CHANGING IMAGES OF JAPANESE WOMEN IN AMERICAN FILMS: FROM THE TEAHOUSE OF THE AUGUST MOON (1956) TO MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA (2005)

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Introduction

Japanese women, especially the “geisha”, have attracted the attention of Western countries since the Universal Exposition of Paris in 1867. They have been seen both as mysterious targets for desire and as dangerous objects that need to be controlled. Madam Butterfly (1898), written by John Luther Long, depicts a love story between an American man and a Japanese woman. It found success as the basis for Puccini’s opera in 1904 and was made into film versions twice, in 1915 and 1932. Madame Butterfly is the most well known classical image of the Japanese woman.

After WWII, a new motif appeared: the Japanese war bride who married American soldiers during their occupation of Japan. During the 1950s, there were a series of films depicting love stories between American men and Japanese women: Japanese War Bride (1952), House of...
Bamboo (1955), The Teahouse of the August Moon (1956), and Sayonara (1957) are among the most well known. These romances differ in an important respect from the Madame Butterfly version of the East-West love story in that there is usually a happy ending. During this period, there were also a number of films with the geisha as a central figure: Geisha Girl (1951), Geisha Boy (1958), The Barbarian and the Geisha (1958), and Cry for Happy (1960).

In 1974, The Yakuza contains an incomplete depiction of an encounter between an American man and a Japanese woman, but the most popular film image of a Japanese woman after the 1950s is Mariko in Shogun (1980), the film version of James Clavell's bestseller novel. The film sparked a new interest in Japanese-themed romances in the United States. Mariko combines the tragic heroine from Madame Butterfly with images of the Geisha who serves and entertains foreign men coming to Japan. Other examples of romance between American men and Japanese women are the coming-of-age love story of an American karate student and an Okinawa girl (The Karate Kid II, 1986) and between an American Major League baseball player and a Japanese woman in Mr. Baseball (1992). The 2005 film Memoirs of a Geisha is the only film since Shogun to focus specifically on the figure of the geisha.

This paper selects post-war films that embody turning points in the depiction of Japanese women in American films: The Teahouse of the August Moon (1956), Sayonara (1957), Shogun (1980) and Memoirs of a Geisha (2005). How have the images of Japanese women, especially the stereotypes of the geisha serving and entertaining American men changed over the last half-century? What historical, social or cultural backgrounds underlie the changes and continuities of these images? What do these elements signify in American culture? This paper attempts to trace the evolution of these images and make some implications about the changing and continuous nature of their functions in American culture over the last 60 years.

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1 To attempt to make a cultural assumption, this paper discusses the above mentioned films which were very popular and seen by many people. Thus, it mainly focuses on the geisha stereotype. However, there are other types of the Japanese women such as war brides and Japanese immigrants whose scenes are mainly depicted in the United States rather than in Japan; for example, Tae in Japanese War Bride (1952), Lily in Come See the Paradise (1990), and Hatsue, in Picture Bride (1999). A further discussion of these representations is necessary for a more in-depth analysis of images of Japanese women in American films.
Formulas and Culture

This paper is based on John G. Cawelti’s formulaic analysis. J.G. Cawelti uses the word “formula” to refer to what we would normally call “genre.” “A formula is a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form or archetype” (Cawelti 1976: 6). These “cultural conventions” refer to “patterns of convention which are usually quite specific to a particular culture and period” – stereotypes such as “red-headed, hot-tempered Irishmen” (ibid 5). Cawelti regards symbols, myths and even stereotypes as the way “a culture expresses the complex of feelings, values and ideas it attaches to a thing or idea” (ibid 27). He sees texts, including films, as “imaginative orderings of experience” (ibid 27). Cawelti assumes that texts gain their power from organizing feelings and attitudes and thereby shaping the perceptions and motivations of those who share them. Texts order, condense, and reflect the relations between given stereotypes or representations and other representations. He suggests that when analyzing symbols, stereotypes or representations, we need to pay attentions to the entire story, to other elements of the story as well as given symbols, stereotypes or representations themselves. Taking stereotypes as evolving symbols, he further suggests that we can define the cultural elements of a particular era by comparing and contrasting these symbols with those of a different time period.

