



"Lesley Downer has taken the essential truth of geisha culture—its mystery—and peeled it away layer after layer like an onion. I highly recommend her engaging and enlightening examination of this little-known world."
—Arthur Golden, author
Memoirs of a Geisha

THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE GEISHA

WOMEN
OF • THE
PLEASURE
QUARTERS



LESLEY
DOWNER

The Secret History of the
Geisha

Lesley Downer

Women of the Pleasure Quarters

Broadway Books

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To the memory of my father and mother

Gordon Downer

and

Lilian Downer

acknowledgments

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Note on Geisha Names

Like sumo wrestlers, geisha have only one name, a professional name like a pen name or an actor's name. These names are quite different from Japanese women's names and immediately recognizable as professional names. The name also indicates a geisha's relationship with her "older sister"; the names of the two have at least one element in common.

Usually only one person at a time bears a particular name in a particular district. In order to preserve the privacy and discretion of women who very kindly spoke with extraordinary openness to me, I have used pseudonyms—ordinary Japanese women's names—for some of them and blurred their identities by, for example, not specifying the geisha district where they live. One Shimbashi geisha told me that if it was known that she had spoken with such openness to me, she would never work as a geisha again. I have taken precautions not to betray these women's trust.

Note on Pronunciation

Japanese words are pronounced as they are spelled, with each syllable distinct and with clean vowels and nonaspirated consonants, rather like Italian. All syllables are equally stressed. Thus *karaoke* is pronounced *ka-ra-o-ké* and *mizuage* *mi-zu-a-gé*. The word *geisha*, incidentally, is pronounced not *geisha* or *guy-sha* but *gay-sha*.

introduction: through the looking glass

When I see the first new moon

Faintly in the dusk

I think of the moth eyebrows

Of a girl I saw only once.

Anonymous poem¹

On a Kyoto backstreet one sultry May evening, I caught my first glimpse of a geisha. She came flitting toward me with a faint tinkling of bells, an extraordinary vision like an apparition from another age. Her face, smooth and impassive as a mask, was an immaculate white oval with the sides of the nose and the eye sockets shaded in pink. Her eyes were outlined in black, her eyebrows two moth wings of feathery brown, and her lower lip a startling crimson crescent; her upper lip, disconcertingly, was white. Her hair, piled into gleaming black coils, was teased and lacquered into an undulating landscape of hills and valleys adorned with flowers, dangling silver pins, ribbons, and combs. Swathed in an ornate kimono in shades of blue and gold, she clattered by on preposterously high wooden clogs, her long sleeves swaying as she walked.

As darkness fell, white lanterns began to glow, lighting up the shadows. She was a vision made for darkness, for an era when geisha used to flit through the gloom of unlit teahouses, glimpsed only by flickering candlelight. Their painted faces transmuted them into shamanesses who could transport men into another world, a world of dreams.

She passed with a rustle of silk, revealing a breathtaking expanse of exquisitely white-painted back. I had not realized that geisha wore their kimono quite so shockingly low. It was like a décolletage in reverse, enormously erotic. At the nape of the neck, which Japanese men find especially sexy, was a titillating fork of naked, unpainted skin, shaped like a serpent's tongue. It was the most mesmerizing of all, a reminder that behind the alabaster mask, beneath the layers of silk and brocade, was a real flesh and blood woman.

Breaching a Secret World

It was nearly sunset when I got to Kyoto that mild May evening. I had to ask the taxi driver to drop me off at the end of the lane where I was to stay; it was too narrow for cars to squeeze through. I lugged

my suitcase the last hundred yards to the inn, over the doorstep, through the door, then up a couple of dark, very steep wooden staircases to my room.

It was bright, airy, and wide open to the elements. One wall was barely a wall at all but a rickety wooden balcony with flimsy slatted doors which you could slide shut to close off the room when it was hot, cold, or rainy. The tatami matting of the floor was moth-eaten. On it sat a dumpy bandy-legged wooden table, a worn flat cushion, and a doll's house-size dressing table perilously supporting a tall thin mirror with a piece of ancient brocade draped over it. In one corner was a wobbly wooden frame with a few hooks for hanging clothes.

Bamboo blinds attached under the eaves created the illusion of a fourth wall, flapping and banging in the slightest breeze. Standing on the balcony I peeped through at the vista of gray tiled rooftops interspersed with telegraph poles and a mad cat's cradle of wires. The road below was lined with little wooden houses very similar to the one I was in. In the house opposite a couple of women were silhouetted behind the blinds. Voices, laughter, and the jangling plink plonk of the shamisen, a banjo-like instrument, hung in the air. Women pattered up and down the street, pausing to bow and greet each other in high-pitched coos.

Having spent many years in Tokyo, I had come to the ancient city of Kyoto in search of geisha. Once the capital of Japan, it was still the country's cultural heart, home of temples, palaces, gardens, and theaters and the place where the classical heritage was most fiercely preserved. The picturesque streets of the geisha districts, the old pleasure quarters, looked more like the Japan portrayed in nineteenth-century woodblock prints than anywhere else. Kyoto was also the only place where the strict geisha training continued and the geisha traditions were handed down.

I wanted to meet the real women behind the painted faces, the charming chit chat, and the eternal mysterious smile. The geisha, it seemed to me, were purveyors of dreams. Theirs was a misty world of romance created for the enjoyment and entertainment of men, in which the most browbeaten office worker could be king. It was not my intention to spoil the illusion or dispel the mystery. But as a woman, I wondered out of what past the geisha had come. Who were the women who, in modern Japan, had chosen to live this life? For men it was a dream world; but who were the women whose job it was to create this dream?

