

American's stereotypical view on geishas and how they couldn't be more wrong

[History](#)



Geisha Opinion and Stereotypes: An Analysis

Throughout all of history, women have received the short end of the stick. From voting rights to discrimination, women have always been stereotyped and misjudged by men since as far back as history goes. This discrimination and stereotyping can come from anywhere, from men or from women. Judgement, discrimination, and stereotyping are ideas that are anything but new to geisha. These women who perform as elite, skilled hostesses and entertainers are commonly viewed of prostitute's due to American stereotypes. Geisha have also experienced discrimination and judgement from Japanese women as well, mainly housewives. These ideas of what geisha do are incorrect. Geisha are not only misjudged and stereotyped by westerners, but also by Japanese people themselves. In order to understand where these misjudgments and stereotypes come from, it is integral that you look first into the background and history of the " geisha".

When looking back on the history of geisha women, you can get a glimpse into why there are very strong stereotypes and associations tied to this position. Geisha first emerged within the Tokugawa period, but it is not what we associate as geisha today. In fact, " the first geisha were men." During this period, these men were common entertainers within brothels and teahouses in Japan. Oftentimes they were entertainers meant to host the male customers while they waited to see courtesans. Entertainment was a budding industry in Tokugawa Japan. These male geisha's presence in brothels and teahouses can be attributed to the growth of the need for " pleasure quarters." Edo was especially well known for its entertainment and

pleasure, as it held Yoshiwara, an extremely famous pleasure quarter. This idea of entertainment without sex was then ran with by female artists. Dancers and musicians pulled from this by starting to offer themselves up in the similar ways many geisha men did. From this, is where the idea of geisha as prostitutes likely stems from. Many of these artisan geisha “ engaged in prostitution to varying degrees.” From this, a grey area can begin to be seen. As some geisha women entertained and others pleased, it became hard to discern the geisha entertainers from those who offered up their bodies along with their skills. These interweaving of skills and pleasure has yet to be undone for geisha, even today. For years afterwards, geisha would be associated with prostitution and loose women. If a handful of geisha were involved in prostitution, it was easy to stereotype and judge them all as prostitutes. The disparagement of geisha came after this as you enter the Meiji era. The 19th century brought about intellectuals who disparaged these women. Thinkers of the time such as Tsuda Mamichi, Mori Arinori, and Fukuzawa Yukichi called geisha “ bought women” and asked for them to “ be ostracized from human society and barred from association with honorable people.” As society began to value monogamy and deplore promiscuousness, the interwoven relationship of geisha to prostitution meant they were brought down in the same way prostitutes were. And these negative associations were not coming solely from men. It is also of note that “ early feminists also regarded the popularity of geisha as a blight on Japan’s reputation.” These anti-geisha sentiments were shared by both genders. Geisha women were simply women of dubious reputations who were an obstacle to any respectful and well-to-do women. To many women,

especially housewives, geisha could be seen as a threat to other women and their monogamous marriages. Seen as the enemy of Japan, geisha experienced heavy misjudgments and stereotyping from all outer circles. These women could not be accepted in society due to their ability to cater to men's sexual desires. These 19th century sentiments about geisha even included the idea that geisha only helped to confirm "every despicable Western stereotype about submissive "Oriental" women."

As the stereotypes and discrimination piled up, geisha women sought to remove themselves from these harmful depictions of them. This came later in the 19th century as geisha began to separate themselves by "civilizing". By disassociating themselves from the idea of prostitution, geisha worked off "the vanguard of a social transformation" by using "civilization and enlightenment" to gain publicity and a more positive public opinion. The benefits of doing so was twofold. For geisha, it meant associating themselves with an elite class and high society. For the brothel owners, it meant the ability to change the language surround the sex trade of Japan. From this, geisha began to pull away from the public masses and associate with "enduring ideas about the value and purpose of women's education." Societal change was not the only backer for these moral changes by geisha. Rather than just society, port cities and visiting westerns also backed this need for change. Their demand for sex and other services helped uphold the business and provide for expansion. While expansion was fast for the sex trade, what was not fast was the change in public opinion. Geisha's intent to disassociate themselves from prostitution through enlightenment and civilization did not immediately propel them away from their original stereotypes. Instead, they

