, and assigning a reading by Gina Marchetti on that topic, we showed brief excerpts from the 1956 film *Teahouse of the August Moon*, in which Marlon Brando appears as a Japanese man, and we showed longer excerpts from *My Geisha*, the 1962 film starring Shirley MacLaine as an actress determined to keep tabs on her husband, a film director who travels to Japan to shoot a film version of *Madama Butterfly*.¹⁵ The MacLaine character impersonates a geisha and wins the lead role in the film, learning much about herself and about her husband’s fascination with Japanese women. As one example of the intersection of Japanese and non-Japanese portrayals of geisha, we showed how the camera’s caressing attention to MacLaine’s body after her transformation into a “geisha” closely resembled the ways the camera paid attention to Kishi Keiko’s body in Toyoda’s *Snow Country*.



Detail from a publicity photo of Shirley MacLaine in the 1961 film, *My Geisha*. Copyright © 1961 By Paramount Pictures Corp., and Sachiko Productions, Inc.

Marchetti’s effective critique of *My Geisha*, in which she argues that it erases the “Japanese woman” by being ultimately self-reflexive (i.e., about white women and their relationships with white men), inspired good discussions. It was at this point that we read excerpts from the Golden novel. Examined carefully, Golden’s novel provokes questions such as: why is authenticity so important for this novel and its author, and how is that sense of authenticity achieved? How do American audiences come to believe the details of this novel? To what extent is “authenticity” a product of the book’s skillful bombarding of the reader with familiar images of “Japanese culture”—sushi, tea ceremony, sumo—and the reinforcing of these hackneyed images with further intriguing details? Golden’s graduate work in Japanese history at Columbia figures prominently in the dust-jacket biography and many reviews of *Memoirs*; does his status as specialist provide authenticity?

To consider how naturalized certain images of Japan have become, particularly when narrated by a Western “expert,” students could be asked to search for and read reviews of Golden’s novel, and to contrast those with the initial reception of Kazuo Ishiguro’s 1989 *The Remains of the Day*. Ishiguro was born in Japan and has lived in England since he was six; just as Golden’s educational pedigree is often cited, Ishiguro’s biography inevitably found its way into reviews of *Remains*. That novel, in the voice of an English butler reflecting on his service to an aristocrat, was like Golden’s a popular success, although *Remains* was also a critical success, winning the Booker Prize in 1989. While Golden was widely praised for having captured Japan with “uncanny fidelity,” some reviews of *The Remains of the Day* remarked on the “dazzling” ability of Ishiguro to inhabit a character so different from himself.¹⁶ (Interestingly, one critic found this “extended demonstration of virtuosity” tiresome and “empty.”)¹⁷ Students could see that certain responses to the two novels suggest that Japaneseness, carefully outlined in a set of images manufactured and consumed, is easily inhabited and ventriloquized, while Englishness is not (and if, by chance, Englishness is achieved, its performance can be found irritating or meaningless).

We found that *Memoirs* also prompted us to consider the significance of the main character’s immigration to the United States at the end of the novel, and we asked students how this book might affect views of Japanese, Japanese American, and Asian American women. During this segment of the course, we also focused on selections from Liza Dalby’s participant-observer account of “becoming” a geisha in Gion in the 1970s. Vincent

Crapanzano's article on the "masking of subversion" in ethnographic description helped us critique Dalby's and Golden's positioning themselves as ethnographers "decoding" a culture for "outsiders," and helped us to consider the "cultural violence" in the ethnographic or quasi-ethnographic act.¹⁸

We ended the course with some counter-narratives, showing *Eat the Kimono*, Claire Hunt and Kim Longinotto's 1989 film about Hanayagi Genshu, a singer and performer of traditional Japanese dance who served prison time for stabbing the *iemoto* of the school of dance in which she had trained, and whose outspoken critiques of the emperor system, class and racial discrimination, and misogyny provide a refreshing alternative to much of the material the students have read and seen during the term.¹⁹ We also had students read Diana Son's *R.A.W.* ('Cause I'm a Woman), a powerful performance piece about an Asian American woman's refusal to inhabit the sexualities and stereotypes offered her by American society.