I had lived, talked, traveled, and daydreamed my way through a couple of decades in Japan, filtering my experience of a country which was often shockingly ugly through the prisms of its past. I absorbed myself in the passionate stories of heroes, villains, and beautiful temptresses recorded in its spare but evocative poetry, drama, and literature—like the tale of the all-time femme fatale, Ono no Komachi, the most beautiful woman in the world; or Narihira, the great lover, who cut a swathe through women's hearts; or the Heian courtiers of the tenth century who made love into the essence of life, to be studied, cultivated, and perfected as an art form. The geisha were the heirs to this romantic heritage. I hoped I would find that they prospered still, that the past had not faded completely into the realm of imagination and dusty scholarly tomes.

But at the dawn of a new century, was there a place for geisha in the land of Nintendo, Sony, Nissan, and Honda? Persistent reports in papers and magazines had suggested that they were an endangered species, if not already extinct. Although I had come across geisha in the small provincial town where I had lived when I first arrived in Japan, for years I had barely glimpsed them. And if I did succeed in befriending any, would they be "real" geisha or mere shadows, play-acting at being the real thing?

Before I had even reached Kyoto I had discovered that there was something strangely unsettling about the very notion of geisha. On the plane on my way to Japan, I had mentioned to the man next to me that I was planning to do some research on geisha. Suddenly he changed from the mild-mannered mustachioed academic he had seemed—he had told me he was a specialist in car ergonomics—and poured out a torrent of abuse.

“Fujiyama,” he foamed, spitting out the word which foreigners mistakenly use when speaking of Mount Fuji and a symbol to Japanese of our inability to muster even the faintest understanding of their country. “ ‘Fujiyama’, ‘geisha’!” he snarled. “Stereotype, prejudice!”

I had said nothing about my attitude or approach to geisha or why I was interested in them. The very idea that a foreigner would dare to even think of writing about them filled him with rage.

At least one foreigner had already done so—Arthur Golden, whose novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, took a generation of Western readers inside the geisha world of 1920s Gion. The book, at that time, had yet to be translated into Japanese. The West, meanwhile, had been swept by geisha fervor. Inspired by Golden’s heroine, Sayuri, the fashion world rediscovered the allure of femininity. The collections of 1999 were full of kimono-like creations which wrapped and concealed the body, hinting at the mysteries beneath rather than revealing them. That summer Madonna appeared at the Grammys in an extraordinary outfit described as a kimono, with long flapping sleeves and a plastic obi. It would be hard to imagine anything further from the traditional garment. Nevertheless it was the talk of Tokyo.

My neighbor on the plane was not just an eccentric. To my amazement, confiding in Japanese men that I was planning to look into geisha and their culture exposed me to my first experiences of rudeness in this country of protocol and courtesy. Enraged, they laid into me for taking an interest in such a trivial, old-fashioned, and banal aspect of their culture. A Japanese woman who, as a teacher of the shamisen, lived her life on the borders of the geisha world, asked me with gentle puzzlement why I wanted to look into the “dark, bad side of Japan.” And when I went to bookshops, I found intriguingly little on the geisha.

When I mentioned geisha to friends and acquaintances in Tokyo, many said (with, it seemed to me, unnecessary forcefulness) that no, they did not know any. But some did. They took me aside, sat me down, and explained that geisha were dancers, musicians, entertainers, and conversationalists who filled a specific niche at the highest levels of Japanese society. They were absolutely not prostitutes, high class or otherwise. That established, they suggested particular geisha that I might care to look up and, most important, indicated that I might mention their name.

First Days in Kyoto

On my first morning in Kyoto I was woken by a strange shouting, like the cry of an animal. Sunlight was streaming into the small room where I slept on the floor, sending motes of dust sparkling and spinning. Purely by chance I had ended up staying in one of the geisha areas, in a house which had until recently done service as a geisha house. When I finally met geisha, I learned that they lived in bare little rooms as poorly furnished as mine.

I went in search of breakfast and found a coffee shop along the street. Inside, mellow jazz emanated

from the speakers. The master of the shop, nervy and balding, tapped his fingers on the counter while he brewed up coffee in a glass percolator. The mistress, warm, plump, and smiling in a pink-and-white-checked apron, prepared industrial-size slabs of cotton-woolly toast. The shop was full of women sitting over breakfast, flicking through newspapers or chatting.

Later, wandering the neighborhood, I found myself in a warren of alleys lined with wooden houses pressed so close together that only the occasional shaft of sunlight pierced the gloom. Every now and then a motorbike or scooter skidded past but mainly there was silence. I had never been anywhere in Japan so untouched by the passage of time. It was as if I had stepped back into a preindustrial era.

There were five geisha areas or *hanamachi* (flower towns), of which three clustered together on the eastern side of the River Kamo which rolled, wide and brown, a couple of minutes walk away from the inn where I was staying. These three—Gion, the most famous and classy, Gion Higashi (East Gion), and Miyagawa-cho—were bordered to north and south by two thoroughfares, Sanjo and Gojo (Third and Fifth) streets. Cutting through the middle, the nerve center of the area, was Shijo (Fourth) Street, crammed end to end with shops dealing in all the paraphernalia of the geisha world—hairpins, tortoiseshell combs, dangly hair decorations, fans, clogs, kimono fabric, white face paint, sticks of safflower lipstick, hair wax, camellia oil, and small beautifully molded cakes of sugar, rice, and bean.