This research uses Cawelti’s pragmatic approach to film to analyze images of Japanese women not only in terms of the elements which construct each image, but also by looking at other elements in the story, their relationship to images of American men, the plot line, and whether a story has a happy ending or a tragic one. It is only by means of this larger analysis that we can get at historical and cultural messages that lie behind these images.

The Teahouse of the August Moon (1956)²

Plot Summary

One year after World War II, Captain Fisby is sent to the village of Tobiki in Okinawa to teach the local people about democracy. The first step in his

² Cast: Sakini (Marlon Brando), Capt. Fisby (Glenn Ford), Lotus Blossom (Machiko Kyo).
program is to build a school, but the villagers, including a local geisha named Lotus Blossom, know what they really want. They tell him about their culture and traditions and persuade him to build something they really want: a tea-house. Fisby has a hard time breaking this news to his superiors.

Representations of the Geisha and their Functions

Lotus Blossom is depicted as a traditional geisha. Her job is to care for and entertain the American officer, Captain Fisby. She cooks, helps dress him, and teaches him Japanese language and culture, as well as making flower arrangements, playing koto or shamisen, Japanese traditional stringed instruments and dancing for him. At first he is embarrassed, but he later comes to accept Lotus and enjoy the Japanese life. She comes to love Fisby, and when he must leave Okinawa, she asks him to marry her and take her to the United States. Fisby has “gone native” – he has become Japanese rather than Americanizing the Japanese. He drinks shochu, a Japanese alcohol, wears a bathrobe-like kimono and zori, Japanese sandals. The comedy in this film derives from the reversal of roles for the American officer who came to educate the Japanese but ends up becoming one of them. The function of the geisha in this plot is to serve and entertain the American and introduce him to Japanese culture. We will examine this function with the next interpretation of Sayonara.

Sayonara (1957)³

Figure 1. Lloyd, Kelly, and Katsumi

Figure 2. Hanaogi and Lloyd

³ Cast: Lloyd (Marlon Brando), Airman Kelly (Red Buttons), Hana-ogi (Miiko Taka), Katsumi (Miyoshi Umeki). The author takes Figures 1 and 2 from a DVD video of SAYONARA (Copyright 1957: Goetz Pictures, Inc.)
Plot Summary

Lloyd, a Korean War flying ace assigned to Japan, falls in love with Hanaogi, a Japanese entertainer who is a performer for a Takarazuka-like theater company. He meets her through his enlisted crew chief, Airman Kelly. Kelly has married a Japanese woman, Katsumi, in spite of the disapproval of the United States military, which will not allow the marriage. When Kelly and many others who are married to Japanese are ordered back to the United States, Kelly realizes he won’t be able to take his wife, who is now pregnant. Finding no other way to be together, Kelly and Katsumi commit double suicide. This strengthens Lloyd’s resolve to marry his Japanese lover.

Representations of Japanese Women: a Conventional Type and a New Type

This work contains two love stories: a conventional, tragic one like Madame Butterfly and one with a happy ending. It also has two types of Japanese women: a conventional type and a new one. More emphasis is placed on the happy-ending story and the new model for Japanese women, but let us begin with the conventional type, Katsumi.

Katsumi (figure 1) is a very devoted woman who serves Kelly, cooks many Japanese dishes, and even washes his back in a bath. Katsumi is very shy and reserved. She does not insist that her opinion be heard, and is very dependent upon him. When she wants to have plastic surgery for a double eyelid, she gives up after he comes out against it. She loves him so much that when he is ordered to go home without taking her, she chooses to commit double suicide.

