

Geisha:
Living in the American Imagination
at the Turn of the 21st Century

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For my parents,
Ikenaga Mieko and Ikenaga Tadayasu

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Introduction

From June 25 through September 26, 2004, San Francisco's Asian Art Museum is featuring a special summer exhibit, entitled "Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile." An article "Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile," which is posted on the museum's website, explains that the exhibit displays images and information about geisha, saying that they are "one of the most compelling but misunderstood icons of Japan" in America.¹ The program was organized by Andrew Maske, the Peabody Essex Museum's Curator of Japanese Art, who also supervised the same exhibition at a museum in Salem, MA, from February 14 through May 9, 2004. Presenting museum visitors with an opportunity to see geisha "not only as cultural icons of beauty and allure, but also as real women of tremendous strength, talents, and dedication," the exhibit at the Asian Art Museum seems to challenge the Western misconception of geisha as prostitutes or concubines wrapped in exotic kimono.² According to the article, the exhibit emphasizes the cultural and historical role geisha play as "persons of art" by showcasing geisha musical instruments and photographs of them dedicating themselves to arts.³ The exhibit also features an educational portion to the site where prostitutes are distinguished from geisha, and the

¹ "Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile," Asian Art Museum of San Francisco 7 July 2004, <<http://www.asianart.org>>pars. 6. Since I was not able to visit the museum during the exhibit, I depend thoroughly on the information provided by this website for my understanding of the event. The book with the same title, Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile will be published by Peabody Essex Museum in September 2004.

² "Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile," pars. 2.

Western Orientalist image of geisha is shown to be false. Thus, the site suggests "accuracy" in its portrayal of geisha.

The exhibit addresses the increasing popularity of geisha since the publication of Arthur Golden's Memoirs of a Geisha (1997) in the United States. For many Americans, who are curious to know "authentic" and previously untold information about geisha, the article notes how the exhibit focuses on the authenticity of displays and depictions of geisha by presenting people and artifacts relating to actual geisha culture as well as woodblock prints and ceramics. In fact, two geishas, Umeha (a 25-year-old geisha) and Umechika (a 20-year-old apprentice geisha), along with their housemother, Umeno, paid a three-day visit to the San Francisco exhibit.⁴ After being introduced by Canadian photographer and geisha specialist Peter MacIntosh, they gave "a lecture, dance performance, and [provided] conversation" during part of the opening ceremony.⁵ Through such interactions, the exhibit allows museum visitors to have a glimpse inside the traditionally closed geisha communities. Displays including geisha's musical instruments, such as a three-string *shamisen*, seem to stress that geisha are "persons of art."⁶ Moreover, a video, made by Peabody Essex Museum, providing "a contemporary

³ Kenneth Baker, "Display Doesn't Demystify Geisha," San Francisco Chronicle 25 June 2004, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 15 July 2004 <<http://micro189.lib3.hawaii.edu:2056/universe/printdoc>> pars. 9.

⁴ Michael Taylor, "San Francisco; Visiting Geisha Paint the Town," San Francisco Chronicle 24 June 2004, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 15 July 2004 <<http://micro189.lib3.hawaii.edu:2056/universe/printdoc>> pars. 2.

⁵ According to an article in San Francisco Chronicle on June 24, 2004, Peter MacIntosh lives in Kyoto and introduces geisha to clients. He speaks Japanese fluently and acted as "a liaison between the geisha and... the Asian Art Museum." (Taylor, pars. 8-10.)

⁶ Baker, pars. 9.

glimpse at” geisha entertainment work in tearooms, was shown at the museum.⁷ The exhibit also focuses on portraying geisha as individuals—the photographs of geisha, Iki (Chic) Marichiyo from Shinbashi, a popular geisha district in Tokyo, for example, call attention to how a single geisha conducts her life in the modern setting.

Through the article, it is clear that the exhibit explicitly acknowledges the stereotypical image of geisha previously propagated in the Western world in order to contrast this contemporary, “authentic” picture of geisha. In fact, the major goal of the exhibit is to present “the story of the emergence and status of these highly trained women—both past and present—while separating fact from fiction.”⁸ The exhibit thus juxtaposes “‘exotically’ dressed and coifed Japanese women” in old photographs, paintings, and American films against contemporary photographs and artifacts that supposedly represent a more realistic picture of geisha.