The river divided this small alternative universe from the modern city with its snarled traffic, air-conditioned department stores, clashing neon, and bustling people. Across the river from Gion was the fourth of the five *hanamachi*, Pontocho, a tiny picturesque alley lined with restaurants which in summer were extended at the back to make platforms lined with reed matting where one could dine, sip sake, and enjoy the cool breezes above the rolling waters of the Kamo. It was several days before I visited the fifth, Kamishichiken (literally “Seven Houses to the North”), in the northwest of the city. To my mind it was the most charming of all, a couple of quiet intimate lanes lined with dark prosperous houses, many with a lantern glowing outside, meandering in a gentle curve up to the stone lanterns and plum trees of Kitano Shrine.

That evening I was to have my first appointment with one of the *grandes dames* of the geisha world. I had mentioned on the phone that I was a friend of a friend, an important and powerful businessman whom I will call Mr. Suzuki, and hoped that that would smooth my way. Far from seeking publicity, the geisha shun it. Their whole profession depends on their ability to keep secrets. Many have been the friends of the nation’s most powerful men, often for a lifetime. Such men choose to entertain at geisha houses because they can trust these women to keep their lips sealed, no matter what they see or hear. But I also knew that in Japan as elsewhere the most important thing is who you know. With the help of introductions from friends I had made over years of living and working in Japan, I was confident that little by little I could breach this closed world.

At the end of an alley I pushed open a door and found myself in a small brightly lit room. There was a bar along one side and some leather sofas arranged to make a couple of alcoves. A small, regal woman in a kimono greeted me, offered me a whiskey, then turned back to banter with a group of noisy elderly men. Rather awkwardly I perched on a stool at the bar and began to chat to the barman. Finally the woman came to perch alongside me.

“So you are here through the introduction of Ken-chan,” she said, using the affectionate, diminutive form. “I’ve known him for years, since he was a little boy. I used to bounce him on my knee.”

It was hard to imagine the leathery Tokyo businessman I knew being bounced on anyone's knee. Added to which, if that was the case, I realized with surprise, she had to be in her seventies. She was as tiny and frail as a butterfly, with the kind of looks that become, if anything, more beautiful with time—a fine-boned, delicate face, perfect skin without a trace of lines. Dressed in a modest indigo-blue kimono with a subtle pattern woven through it, her hair drawn back into a pristine bun, she sat very upright, poised and gracious.

“So . . . what would you like of me?” She spoke in Kyoto dialect, ineffably polished and stylized, where everything is hinted at and nothing is said directly. Fresh from Tokyo, I found it difficult to pick up every nuance.

Clumsily I launched into an explanation. As she knew, I was a writer. I was hoping to write about the geisha world. Hopefully I could meet geisha, some young, some at the height of their career, perhaps even spend time in a geisha house living among geisha like one of them, seeing life from the inside. I gathered she might be able to help me. I'd be very grateful if she could do so.

I stumbled to a close. She sat in silence, looking straight ahead.

“Mmm,” she said slowly after a long pause, pursing her lips. “But how can you ever understand our *shikitari*?”

“*Shikitari*?” I prided myself on my spoken Japanese but this was new to me.

“You see?” she smiled, tight-lipped. “You do not even know the word.”

Many of the customs and practices in the geisha world, I was to learn, have their own terminology, a sort of jargon known only to insiders, incomprehensible to most Japanese. Other words which they regularly use—such as *shikitari*—are rare and sound rather archaic to the Japanese ear. It was only after considerable research that I discovered that *shikitari* means “customs, practices, the way of doing things.” It was indeed the *shikitari* which I wanted to learn about, among much else.

“How long are you planning to stay in Kyoto?” she went on.

“Several months,” I replied uncomfortably, adding hastily, “but I've lived in Japan for many years. I first came more than twenty years ago . . .”

“I have been to London many times,” she snapped. “I have met all the top people—the aristocracy, musicians, singers . . . But you would still say that I cannot understand England, would you not?”

I had to confess, I murmured as politely as possible, that that was not exactly the way that English people thought. For a start, she said, ignoring my response, geisha were of different sorts and different status. Some, like her, had been born in Gion. She herself was third generation; her mother and grandmother before her had been geisha. Then there were those—here there was the faintest, barely perceptible curl of the lip—who had come in from elsewhere. They, she implied, were a different class altogether. Of the five *hanamachi*, Gion, Pontocho, and Kamishichiken had long histories. They had always been geisha districts. But I must bear in mind that East Gion and, worse still, Miyagawa-cho were different, unspeakably low, in fact quite beyond the pale; in the past, prostitutes—she breathed the word with distaste—had lived there.

“I would not like to see Miyagawa-cho written about in the same breath as the others,” she said emphatically.

Even Gion, Pontocho, and Kamishichiken were all completely dissimilar, with entirely different histories and *shikitari*. She had met many Westerners, she concluded, writers and journalists, who had come to Kyoto on the same quest as mine. They had all failed. They had all given up and so should I.

“No matter how long you are here you will never understand the intricacies of our system.”

Gloomily I took another sip of whiskey. I had never met a Japanese woman so formidable and steely. In the alcoves the men were shouting and laughing. Ties were loosened, faces flushed.

“Mama!” shouted one. With the indulgent smile of a mother for a naughty child, the mama-san—my hostess—slipped away to join them, topping up their drinks and admonishing them teasingly. One, rather the worse for wear, came over to try his English skills on me.