The puzzle in this film is Kelly. He is depicted as a very nice and sincere man who understands and appreciates the Japanese and Japanese culture. He lives in a Japanese house and wears a kimono. He enjoys Japanese dishes and sake. Like Captain Fisby, he has become Japanese, at least to the point of choosing his Japanese lover over loyalty to his home country – and committing Japanese suicide to prove it.

On the other hand, Hanaogi (figure 2) brings a new set of characteristics, while retaining the traditional Japanese role of serving and protecting her American lover. Hanaogi starts the film prejudiced against Americans because she has lost her parents in American bombings during the war. She is not shy, but very active and kisses Lloyd when she confesses her love toward him. She is also very independent: she is a musical star and has her
own occupation. In the last scene, she clearly states her opinion in public. Hanaogi contains many elements of the typical American women.

There is also a marked contrast between Lloyd and Kelly. Unlike Kelly, Lloyd is depicted as a very conservative man who starts out prejudiced against the Japanese. He has an American fiancé who demands his love and more from him. But he discovers a deeper form of love with Hanaogi, who does not demand anything, but entertains him and offers her love without expecting anything in return. Lloyd comes to understand the Japanese and Japanese culture as he loves her more, but he never becomes Japanese in the way Kelly does. Lloyd always wears his uniform and looks like a genuine American pilot.

**The Japanese State as a Woman**

What is the significance of the stereotype of Japanese women as subordinates ready to accept, serve and even entertain American men? Nakao (1993) points out that the figure of Japanese women in Europe during colonization is an ideal representation of an unknown country, Japan: “the representations of Japan as women reflect the empire’s hopes, desires, and requests toward the Far East’s service to the West and the West’s absolute predominance over the East” (Nakao 1993: 218). Nakao argues that the assumption that there will be beautiful women in an unknown world waiting to fall in love with their conquerors is indispensable as the psychology of imperialism. Since the colonizers are men, it is natural to represent the encounter with a strange land and culture as a kind of conquest of an unknown woman. Europeans during that period had strong desires and longings for this foreign culture/woman, but they were also afraid. Depicting colonialism as a form of courtship made this process easier.

Nakao’s argument about British and European representations of Japanese women helps explain the conventional types of Japanese women depicted in 1950s films during the GHQ’s occupation of Japan. The figure of Japanese women as subservient beings who docilely accept, serve, and entertain American men seems to reflect Americans anxiety about whether the unknown country would accept the Occupation Army or not. The unfolding of the plot develops this underlying fear. Hanaogi’s initial dislike of Americans because her parents were killed in American bombing
reveals American anxiety about being accepted in a country that they had just violently defeated in war. Hanaogi’s attraction to Lloyd and her final acceptance of him as a lover is a way of overcoming these fears and anxieties. Hanaogi is not simply the love object in a single romance but a representation of the Japanese nation which the American occupiers were trying to seduce.

Two types of Love and Marriage and the Relationship between Japan and the U.S.

Why do Hanaogi and Lloyd end up living happily ever after while Katsumi and Kelly commit double suicide? Nakao’s analysis of the roles of men and women in the colonial relationship is useful in answering this question. Consider Kelly and Katsumi. Kelly’s assimilation into Japanese society and culture represents danger for Americans. His death suggests that an American has to be on guard against being too influenced by the culture of the country they are occupying. On the other side of the colonial relationship, Katsumi’s conventional role passively serving and obeying her American husband does not embody what Americans consider really ideal qualities in a woman. Her death implies that the Japanese must assimilate some aspects of American culture and change themselves to become suitable mates.

In contrast, Lloyd comes to understand Japanese culture but does not allow himself to become assimilated. Hanaogi retains elements of Japanese culture that might be appealing to Americans but also embodies characteristics that make her easier to understand for American audiences. She is a musical star and has an independence and individualism that makes her more acceptable to Westerners. In the end she gives up her concepts of *giri* (obligation to her theatrical company), changes herself, and moves closer to American identity. In other words, she chooses Americanization. The happy ending of their relationship confirms the ideal roles of the two nations in their colonial relationship.