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were seen as different, but uncertain. You can see this uncertainty in a policy from the Meiji era, in which geisha were given leniency on medical testing. During this time “ local officials had begun to implement mandatory medical examinations for licensed prostitutes.” However, geisha were commonly exempt from these exams which reflects on how lawmakers and officials at the time were unable to classify geisha properly. Rhetoric on geisha and their position in society would change as the eras did. The needs of proprietors to educate geisha and prostitutes in the fine arts and other aspects of female education caused a large change in rhetoric for the position of a geisha. This shift was pushed by the proprietors in order depart from “ Tokugawa-era vindications of work in the sex trade.” They worked to move the imagined value in a geisha or prostitute from their “ present activity as earners” to “ their imagined future as mothers.” The integral part of this rhetoric to take into consideration is how they did not sell geisha and prostitutes as future wives as well, but only as future mothers. The background of this lies in the fact that the men who tended to patronize upper-class geisha enjoyed taking them as concubines rather than their wives. They would bear these men children, but never outright marry them. There is also the smallest inkling of national pride in this insinuation of geisha as future mothers. When these women bear morally fit children due to their education, then their children can help support the future of the nation. A well-raised child was integral to the nation and thus associating geisha with this sentiment helped give them more appeal to possible patrons. Proprietors, prostitutes, and geisha would continue to survive until the early 1900s. The turn of the 20th century brought the outlawing of

prostitution in Japan. The decline of the geisha would begin with this and continue further as World War II erupted. The war is where you can attribute the most noticeable beginnings of western stereotypes of geisha. As American soldiers entered the country they, just like the Japanese men, required certain services. But as these men frequented the local prostitutes, the term " geisha girl", which the prostitutes referred to themselves as, brought negative stereotypes and judgements back into the fold for geisha women. Their decline during this period was also heightened due to the need for women to fill in for men at their places of work and factories for the war. During this period, Western and specifically American opinion solidified on the idea of what a geisha was. Because of the term " geisha girl", the role of a geisha was cemented in many American's eyes as a more endearing form of a prostitute.

To comprehend what many Westerners felt of geisha and " geisha girls", it is important to turn to American and Western accounts from this time period. To Westerners, they are seen as alluring and intriguing. Language around them from Americans are vague as they didn't understand them, but wanted to. One American teacher's account from 1961 presents meeting geisha girls as a bullet point on a long list of things to do. To the American, the allure of a geisha is on his and other American men's mind. So much so that the geisha to him is like a tourist stop, a late-night stop at a " Japanese cabaret" to " sip sake at a few of those tiny bars down the back streets." The concerning aspects of the Western man's opinion of the geisha girls is that his enamor with the women is not for their skill in art forms or their ability to entertain, but rather the geisha are reduced to their beauty. The women are seen as "

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lovely” and “ graceful”, however there still lies the implication of something more to be provided by the women other than entertainment. The American is also told by a local Japanese priest that because the geisha did not “ rinse your cup in the bowl” that it meant she “ would like to know you better.” Western women also held these very similar ideas of a geisha during this time period as well. A European woman who lived in Japan for 3 years during the war spoke of women in Japan saying that “ marriage is her only career unless she becomes a geisha.” To the European woman, the role of a geisha is not a woman’s occupation of high skill and ability in the arts, but rather a woman’s lesser option should she not marry. The image of Japanese women and specifically geisha was conveyed to Americans commonly through images “ of the bodily intimacy of Japanese women and white male soldiers.” It wasn’t uncommon to see records with images of geisha girls or photos with captions such as “ Servicemen in Tokyo are teaching geisha girls a few things about American jive and dancing.” Though these geisha girls were assumed to be actual geishas by the American public, they of course were not. But for many it is hard to shake the rhetoric and language that these images and terms assigned to geisha. Clearly, the use of geisha girls was meant as a way to create a “ Western fantasy” concerning “ the submissive yet licentious “ Oriental women”” of Japan. This was fueled further by the “ liberation” Japanese women felt after U. S. occupation as they were given civil rights in the newly drawn constitution for Japan. The Western idea of a geisha runs along the same path of the Western idea of Asian women. Still even today many women in Asia are seen as small and submissive items in which men can possess. It is hard to deny that there is a prescribed

importance to “ the interplay of gender and sexuality in the operation of orientalism.” A lot of ideas and stereotypes link back to World War II and it’s Western involvement in Japan. From visiting American teachers to white soldiers, the word geisha soon became misconstrued even further than it had already been. These women’s occupations were unintentionally linked through the term “ geisha girl” as well as furthered by Western images and rhetoric that surrounded these women.