At that moment the door opened. With a rustle of silk and brocade, a creature like a painted doll appeared.

“*Okasan, oki-ni!*” she cooed in breathy, high-pitched tones using the Kyoto word for thank you: “Mother, thank you.” Tottering unsteadily into the room on clogs a good four inches high, she stood nodding, smiling, and giggling, covering her mouth with her hand.

“She has just become a maiko,” explained the mama. “This is her third day.”

I was dumbstruck, as many people are, on coming face to face with a maiko. (Maiko literally means “dancing girl” but is usually translated “trainee geisha” or “apprentice geisha.”) Later, as the days and months passed, I was able to see the childish faces underneath the thick white paint. But that time, I could not stop myself staring in amazement and curiosity at this extraordinary confection. I was not the only one. For a moment there was silence before the chatter started up again.

She was wearing a sumptuous black kimono with an intertwined design of bamboo leaves and stems in browns, whites, and greens around the hem. The kimono sat flatteringly low on her shoulders, revealing a layer of brilliant red brocade at the throat which I took to be an under-kimono; in fact it was a separate under-collar. Around her waist, wrapping her like a corset from armpit to hip, was a thick cummerbund—the obi—of pale gold embroidered with flowers.

She was not so much a woman as a walking work of art, a compilation of symbols and markers of eroticism, as far removed from a human being as a bonsai is from a natural tree. Geisha have been described as icons of femininity. If that is the case, it is a very stylized image of femininity, following conventions utterly different from Western notions of beauty and sexiness. There was certainly not the slightest pretense that this was a real woman. She was an actress, painted up to play a role; it would be as absurd to confuse the girl with the role as to assume that the star of a soap opera actually was the character she was playing.

Rather unsteadily, with much rustling of fabric, she perched on the edge of one of the sofas; the enormous obi prevented her from sitting any further back. I glanced at the mama, hoping that I might slip over and join the group; but with a barely perceptible pursing of the lips she indicated that I

should keep quiet and stay where I was. So I watched and listened, curious to see what this painted creature might have to say.

“When were your parents born?” began the stringy, gray-haired man next to her, basking in her presence.

She smiled, giggled, covered her mouth with her hand.

“Showa twenty-nine,” she trilled, using the Japanese calendar in which years are numbered according to the ruling emperor (1944 by the Western calendar).

The man roared appreciatively as if she had just uttered a scintillating witticism.

“Showa twenty-nine, same as my son!” he beamed.

Smiling, she picked up one of the bottles of beer which littered the table and offered to fill his glass. One by one she moved from guest to guest, filling their glasses, giggling, repeating “*Oki-ni!*” Her job, it seemed, was just to be there. Chatting was an optional extra. Soon the men had reverted to talking among themselves.

Time passed. She rose to her feet. Bustling and clucking like a mother hen, the mama tugged, pulled, and patted her kimono into place and adjusted the heavy gold obi until the two long ends which crossed one over the other and hung to her feet were perfectly symmetrical.

“*Oki-ni! Oki-ni! Okasan, oki-ni!*” sang the girl. Bowing and giggling, with a clatter of clogs and a tinkle of bells, she backed out of the door and was gone. The room seemed a little duller, a little gloomier without her.

The Mama-san

It seemed an auspicious beginning. But as the days and weeks passed, I began to fear that I would never get any further than this. I could see the geisha, I lived among them. But I was always an outsider, I could never step through the looking glass. And the more curious I became, the more the geisha world presented me with a blank face.

Every connection I thought would be hopeful turned out to be a dead end. From time to time I was introduced to women who I knew were ex-geisha and the proprietresses of geisha houses.

“I wonder if I might meet the geisha and maiko in your house,” I would murmur tentatively. “Would be possible . . .”

“Much too busy,” they would snap. “Geisha are busy all day. They go to classes, they appear at parties. They certainly wouldn’t have the time to talk to you. But call me next week, I’ll see what I can do.”

Hardly daring to hope, I would call them the following week. The answer was always the same.

But on the fringes of the geisha world I was making friends. Every day I went to the coffee shop for breakfast. ~~By now the motherly owner and her jazz-loving husband were used to my eccentric foreign ways.~~ Instead of the tiny container of cream substitute which they served to everyone else, they gave me, smiling at the oddness of it, real milk to top up my coffee and indulgently cut me thin slices of toast instead of doorstep-thick slabs. Sometimes I wrote my diary; sometimes I chatted to the owners or the other women.

Then, tape recorder and notebook in bag, I would set off. Sometimes I would drop in to see Mr. Ishihara, the hairdresser. Maiko usually came in to have their hair done in the morning. I would sit in a corner and watch. He would start off with a long thick mane of hair and, while the maiko pored over a teenage magazine, he would smooth it with curling irons, comb in gobs of wax, part and knot and tie, slip in a tail of yak's hair and wads of stuffing, then add ribbons and string and pins until the hair had been transformed into an immaculate gleaming coiffure. He was not so much a hairdresser as a sculptor who worked in hair. Between customers he would sit down to chat. He knew everything one could ever want to know about geisha and their hairstyles, the history and the meanings of the different styles, and had written four books on the subject.

As much as I could I absorbed the geisha arts. The word *gei-sha* literally means "arts person"; perhaps it could be translated "artiste." Maiko spend five years studying dance and music before they graduate, and fully qualified geisha continue to study for the rest of their lives, honing and perfecting their technique. As I walked the streets I would hear the plangent plink plonk of shamisen riffs being practiced over and over again.