The film is thus about more than simply overcoming prejudice or learning about the psychology of people from another culture. The love affair between Lloyd and Hanaogi maps out the ideal relationship between the two countries; the United States as a man who leads and protects and Japan as his wife who devotedly serves and assimilates into the American way of doing
things. America’s enemy during the war becomes Americanized and a suitable partner for the new war against communism. The fears, desires, and wishes of Americans toward Japan seem to be projected onto images of Japanese women. At the same time, these images would relieve American fears and provide a symbolic fulfillment of their desires and wishes.

**Shogun (1980)**

![Figure 3. Blackthorne and Mariko](image1)  ![Figure 4. Mariko in a bathtub](image2)

**Plot Summary**

John Blackthorne (figure 3), an English ship pilot, is washed ashore after a shipwreck in the early 17th century. He meets Mariko (figure 3), a beautiful Japanese woman who helps him live in an unfamiliar land. Blackthorne and Mariko are thrown into the midst of a war between Toranaga and Ishido, who struggle for the powerful title of Shogun. Mariko is killed in the battle and leaves a note telling the true story to Blackthorne.

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4 What is important here is that this kind of representation of a nation as a woman is not constructed only by the Americans. As John Dower argues in “Embracing the Defeat”, the Japanese government and people offer Japanese women to serve and entertain Americans.

5 This relationship of the U. S. as a man and Japan as a woman can be confirmed in another episode in the story; Irene, an American woman, Lloyd's fiancé seems to be attracted to a Japanese Kabuki actor, Nakamura. The result of this incipient attraction remains a mystery and ends up consolidating the role of the Japanese as a woman, not a man.

6 Cast: Blackthorne (Richard Chamberlain), Lord Toranaga (Toshirô Mifune), Mariko (Yôko Shimada). The author takes Figures 3 and 4 from a video tape of SHOGUN (Copyright 1980: Paramount Pictures Co.).
Representations of Mariko

Mariko’s image is very similar to the conventional type. One important difference is the bath scene. In You Only Live Twice (1967) Bond is depicted taking a bath with a Japanese and Japanese women, but in this scene Mariko (figure 4) takes the initiative and slides into Blackthorne’s bath.

Mariko accepts a Western man, helps and serves him, but gets involved in a war among Samurai warriors and loses her life. The film depicts Japanese society as barbaric and feudalistic, comprised of aggressive Samurai warriors who attempt to invade other territories and dominate others. Mariko dies an unhappy death, killed in a Samurai battle. Blackthorne, who had led a miserable life in Japan before his talent was acknowledged by the Shogun, was forced to stay in Japan. The film attributes Mariko’s tragedy and Blackthorne’s misfortune to the nature of Japanese society. The depiction of Mariko and the experiences of Blackthorne are used to implicitly criticize Japanese society as a whole.

Memoirs of a Geisha (2005)7

Figure 5. Sayuri

7 Cast: Sayuri (Ziyi Zhang), Hatsumomo(Gong Li), Mameha (Michelle Yeoh), Pumpkin (Youki Kudoh ), Chairman (Ken Watanabe). The author takes Figures 5, 6, and from a DVD video of SAYURI (Copyright 2005 :Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. and Dream Works L.L.G. and Spyglass Entertainment Group, LLC.)
**Plot summary**

This is a coming of age story of a Japanese girl. In 1929 an impoverished nine-year-old named Chiyo from a fishing village is sold to a geisha house called *Nitta Okiya*. In the Okiya, she meets Okaasan, the master of the house, Pumpkin, a girl about the same age and the similar background, and Hatsumomo, a popular Geisha. Chiyo’s life is made miserable by Hatsumomo, but her meeting with the chairman, a kind, generous gentleman, gives her the hope to live even in her difficult situation. She takes on the goal of becoming a geisha and seeing the chairman again. Under the mentorship of Mameha, another popular geisha from another Okiya, Chiyo becomes a top geisha, renamed Sayuri, trained in the refined artistic and social skills of the best geishas. She meets the chairman again, but still has to go through many hardships, including World War II. In the end Sayuri is happily reunited with the chairman.

