

White Shadows

Kyoto's Hanamachi Bijin Manufacture & The Portrayal of Female Characters

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In the 16th century the shogun government designed the *yūkaku* (遊廓、遊郭), ‘walled-in pleasure quarters’, where prostitution was legal and *yūjo*, ‘play women’, were classified and licensed.

Inside these walls arose the *oiran* (花魁), a high-class courtesan, differ from the *yūjo*, they were first and foremost entertainers. Many *oiran*, were former *kabuku*, *kabuki* dancers that migrate after the government banned *onna-kabuki* for being too erotic.

An *oiran*, was skilled in the traditional arts of *sadō* (Japanese tea ceremony), *ikebana* (flower arranging), and calligraphy. They entertained their guests by play the *koto*, hand drums and *shamisen* and were expected to be able to carry and intelligent conversation and write eloquently. They were ranked depended upon their skills being the highest rank of *oiran* the *tayū* (太夫), followed by the *kōshi* (格子).

The *yūkaku* rapidly became glamorous entertainment world, offering something beyond sex. It was during this period that the first *geiko* appeared in the pleasure quarters, often wrongly perceived as the *oiran*’s successor.

The *geiko* female’s forerunner were the teenagers *odoriko*, ‘dancing girls’, which were highly expensively trained chaste dancers for hire. Unfortunately those that were not any longer teenager, could not longer style themselves *odoriko*. By the end of their adolescent, because the difficulty to find employment, many turned to prostitution.

The very first Geisha were men, which job was to entertain *tayu*’s customers while were waiting to see the popular gifted courtesan.

Although there is not precise record when the first female geisha appear, today we know hat the first female geisha come from unemployed *odoriko*, which commence to work only as entertainers in the same establishment as the male geisha.

By the 1800, a *geiko* was consider a female occupation and by the 1830’s the extravagant *oiran* began to fall out of fashion, becoming less popular that the elegant *geiko*. Fashionable women throughout society commenced to emulate *geiko* styles.

Once prostitution was abolished, during the Meiji era (1868 - 1912), the *yūkaku* disappeared and *hanamachi*, geisha-towns, were created in major cities in Japan. It is very important to understand that the raise of the *geiko/ geisha* is not as result of the prostitution abolishment. Contrary to some believes, the *oiran* cult in reality was overshadowed by the rise of the *geisha*, before the end of legalized prostitution. Some of the reasons have to do that *geiko* were more accessible to casual visitors and were more adapted to perform common entertainments enjoyed by the people of that time. They also appealed to many people because of their mastery and focus in the arts as opposed of the *oiran*, who has started the same way, increasingly wander off from in their desperation to retain clients.

Today’s *geiko and maiko*, ‘apprentice geiko’, profession harks back to over 350years. In Kyoto a school system for *geiko and maiko*’s professional training has a long historical tradition, in the form of *nyokoba*, ‘vocational schools’, which were established about 140 years ago for the study of these traditional entertainment across the five Kyoto’s *hanamchi* areas.

Each *hanamachi* have business known as *ochaya*, ‘teahouses’, strictly regulated member-exclusive teahouses that accept new members only through an introduction from a regular client. These establishments have the function to organize banquets in a manner that best satisfies customers and to contact the *okiya*, ‘*geiko house*’, to request the service of *geiko* and/ or *maiko* that they believe will meet best the taste of the client upon customer request.

Maiko and *geiko* are registered occupations valid only within the *hanamachi*. Their career path is clear defined. Because Japanese labor law, a girl can apply to become a *Maiko* upon junior high graduation. Most of girls start their career as *Maiko* around 15 years of age and promoted to *geiko* when they are over 20 years of age.

There are two main components or layers that the *maiko* and *geiko* build on their performance skills with their customers: the use of space, *AWAI* and the Confucianism concept of harmony. These two elements together form a reality that is a fable created by the *maiko* or *geiko*'s arts, that it is by no means any less real or unreal and that exist in language but at the same time is inaccessible through language.

WA is a cultural set that 'harmonizes' people principles or standards of behavior dealing strictly with values, beliefs and norms around the harmony concept.

Yumiko Yokochi (Yokochi, 2004) explains *WA* as '*the desire to be one with those of your group*', this lead to understand that though there is individualism awareness; it is preferable when people want the same thing, share the same background, and point of view. The concept of *WA* has created a hierarchic collectivistic group-oriented culture in the *hanamachi* community that influences the arts and relations between *maiko* or *geiko* and customers.

This philosophical cultural system, through the creation of a silent language, has brought a stage into existence, where their arts can be considered as evolving as a result becoming illusionary/ fake. Since *WA* presides over the *hanamachi* community life and *bijin*, 'beauty', is a consequence of *WA*, their *art* can also be found within the 'person', who can become the art, entering the interplay between person and artwork.

As a whole *WA* offers a hierarchy structure and since *WA* presides over life, *maiko* or *geiko* arts and their audiences are not so much interested in 'the real' and no attempts are made to hide the fake. Then artificiality is often appreciated because is understood as essential part of existence where often the real, feelings and personal believe, are non representational. 'The absence of real representation' is conveyed by mystery, through the mastery of *WA*, becoming the core of the *maiko* or *geiko*'s *bijin* quality.

Their use of space is essential for their daily performance, whether is in an *ochaya* or in public spaces. This concept is called 間 (アワイ) *AWAI*, meaning the space that the *maiko* or *geiko* creates in between her and a person. It creates temporary spaces within a larger space, controlled between the *geiko* skills and the person admiration.

In conclusion, the historical, *odoriko* and *ona-kabuku*, can be seen as a female perseverance and survival to continue their artistic path.

Because the *wa* and *awai* presides over the *hanamachi*'s life and interaction, there is a crisis between language and visuality, therefore any knowledge of this world is only apparent.

In trying to represent this world artistically, there is never a sense that can be represented artistically. Because of the lack of artistically representation, arts in general reflect the impossibility to do so.

Kyoto's *hanamachi* is clearly belongs to a unique cultural heritage, which blooms and heals the ephemeral truth of our lives.