Soon after I arrived the Pontocho geisha gave a series of public dance performances. The small theater, tucked on one side of the narrow lane which made up the Pontocho district, was packed out with women in dark-toned kimonos who looked much like the owners of geisha houses and their elderly escorts, who might have been husbands, friends, or patrons. While the spectators fluttered the fans, the all-female troupe gave an abbreviated performance of *Chushingura* (The Tale of the Forty-Seven Ronin [Lordless Samurai]), a drama as familiar as a Shakespeare play or a performance of Swan Lake would be to a Western audience. For the geisha of Kyoto it was a particularly appropriate choice, for the most moving scenes take place in Gion's Ichiriki-tei, the most famous and venerable teahouse in the country.

Little by little my ear was becoming attuned to the melodies and rhythms of the music, at first rather dissonant for Western taste, while my eye was becoming sharper, better able to perceive the quality and crispness of the movements. One way of stepping inside the geisha world, I thought, might be to sit in on some of the maikos' music and dancing classes. But to do this I needed an introduction. Taking a deep breath, I called the formidable mama, thanked her very much for her kindness, and asked if I might come and see her again.

"Of course," she replied, all icy politeness.

Whenever you visit anyone in Japan you take a gift, beautifully wrapped in the shop's brand-name paper and presented in the shop's carrier bag. A mere glance at the choice of shop communicates to the recipient your savoir faire and your degree of respect. So it was an urgent priority to find a suitable gift. Should I take cakes or, as a Westerner, expensive French wine? Several guidebooks recommended a celebrated cake shop on Shijo with a long pedigree. So I went along, asked for their most famous cakes of the season, and bought a boxful. The cakes were of rice paste filled with red

bean jam, beautifully molded.

Carrying my offering, I arrived at precisely the appointed time. The bar was silent, dark, and empty apart from the barman, who was leaning on the counter, smoking a cigarette.

“Wait a while,” he said, turning on some lights, and offered me a drink. He had a swarthy, rather flat, melon-seed face and sharp, watchful eyes. He might have been anything between thirty and fifty but had become fixed forever in the ageless role of “boy.” There were plenty of men around but they were all adjuncts, “employees” as one aging geisha put it, servicing the geisha—shopkeepers, barmen, men whose job it was to help the geisha dress, men who worked in the geisha unions.

The barman seemed unnervingly knowledgeable about me and the difficulties I was having.

“The geisha world is not a yes/no society,” he said, apropos of nothing in particular. “You offer a maiko a cake and she just says, ‘Oki-ni.’ She doesn’t say, ‘Yes, please,’ or ‘No, thank you.’ ”

I understood what he was driving at. If I made a request, no one would ever say, “No, that’s impossible,” neither would they say, “Yes, I’ll do that, I’ll help you.” They would always make encouraging noises and tell me to call them again, any time, and they would see what they could do. But no matter how many times I called, nothing would ever come of it.

The mama was a case in point. I had heard from others that she was one of the most powerful geisha in Kyoto. She had been, like her mother before her, a famous beauty. Indeed, she was still extraordinarily lovely. Rumor had it that she had a *danna*, a patron, effectively a husband, who supported her whole enterprise. “They’ve been together for decades,” the innkeeper’s wife had told me. Yet I wondered where that steely core came from. In my decades in Japan I had met many Japanese women, almost all of them married, who were strong, confident, yet also eager to befriend me, a foreigner. I had never before encountered such suspicion and intransigence. It was as if these women had built a self-sufficient world in which I was just a flea, an irritation. They had no need of me; they wanted to brush me off.

When the mama appeared, as exquisite and tight-lipped as ever, she took my carefully chosen cakes with barely a glance and put them aside, then asked me what I wanted to drink.

“*Ocha de mo ii desu*,” I said. “Tea will be fine.”

“That’s rude!” she snapped, rounding on me fiercely. “You say, ‘*Ocha o itadakimasu*,’ ‘I’ll have tea, please.’ ”

Biting my tongue I apologized profusely and thanked her for being so kind as to correct me. There were no concessions to the fact that I was speaking a foreign language. The geisha were unforgiving of the tiniest error. Trying to communicate deference and humility with my body language, nodding, keeping my head bowed, I waited for an appropriate moment when, with the utmost politeness, I could put my request to her. I thought it would help my research, I explained, using the most formal and polite Japanese I could manage, if I was able to sit in on some classes at the Kaburenjo, the “Music and Dance Practice Place,” which housed classrooms, a theater, and the union offices and formed the nerve center of the district.

“Let me teach you,” she said, suddenly kind. “Last time we met, you asked too many things—you wanted to meet geisha, meet maiko, stay in a geisha house, do this, do that. You must learn to be patient. Take it step by step.”

“Step by step,” echoed the barman, who seemed to have more authority than one would have expected.

“When you meet maiko, you do not ask, ‘Why did you become a maiko? What is your training?’ In a gentle way, you say”—putting on a piping little girl voice—“ ‘If you don’t mind, could I ask . . . ?’ And only one thing at a time. You ask too much!”

Taking out one of her business cards, she penciled a few neat characters on to it.

“Take this to Mr. Kimura at the union offices in the Kaburenjo,” she said. “We will practice what you will say. I will run through it with you.”

“Well,” I said, “I guess I’ll introduce myself, tell him that I’ve lived in Japan, show him my books, then say that I want to sit very quietly and watch some classes, maybe meet maiko and talk to them, talk to the teachers . . .”