**Representations of Geishas**

This film does not simply depict geishas as women serving and entertaining men. It demonstrates there are many kinds of geishas and that geishas are individuals with their own personalities. The kimono that each geisha wears, with its distinctive colors and patterns, represents the character and sentiments of that particular person.

For instance, Hatsumomo (figure 6), a senior geisha who sets a series of
traps for Sayuri, wears a gorgeous kimono embroidered with gold or silver whose basic color is black or red. Her open neckline marks her as sexy and glamorous, someone who stands out in a crowd. In contrast, Sayuri’s senior sister geisha, Mameha (figure 7), always wears kimonos in conservative colors. She is depicted as calm, sensible and thoughtful, with an understated intelligence and style. Pumpkin (figure 8), Sayuri’s friend from her apprentice days, is depicted as cute and charming at first. Her kimono is pink. But when she starts to compete against Sayuri, Pumpkin begins to wear kimonos in black or dark blue. When she finds herself at the mercy of destiny and a prostitute, she wears a gaudy dress with her breast almost open. And she again wears a kimono similar to Hatsumomo when she finally deceives Sayuri. When she is an apprentice, Sayuri (figure 5) wears kimonos in light blue or grey or pastel colors, which have an image like “water.” But when she attracts men with a sidelong glance, she wears kimonos in dark, gorgeous colors. In scenes where she shows her injured leg to the doctor, or the one where she is undressed by Baron, or in the “Mizuage” ceremony, the red color in the undergarments of her kimono stands out and makes her highly sexy.

Figure 8. Sayuri and Pumpkin

Here Sayuri is not simply depicted as serving and entertaining men, nor as an object of desire or political intrigue. Instead the film constructs her as a first-class artist distinguished in singing, dancing and social skills – the result of training, discipline and intelligence. The film further
explores the hidden world behind the geisha’s beauty and artistic skills. Her personality is expressed with tropes associated with “water,” such as her blue gray eyes or her kimono colors and patterns. The opening scene of the story shows a high wave raging across the Sea of Japan near her hometown connoting both the violence of her destiny and her inner strength. The cold rain pouring on her when she is trapped by Hatsumomo represents her cold destiny and her sadness. She sees the chairman again on a rainy day, and the chairman’s corporation builds and manages water power plants. When she finally gives up the chairman, she is standing on a cliff over the ocean, the bleak seascape reflecting the bleak feelings inside her. The last scene depicts a calm stream of the water, and the chairman finally confesses his love for Sayuri. The camera moves from a close-up of a fallen leaf in her kimono (figure 9), then moves to autumn leaves floating peacefully in the stream. Like the water in the river, Sayuri flows down without choosing where to go. She accepts her destiny and continues to flow, sometimes clashing against the rocks, but never interrupting her passage onward. She makes a sincere effort to lead a life, and finally gets to the peaceful stream. The lush outer world depicted in beautiful water scenes moving through Japan’s four seasons manifests the complexity and beauty of her inner, spiritual world.

Figure 9. A Fallen Leaf in Sayuri’s Kimono
The Ambivalent Functions of a Geisha: Both a Critique of Americans and A Glorification of Rugged American Individualism

The most striking difference of Memoirs of a Geisha from the previous films is that Sayuri has fallen in love with a Japanese man, not an American. American men in this film are not depicted as nice guys. They are negatively represented as occupiers who cannot distinguish between the delicate beauty of the geisha and a common prostitute. By treating the geishas as prostitutes, they destroy the traditional beauty of the geisha town Hana Machi (flower town) with the dust of jeeps, noisy jazz music and gaudy signboards written in English. These geishas are not the representations of the Japanese state who willingly accept Americans. On the contrary, the images of refinement conveyed by these geishas are used to criticize Americans for destroying traditional Japanese culture during the occupation. Cornel, for instance, mistakes Sayuri for a prostitute and asks her to meet secretly.