CONCLUSIONS

The need for a course like this one remains obvious to us: one of the odd contradictions of today is the fact that productions of both *M. Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon* can be playing in the same city at the same time. Clearly much work remains to be done in identifying what bell hooks has called the "interlocking systems of domination of race and sex" as they play out in the figure of the geisha. Reading the weekly "response papers" we required and the final research papers students wrote, we were pleased and sometimes amazed at the perceptive insights of our students, who themselves reported that they had begun to think differently about race and representation as a result of the course.

We offer our experiences with this course in the hope that it can be modified or expanded to suit the needs of instructors and students in other places and other contexts; we would like to conclude with a few suggestions for such modification. One of us (Terry Kawashima) is currently planning a two-part course for undergraduates, the first focusing on the "geisha," and the second on the "samurai," considering both issues of hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity. Another possibility would be to expand the focus to other East Asian women entertainers, including Chinese fiction about courtesans, accounts or paintings of Korean women of the Chōson (Yi) dynasty, *kisaeng* entertainers, or entertainers in the *pansori* tradition.²⁰ The Korean director Im Kwon-taek has recently made films exploring that tradition with strong central female characters; these films have been well received at international festivals and on the art-house circuit in the U.S., and aside from their important portrayal of performance traditions and female power, their reception illustrates again the continuing appeal of a geisha-like figure in the West. A third possibility might be to frame the above syllabus within the broader context of women and sexuality, beginning with a discussion of prostitution, its definitions, and its implications. We look forward to hearing from our colleagues about their efforts to unravel the persistent image of the geisha. ■