“No, no,” she said. “Just say something very modest: ‘I did these books, there’s others too but this is all I have; if possible it would be really wonderful if I could sit in on a dance class . . .’ And don’t say anything else. Then the next time you make your next request. You see?”

I repeated the words after her in my best high-pitched little girl voice, full of deference and self-deprecation, inserting thanks and apologies after every few words. I was beginning to understand. Within the geisha scheme of things, I was right at the bottom of the pecking order. Here I was, a female, trying to swim along within the geisha community yet ignorant of all their codes. Had I been a man, it would have been natural for me to be an outsider. I would have fitted neatly into the category of customer. The geisha would have indulged me, flirted with me, overwhelmed me with charm and attentiveness. But in this closed, secretive world of women, there was no place for a female who did not know the proper way to behave. My experience must have been akin to that of a new girl entering a geisha house. I was undergoing the most basic geisha training such as would be given to a raw recruit fresh from the countryside.

And—though she probably disagreed with me—I felt I was learning. Living among the geisha, dealing with them on a day-to-day basis, I found their ways beginning to rub off on me. I found myself carrying my body differently, walking with dainty steps, bowing, nodding, smiling until my face hurt. Most disconcertingly, when I called Japanese who had nothing to do with geisha or the geisha world, I found myself talking with exaggerated politeness in sweet, high-pitched velvety tones: “Oh, that would really be too kind, thank you so, so much!”

The next day, full of anticipation, I went along to the large concrete Kaburenjo carrying the precious business card. It was a rather unprepossessing building to house such an august body as the geisha union. My hopes rose when I discovered that Mr. Kimura was really quite young, maybe only forty or fifty. He had clipped hair, glasses, and an office worker’s suit. He took me off to a small side office and asked me brusquely what I wanted. I repeated my speech in my most unctuous tones, being as modest and undemanding as it was possible to be.

“No chance,” he growled. It struck me that, for all my efforts, neither the mama nor anyone else in authority bothered much with politeness at all.

“I’ll ask them upstairs, but I’m sure they’ll say no,” he said, scowling, and showed me the door. “You can try again next week if you like,” he added, which I now understood to mean “Forget it.” Downcast I went back to my small sunny room to lick my wounds and ponder my next step.

The Best Cakes

Whenever I had time, I went to tea ceremony class. The teacher, a comely, charismatic young man, had two faces. When he was conducting the class he wore *hakama*, the formal starched and pleated men’s kimono, and took on the persona of the *sensei* (teacher), barking orders and correcting the smallest mistake. Off duty he was a hip young man who worked as a stylist for a glossy magazine.

Tea ceremony is a series of precise choreographed movements performed in a spirit of stillness and concentration which also involves the serving and consuming of food and drink. It is somewhere between tai chi and the Roman Catholic mass but on a very small, intimate scale. Being very rusty, I was at the bottom of the class and had to be coaxed to remember even the most basic things, such as hold my arms as if there were an egg tucked into each armpit. Fortunately the teacher belonged to the same school that I had studied before, so at least I did not have to relearn details like the folding of the silk napkin.

“For the name, Ippodo; for the history, Kamibayashi; for the taste, Koyama—that’s what we say in Kyoto,” he told us one day, naming the three most famous tea shops in the city. Then he listed the four most famous cake shops. To my relief, the shop where I had bought the mama’s cakes was among them.

“Do you know Kanshindo?” he added, glancing at me. “You should go there this season. It’s very old—it’s where the geisha buy their cakes. It’s famous for its mizu yokan [a bland slab of red bean paste jelly eaten in summer]. It’s very difficult to find, only Gion people know it. If you take them Kanshindo mizu yokan, the geisha will be very surprised and impressed. Shall I tell you where it is?”

And he drew me a small sketch map.

I needed to report back to the mama and take her a gift to thank her for her kindness in introducing me to Mr. Kimura; it was irrelevant that it had not been a success. I called her, made an appointment to visit, and went in search of the cake shop. I walked down Shijo Street, looking carefully. There were plenty of alleys off the main road but nothing where the teacher had indicated. Then I noticed a gap between two buildings just wide enough to slip through. It led to a dark, narrow path lined with blank walls and the closed doors of bars. Halfway along was a small stall, not even a shop, with wrapped slabs of bean jelly in a display case. I bought a couple, wrapped in Kanshindo paper, and carried them off in the Kanshindo carrier bag.

That evening I went to see the mama. As always, I was precisely on time. As always, she was not there. When she finally appeared, I offered her the cakes, bowing and murmuring in self-deprecating tones, “This is really nothing at all, but please take it.”

She took the bag and gave me a warm smile.

“The most delicious cakes!” she said. “You’re learning, little by little.”

I had also learned to ask no more. I thanked her profusely for her very great kindness and for teaching me so much, apologized for my shortcomings, chatted inconsequentially for a while, then left, feeling pleased with myself.

I had never guessed that cakes would make such a difference. After that, whenever I was to visit anyone, I always made a pilgrimage to Kanshindo. I became a regular customer. The two apron-clad women who ran the shop took to asking how I was and I always stopped for a chat. And when I proffered my cakes, the geisha would exclaim with delight or nod approvingly and look at me as if to say, “Aha, I can see you know what’s what.” I had found one of the keys to the door.

Doors Open

There was another key lying around waiting to be found—or maybe it was a door opening rather than a key.