Western opinion however, was not the only opinion that misconstrued and misjudged the role of a geisha. The very root of what geisha were seen as can be found in Japanese accounts and stereotypes of what a geisha was before World War II. Language around geisha was always negative and judgmental. This can be attributed to the fact that these women’s occupations were forever linked with the role of a prostitute. Because prostitutes were seen as detrimental to the public sphere, geisha too were linked in these judgements. Geisha were seen as “ women in an ugly trade” and “ immoral woman”. The line drawn between “ moral” and “ immoral” woman is the main reason why geisha were so highly resented by Japanese women. The immoral consisted of prostitutes and geisha, while the moral concerned of married women, ladies, and reformers. These two groups held a strong competition against each other. Much of the fight though originated from the “ moral” side in the form of protests and stereotyping. Groups were formed to combat the immoral women, such as the Purity Party, an anti-prostitution party that worked to protect “ national morality”. Due to the male-oriented society of Japan, the ability to pit women against each other was far too easy. By creating a comparison between geisha and men’s

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wives, the blame and judgement of cheating men was moved to the wife. Though monogamy and love began to take hold as societal “ norms” in the early 20th century, this did not deter or stop men from “ seeking male entertainment venues.” In a turn of irony, it became common advice to wives to employ “ the tactics of the geisha” “ in order to prevent their husbands from wandering.” What was considered a “ good wife, good mother” even takes root in geisha logic, specifically in the idea of an enlightened geisha. Though these wives would in some ways depend on the roots, foundation, and ways of the geisha, they still would carry their resentment and stereotypes of geisha and their occupation. It is impossible deny how the pitting of these two groups benefitted men and ultimately the patriarchy of Japan. Men held all the power from female sexuality to female fertility to female labor. Similar to the ideas of women in Western nations, subordination and symbol status were key. Men desired women’s bodies like manufactured goods and if their wives would not suffice, prostitutes and geisha were always an option. Women are a commodity to all males; whether they be a wife or a geisha their ultimate goal is to please a man. Unfortunately for geisha, by the end of World War II their presence was forever linked with the role of prostitution. Though not all geisha sold their bodies, they would continue to be grouped in with prostitutes as immoral women. Shortly after World War II, geisha took part in an organization known as the Recreation Amusement Association or RAA. This organization was put together by the Japanese government due to the idea that American soldiers would partake in “ widespread rape” and “ unimaginable disorder, if not supplied with prostitutes.” Though later terminated as this sentiment of

American soldiers was proven untrue; it is important to see how the geisha women were grouped into, and would continue to be, the idea of immoral prostitution.

There are many roots to the discrimination, stereotyping, and judgement of the geisha. A position of high skill and entertainment value, geisha have been and still continue to be misinterpreted as female prostitutes.

Unfortunately, this link to immorality and prostitution links back many years.

The link between these two different occupations exists not only due to Japanese opinion on geisha, but also on Western opinion. Though geisha worked to present themselves as “enlightened” women who were acceptable to exist and partake in society, World War II would ultimately misconstrue their reputation. As the term “geisha girl” spread through Westerner soldiers, geisha hostesses found themselves unable to remove their occupation from the negative image and rhetoric it had gained through Westerners. Their judgement and stereotyped was also aided by the patriarchal society of Japan, which helped to pit wives and moral women against geisha and immoral women. Though some geisha did in fact sell their bodies, today the role of a geisha is a role of value and importance in Japan. Luckily for the occupation, geisha has slowly, but steadily become a way of keeping tradition in modern Japan. The modern geisha is an independent and successful woman who is well trained. Today, geisha perform at parties and gatherings or traditional restaurants. No longer are geisha grouped and pitted against other women. But, it is forever important to understand the background of the geisha and the events they went through due to the societal notions of their occupation. It is important to not deny that the role

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of a geisha was misjudged, stereotyped, and discriminated against for many, many decades. Geisha have dealt with the scorn of their own people and of Westerners, but ultimately, they now live on as beacons of tradition who are highly skilled women in a profession that is now deserving of respect.