Despite the museum’s intention to provide an authentic and realistic image of geisha, the article exposes how the exhibit manifests American fantasies about things Japanese more than it provides an actual representation of geisha. The exhibit controls the image of geisha by redefining and stressing their unchanging, traditional culture, society, and life; it reinforces a feminized and exoticized, if not prostitute-like, geisha who lives in an ancient society as a sculpted artifact. Moreover, by embodying American perspectives of Japanese culture, the exhibit perpetuates the feelings that American culture is superior to Japanese culture. As an emblem of traditional Japan, geisha are

⁷ “Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile,” pars. 12.

depicted as ones who are “tied to the way [the custom was carried out] 300 years ago,” and are irrevocably linked to the past.⁹ In a world which prizes modernization, using geisha to represent Japan ultimately positions America as superior to Japan culturally and socially. When placed against American ideologies of freedom, equality, and independence, as well as modernity, the American image of geisha continues to attest to the perceived inferiority, backwardness, and weakness of Japanese culture.

Simultaneously, the article stresses the new image of geisha the exhibit provides as strong, determined women: they are professional and financially independent art performers, unlike many Japanese women who are restricted to their roles as housewives. This positive image of geisha reflects American ideologies of freedom and independence in order to convey a particular picture of geisha to the American audience. In other words, the exhibit deconstructs the stereotypical image of geisha by highlighting the ways geisha are “American.”

The image of geisha has been popular in the West as an icon of not only Japanese women but of Japanese society and culture since the 19th century. The history of American images of geisha can be divided into three phrases chronologically: one constructed between the 19th-century and the early 20th century, one in Post-WWII, and one at the turn-of-the-21st-century. This last period is the subject of my study. During the 19th century, the image of geisha as courtesans was perpetuated among upper-class

⁸ “Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile,” pars. 2.

⁹ Taylor, pars. 12.

Western males through *ukiyo-e* and porcelains.¹⁰ By the beginning of the 20th century, however, Asian products became “popular commodit[ies] in the American market.”¹¹ For example, the opera Madame Butterfly, which reinforced the perspective of the superior, masculine “West” and the inferior, feminine “East” as well as the idea of an innocent, submissive, powerless Japanese woman, hit the American stages and became inextricably linked with Japan.

In the post-WWII era, this earlier picture of geisha in America became increasingly stereotyped and exoticized. It was in films, photographs, and probably personal stories told by American GIs after the American occupation of Japan that popularized the particular image of geisha as prostitutes and courtesans. In fact, the documentary, The Secret Life of Geisha, aired in 1999 on Dateline NBC, explains that GIs during the American occupation of Japan largely helped perpetuate the image of geisha as prostitutes. Confused with real prostitutes because both the geisha and the prostitute wore kimono, the GIs spread the idea that any kimono-wearing women were quiet, submissive, powerless, and sexually available. Films, such as Around the World in 80 Days (1956) and The Barbarian and the Geisha (1958), as well as the remake of the opera Madame Butterfly in the 1980s, also unquestionably helped to construct the doll-like, submissive and erotic beauty of the geisha. Without actual geisha’s voices and

¹⁰ Ukiyo-e is a style in Japanese painting which was popular in the 17th and 18th century. “The Ukiyo-e, or “floating-world,” style was so called because it portrayed the shifting fashions and unstable lives of common people and of actors, courtesans, and other inhabitants of the amusement district of Edo (Tokyo)” (Encarta Encyclopedia Standard 2003, CD-ROM. Redmond, WA, Microsoft, 2002.)

stories, the appearance of the geisha—figures in kimono with white makeup and flamboyant hairstyles—spoke to their femininity, powerlessness, and exoticness. Americans, trying to counter the threatening, barbaric image of Japan created during WWII, paid particular attention to geisha images, and the supposed passivity of the geisha softened the image of the powerful Japanese most Americans held in their minds. In fact, in her comprehensive study of the orientalizing of Asian female figures in films, Gina Marchetti asserts that as “the geisha was losing popularity in Japan, she began to gain interest in Hollywood.”¹² For this feminine image of geisha to be used to reconcile the image of Japan perpetuated during World War II, Marchetti argues that American portrayals of geisha necessarily “continue to be passive, subservient, [and] erotic.”¹³ In addition, in the earlier stories of geisha, such as those told in Madame Butterfly, the Barbarian and the Geisha, and My Geisha, white men (and/or white women) played important roles with their characters emphasizing superiority over geisha and things Japanese.