One day I was walking home when a geisha caught up with me, scurrying along on her silk-covered sandals. She was tall and slender with a dancer’s long neck and a striking face, handsome rather than beautiful, with a long chin, high cheekbones, thoughtful eyes, and a wide sensuous mouth. She was wearing, as geisha (as opposed to maiko) do, an elegant, understated kimono in shades of pale mauve with a plain obi, and her hair was swept back. Perhaps it was because she was wearing heavy makeup (though not the white face paint of the maiko, which geisha wear only on formal occasions) that I failed to recognize her though, to my embarrassment, she seemed to know me well.

“Going home, are you? Or dropping in to the coffee shop?” she asked gaily. Then she mentioned that she was on her way back from Tokyo where she had been performing in an *odori-kai*, a convention for professional dancers, and suddenly I realized who she was.

Whenever I had seen her before, I had always taken her for a university student or a secretary. When I went for breakfast she was often there, a quiet, serious girl with large owl-like glasses who sat at the far end of the counter reading her paper. She usually wore a dress or a simple blouse and skirt over slim bare legs and had short neat hair and a scrubbed clean face. I had always been rather curious about her. She looked like a bit of a bluestocking, very far removed from a geisha, as if, like me, she was an outsider, not really part of this world at all.

I knew that she was a talented dancer. But plenty of women learned *Nihon buyo* or *jiutamai*, the form of traditional Japanese dance practiced by geisha, as a hobby. It had never occurred to me that such a serious-looking, intellectual young woman might be a geisha herself.

The following day at breakfast she was not there. By now it was midsummer, approaching the season of the Gion festival. All the geisha had had fans made of hand-crafted paper shaped like ginkgo leaves and inscribed with their professional names in beautifully brushed black characters, which they handed out as souvenirs. The master and mistress of the coffee shop had a whole collection, pinned up

in rows across the wall.

“Look,” said the master, reading some of the names to me. “And see this one? That’s our Fumiko. You know her. She’s famous, she’s one of the top dancers in the district.”

I looked blank.

“She sits just over there. You know, with the big glasses!”

Something was changing in my perception of the coffee shop and its customers and in their perception of me. For weeks I had gone there simply to have breakfast. Sometimes I chatted to people, often I didn’t. Sometimes some of the older ladies engaged me in conversation. And as I became a familiar face, the plump, motherly owner would inquire how I was getting on with my research.

I looked at these women I knew so well, with their unmade-up faces, in their slacks and blouses, some still in flimsy nightgowns, with their piled up helmets of lacquered hair. How could I not have realized? All this time I had been scouring the district, making phone calls, using connections, trotting here and there with cakes, when I was already right inside the geisha world.

In fact it was just as well that I had been so oblivious. For instead of behaving like a journalist and alienating everyone by bombarding them with questions, I had, entirely by accident, done exactly the right thing. I had sat quietly, not being obnoxious, not asking nosy questions, speaking when spoken to, just eating breakfast, day after day. It was a bit like stalking wildlife. They were used to me. I had won their confidence.

I still did nothing. I was well trained by now. I had plenty of people to meet and places to go. Then several days later the owner leaned across the counter and said in confidential tones, “You wanted to find out about geisha, didn’t you? Hara-san says she’d like to talk to you.”

I knew Hara-san well, a warm rather beautiful woman in her mid-seventies with a pile of snowy-white hair, large, luminous eyes and a smile which lit up her face. It turned out that she was the *okami-san*—the owner-mistress—of a teahouse a few doors away from my inn. The word “teahouse,” incidentally is a literal but rather misleading translation of *ochaya*. Geisha live in a “geisha house” (*okiya*) and work in a “teahouse” (*ochaya*), where there is music, dancing, partying, sometimes food, and always plenty of alcohol; tea is the last thing you would expect to find there.

I went off to visit Hara-san, taking, of course, Kanshindo cakes. Talking to someone so familiar was an entirely different experience from quizzing a geisha who barely knew me. With childlike innocence, she poured out her heart, showing me photographs of herself as a beautiful, grave-faced young geisha.

Suddenly doors were flying open. I traipsed in and out of houses with my notebook and tape recorder listening to stories. Some were uneventful, others extraordinarily moving. I was amazed at the openness with which women would reveal the most harrowing experiences of their youth.

Now, a good two months after I had first arrived, when I walked down the street maiko recognized me. They stopped to bow and say “*Ohayo dosu!*,” the quaint geisha phrase for “Good morning,” or “*Oné-san, oki-ni,*” “Big sister, thank you!” The ones I knew would whisk me off on shopping expeditions,

clattering along beside me on their clogs, taking my arm to make sure I was not swept off my feet by one of the lethal passing motorbikes, sheltering me with their oiled paper umbrellas when it rained, chattering and giggling sweetly. I felt pampered, protected, charmed, and hugely honored that they had chosen to befriend me. It was easy to see how beguiling such behavior must be for the wealthy businessmen who were their customers.

As a single woman, I had always been something of an oddity in Japan. People would ask why I was not married and had no children until, as I passed some unspoken but recognizable age, they became embarrassed even to ask. None of the geisha was remotely interested. After all, they themselves were not married. Some had children, some not. Those who had were single parents. No doubt they assumed that I had the occasional lover, as they did. As I lived among them it began to dawn on me that I—a modern Western career woman—was not far removed from a geisha myself; though when I put this theory to the geisha I knew, they looked distinctly dubious. Perhaps that was the answer. Perhaps they were the original liberated women and the rest of the world had just caught up with them.