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NOTES

1. The film has had a troubled history even before entering production: there have been reports that Columbia Pictures has dropped Spielberg in favor of another director, and there have been reports that Spielberg has abandoned the project. But see the Sony Pictures Entertainment site (www.spe.sony.com/movies/), where the film is still listed with Spielberg as director and appears under the category "Coming Soon"; also see the on-line magazine *E!Online* (www.eonline.com/Reviews/Movies/Scoop/001215.html) and (www.worldzone.net/music/johnwilliams/williamsspielberg/) for accounts of Spielberg's plans to return to the *Memoirs* project in mid-2001.
2. See for example the "Geisha journal and letter box" at www.galison.com.
3. We used the following texts about female entertainers: *Records of Courtesans (Yujo no ki)* and *Records of Puppeteers (Kairaiishi no ki)* by Oe no Masafusa (1041–111), "The Matter of the Holy Man Shoku Encountering a Living Boddhisattva Fugen" from *A Discussion of Past Matters (Kojidan)* by Minamoto no Akikane (ca. 1212–15), and "The Matter of the Lady at Muro Commencing the Mindset of the Buddhist Way After Being Forgotten by Kenki" from *A Friend Amidst a Quiet Life (Kankyo no tomo)* by the priest Keisei (c. 1222). All English translations can be found in Kawashima, *Writing Margins*.
4. Okano presents a fairly bleak vision of Buddhism in Japan as a root of sexual inequality; students should be asked to compare her views with those expressed in the assigned primary texts. Some of the secondary texts we assigned (especially Crapanzano, Scott, Jones, and Hunt) were fairly challenging for our students; we always took time in class to explore and explain the arguments and contexts of these readings.
5. English translations of both *Sonezaki* and *Amijima* can be found in Keene's *Four Major Plays of Chikamatsu*.
6. The use of the film would complicate matters by introducing the role of a modern interpreter of an Edo text. This can be productive in that the students will be forced to question film as a transparent medium of "past truth," and the film could serve as a segue into the modern section of the syllabus.
7. The video *Bunraku: The Classical Puppets of Japan* (dir. Brockway) includes two segments from *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*.
8. Alan Woodhull's dissertation is in four libraries in the U.S. (Stanford, Rutgers, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania), and should be available through inter-library loan.
9. While a trip to a local museum may provide an excellent opportunity for students to examine Japanese woodblock prints or, more specifically, *ukiyo-e*, rarely are there exhibits of *shunga*, and slides made from books are generally a more workable option. See the bibliography for some exhibition catalogs and monographs containing reproductions of *shunga*.
10. The work of K. Mark Anderson on Meiji celebrations of Japanese aesthetics argues this point.
11. While we would have liked to show these films in their entirety, time constraints made it necessary to show excerpts only. We kept the videos on course reserve, and interested students were able to view the complete films.
12. Modern Japanese literature would also offer a number of texts for this segment of the course. Higuchi Ichiyō's "Child's Play" (Takekurabe, 1895–6), Nagai Kafū's *Geisha in Rivalry* (Udekurabe, 1917), and Ooka Shōhei's *The Shade of Blossoms* (Kaei, 1958–9) might work well. There is also an anime version of "Child's Play" in the "Animated Classics of Japanese Literature" series sold in the U.S. by Central Park Media. The video "Wandering Days/Growing Up" is available from www.centralparkmedia.com.
13. This suggestion appears in a book review at www.thatsshanghai.com.
14. See Schonberg and Boubil's description of the origins of the musical's text and their "study guide" to the musical at www.miss-saigon.com.
15. *Teahouse of the August Moon* also stars Kyō Machiko as a fun-loving "geisha girl," and her role can be usefully contrasted to the prostitute "corrupted" by GIs she plays in Mizoguchi's *Street of Shame*, released the same year. Brando's "yellow-face" role in *Teahouse* can also be contrasted with his appearance in *Sayonara*, the 1957 adaptation of the James Michener novel about love between an American pilot and a Japanese "entertainer" during the Korean War. *My Geisha*, *Teahouse*, and *Sayonara* are usually available at larger video rental outlets.
16. The quotes are from Pico Iyer (in a blurb on the dust jacket of the first U.S. edition of *Memoirs*) and Lawrence Graver, respectively.
17. Terrence Rafferty, "The Lesson of the Master."

18. Selections from Liza Dalby's recent novel about Murasaki Shikibu might be useful to read in conjunction with *Geisha* and Crapanzano's article. Students could be asked to search for reviews of Dalby's novel to see they include the kind of admiration for the novel's "authenticity" expressed by many reviewers of Golden's novel; students could note the role Dalby's ethnographic experience plays in evaluations of her authentic Japanese voice.
19. Available for rental or purchase from the media arts organization Women Make Movies (www.wmm.com). The Shinoda, Toyoda, and Mizoguchi films and the Brockway bunraku program mentioned above are available on video at the Chicago-based nonprofit organization Facets Multi-Media (www.facets.org). Im Kwon-taek's films are available on video from www.koreapop.com (although this company's videos often lack English subtitles). There have been a number of film versions of the Madam Butterfly story, including a 1932 film of "Madame Butterfly," the American play which originally inspired Puccini, starring Sylvia Sidney and Cary Grant (not available on video). Among notable productions of Puccini's opera are an Italian/Japanese film version from 1955, in which Cio-Cio is played by a Japanese actress with voice dubbed by an Italian soprano, and Ken Russell's production for the 1993 Spoleto Festival, set in 1940s Nagasaki and concluding with the explosion of an atomic bomb. (Unfortunately, videos of these productions are not available, to our knowledge.) Derek Bailey's made-for-TV film of a La Scala production, which we used in class, stars Hayashi Yasuko as Cio-Cio, and thus stands as an exception to the usual "yellow-face" casting; another version stars Raina Kabaivanska as Cio-Cio. These last two videos are available from Facets Multi-Media.
20. *Classic Korean Literature from Hyangga to P'ansori*.

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