Another important point here is that the chairman, a Japanese man who brings happiness to Sayuri, has an essentially American character. He is an engineer, always wears Western clothes, and teaches his friend, Nobu the American way of life – selfishly enjoying one's own life rather than serving others or sacrificing oneself for the community or the corporation. Sayuri herself has an American element in her character. The scene of her running to the shrine gate reflects the American ideal of rugged individualism, a glorification of the individual who realizes her own desires by force of her own will, without support from the culture or community in which she is embedded. Thus, the representations of geishas are used to implicitly criticize some effects of the American occupation of Japan while at the same time reinforcing and glorifying a traditional aspect of American identity.

Conclusion

In Memoirs of a Geisha, the stereotype of a geisha, who once simply served and entertained Americans, has evolved into a much more complex depiction of a beautiful artist who is well-trained in musical instruments, dancing and elegant manners. The film also shows an individual woman with inner strength who makes a sincere effort to lead a life on her own
terms—though in the end those terms revert back to a traditional Japanese theme of harmony with one’s destiny (the water theme). The film dramatically reconstructs traditional images of Japanese women formed through the post-war period. The cultural and political function of images of Japanese women also seems to have changed. Instead of relieving American anxiety about being accepted by an occupied nation, the film criticizes the underlying imperialism at work in the American occupation, while at the same time transferring American ideals of individualism onto the Japanese – perhaps a more subtle form of imperialism⁸.

What do these changes reveal about American society and culture? And what cultural changes lie behind the changing depictions of Japanese women? The reduced emphasis on Japanese women serving and entertaining American men would reflect the reduction in pressure that women now feel to fulfill these roles. After WWII Japan became an allied nation in the fight against communism, modeling its political and economic system after the Americans. In 1989 the Russian threat fell with the Berlin Wall and China was well on its way to a market economy. The hegemony of the American system seemed to lose traction and relevance. In this changed political and cultural environment, there was no need for Japanese women to relieve Americans’ imperialist fears and anxieties. Second, the psychological distance between the United States and Japan has greatly diminished. After years of close economic, political and cultural ties, Japan is no longer an unknown country to the United States. Simple stereotypes without some kind of insight into the nuances of Japanese history and culture were no longer sufficient.

Has the role of Japan as a servant to the United States disappeared? No, but the emphasis has changed. In Memoirs of a Geisha, the focus is on Japanese men, not American men, but it is an American colonel who brings Sayuri back to be a geisha. She must serve the colonel in order to benefit the chairman’s corporation. Japan’s role of serving the United States remains, though the focus is more on economic service rather than political or military submission.

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And what has happened to the notion that Japanese women are exotic, mysterious and finally dangerous targets of desire that need to be controlled? The intimidation Americans feel when confronted with the exotic world of Oriental sexuality is evident in the American colonel’s embarrassment when he finds out he is simply a tool used by Sayuri for her own intrigue. This perplexity is continued in the last scene when Sayuri is reunited with the chairman. Instead of simply celebrating their reunion as a happy ending, the film questions whether Sayuri will really be happy. This ambiguity reminds American viewers that in the end Japanese culture, and especially Japanese women, are mysterious and inscrutable objects that can never be fully understood by Americans.

References

Abstract
This paper examines images of Japanese women in American films from the 1950s to the present: *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956), *Sayonara* (1957), *Shogun* (1980) and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005). The analysis indicates that images of Japanese women, especially stereotypes of the geisha, who once simply served and entertained Americans, have evolved to portray a much more complex image: a beautiful artist who is well-trained in musical
instruments, dances, and elegant manners. It also shows that one of the geisha’s central symbolic functions in the 1950s – serving as a surrogate for the Japanese state in providing service to Americans – has largely disappeared. Their image as mysterious targets of desire for Americans, however, has remained largely unchanged.

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