I felt, I realized, extraordinarily at home. In Japan, outside the geisha community, everyone seemed to get up with the lark. Here, like me, they got up late. One would not dream of dropping in to see a geisha before noon. And unlike the punctual Japanese, they were never on time, as I had discovered when I was paying court to the mama-san. It was in many ways the looking-glass image of “real” Japan. All the usual rules were subverted. One should not take the comparison too far. Like Japan, it was a hierarchical, stratified society. But, within the small confines of the geisha communities, it was women, not men, who wielded power; and everyone hoped for girl children, not boys, so that they could carry on the line of geisha. It was a back-to-front world—which was of course the whole point. Men came to the “flower towns” looking for an escape from drab reality in a world of dreams.

So how had this dream world arisen? This was something I could only understand by looking into the past. Over the following months I sifted through texts to try and understand where the geisha had come from, what their role was in Japanese society, and why Japan had developed this parallel universe. I befriended geisha in Tokyo and in some of the hot spring resorts where Japanese go on holiday. I hung out with different classes and varieties of geisha. And I began to get some clues as to why Japanese men (some, anyway) might be angry at the very notion of my writing a book on geisha.

Geisha Past and Present

In this book I put together the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. The first, fourth, sixth, and eighth chapters deal with the history of the geisha, their changing face and role through the centuries, and the many romantic tales, both fact and fiction, which have grown up around them. It is a secret history. In the standard histories of Japan, geisha are never mentioned; yet when I probed a little deeper, I found them there, playing a role in the great events of their day and consorting with the most powerful men of the country as friends, confidantes, mistresses, and sometimes wives. But they are always in the shadows, the women behind the decision makers.

Today they seem respectable enough; in fact there is a powerful geisha PR lobby driving home the point that geisha are not prostitutes with such insistence that even the most out-of-touch Westerner must have got the message by now. But in Victorian times and before, when geisha were in their

heyday, they were the pinnacle of an outrageous alternative society. Like rock and roll stars today, they were the queens of a popular culture created by, with, and for the people, so subversive that the shogunate, the government of the day, spent much its time hopelessly attempting to repress it, or at least keep it within controllable bounds. Many of the writers who celebrated this culture found themselves in prison from time to time. The woodblock print artists whose work is so familiar to us today made a living portraying the courtesans, geisha, and kabuki actors who were the pin-ups of this alternative society.

As for the glamorous courtesans and rollicking male geisha who were like court jesters to the wealthy guests, the Japanese will tell you that both professions died out at least a century ago. I found differently . . .

And what of modern-day geisha? Very few Japanese have ever met one. In the evening the streets of Gion are crowded with Japanese tourists with cameras poised, waiting patiently like birdwatchers for maiko to flit into view for a few seconds before darting into a nearby teahouse. Only the very wealthy or their guests will ever get to spend an evening in the company of maiko or geisha. Who are these women and why do they do what they do? In the rest of the book I look at the world of the geisha today, from the rites and rituals of geisha life and how a geisha does her makeup and kimono, to how she learns to charm at geisha parties. It is a journey in search of the last remnants of a dying tradition to record some of these colorful personalities, their customs, their stories, their memories, their present and their past.

Inevitably I find myself looking at what it means to be a woman in Japan. What is the dividing line between geisha and prostitutes and between wives and geisha? And what of the men who spend their time with geisha? Almost all the people who recorded the geisha and their lives in stories, novels, and woodblock prints were men. In the few surviving writings and paintings by geisha, they portray themselves very differently, not as siren queens but down-to-earth women.

In Japan in the heyday of the geisha, relations between men and women operated very differently from the way in which we do things in the West. Until recently, all but the lowest classes had arranged marriages. The purpose of marriage was to create an alliance between families; to go against one's family and marry for love would have been quite unthinkable. It was also—hard though it is to imagine—considered shockingly improper to enjoy sex with one's wife. The function of conjugal relations was to produce children to perpetuate the family line. As for pleasure, men were expected to find that elsewhere.

I also look at the Japanese attitude to love and sex, untouched until recently by either the European notion of romantic love or Christian sexual morality. This is a culture in which hedonism, sensualism and the art of the erotic, not at all the same as sex, were uninhibitedly developed in very sophisticated ways. In the floating world of the geisha, it was love, not sex or sensual pleasure, which was taboo.

japan before the geisha

High-class Courtesans and the Culture of Desire

*Because they fall
we love them—
the cherry blossoms.
In this floating world,
does anything endure?*

Ariwara no Narihira (823–880)¹

The City of Purple Hills and Crystal Streams

More than a thousand years ago, long before geisha were even thought of, Kyoto was the center of an extraordinarily effete, decadent, and promiscuous culture which transformed love into an art form and beauty into a cult. Centuries later, when pleasure quarters were built where men could transcend their everyday lives and imagine themselves noblemen of leisure, the courtesans and geisha modeled the dreams which they sold on the romantic culture of the Heian princes.

The Heian period lasted from 794 to 1195, the time of the Vikings, King Canute, and William the Conqueror. It began with the construction of a beautiful new capital in an auspicious location, a wide bowl-shaped valley surrounded by tree-clad hills, with sparkling rivers bordering it to each side. The official name was Heian-kyo, the Capital of Peace and Tranquility. Poets called it the City of Purple Hills and Crystal Streams; we know it as Kyoto.

There a city grew up of vermilion-painted palaces, slender-pillared temples, and spacious mansions of wood with wattled roofs. Noblemen and princes rumbled up and down the broad mud-paved boulevards in the shadow of the overhanging willows, in lavishly decorated oxcarts attended by retinues of liveried outriders. Under the rule of the emperor and his all-powerful ministers of state, the

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