Although Arthur Golden’s Memoirs of a Geisha (1997) played a significant role in the spread at the turn-of-the-21st century of a more humanized and complicated picture of geisha, it was not the first book to attempt to do so. The publication of Liza Dalby’s Geisha in 1983 challenged the previously limited study and image of the geisha. Her

¹¹ Mari Yoshihara, Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 10.

¹² Gina Marchetti, Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 178.

¹³ Marchetti, 178.

groundbreaking anthropological research on the diversity of geisha and the complexity of their culture and rituals raised the standard of research on geisha in many ways. Dalby, unlike previous writers who professed to understand their subjects without ever even going to Japan, went inside the geisha communities to study them. She also includes her own first-hand experience of being a geisha for fourteen months; she became the first and only American geisha, even acquiring a geisha name, Ichigiku. She lived in a geisha house and conducted interviews with geisha, at the same time experiencing the geisha's profession through rituals and working as a geisha in *ozashiki*.¹⁴ Using her advantage of being both insider and outsider, Dalby sometimes objectively and sometimes subjectively exposes geisha's perceptions about themselves, their lives, and Japanese people and society. Her text, which is heavily anthropological, did not receive as much attention as Golden's Memoirs from the general American public.¹⁵ Dalby's Geisha nonetheless became a bible for study on geisha, strongly affecting and shaping the contemporary American image of the geisha.¹⁶ Dalby's work also made the inclusion of the geisha voice necessary to establish authenticity in portrayals of geisha.

The turn-of-the-21st-century picture of geisha not only humanized and diversified the image of geisha, but most importantly, it made the geisha's personal stories, their culture and history, more accessible to the larger American audience. The popularity of

¹⁴ Ozashiki is a room in a teahouse where geisha entertain male clients nightly.

¹⁵ A Made-for-TV program, "An American Geisha" (directed by Lee Philips and first aired in 1986) is loosely based on Liza Dalby's Geisha and her experience as an American geisha. Though I'm not able to find a videotape of it, it is repeatedly shown on cable TV, most recently sometime at the end of March 2004.

¹⁶ Every work on geisha by Americans refers to her work Geisha.

Golden's Memoirs also prompted the publication of a number of other books by Americans, such as Lesley Downer's Women of the Pleasure Quarters: the Secret History of the Geisha (2001). Moreover, documentary films on geisha have been televised, including the Secret Life of Geisha (1999), in which both Liza Dalby and Arthur Golden appear. In addition to the Western media's attention to geisha, several old Japanese publications on geisha have recently been translated, such as Sayo Masuda's Autobiography of a Geisha (2003), and a few old Japanese films about geishas have recently been re-released, including The World of Geisha (2003, originally released in Japan in 1973).¹⁷ Numerous individual websites about geisha that invite visitors' responses demonstrate the American public's fascinations with both historical and contemporary personal stories of geisha.¹⁸

Of course, the American imagination of geisha has never been limited to film or TV screens; it has influenced the way a majority of Western, popular-culture consumers see and understand things Japanese. Ultimately, it might even contribute to sexual violence towards Japanese women. That is, the American imagination of geisha feminizes and disempowers not only the image of geisha in the American mind, but also

¹⁷ As Gina Marchetti says, Japanese films about geishas focus on lives and emotions of geisha, though they are clearly depicted as prostitutes. I do not know if Japanese films generally depict geishas as prostitutes or not.

¹⁸ Academic studies on the image of the geisha at the turn of the 20th century are not out yet, except Anne Allison's "Memoirs of the Orient," which examines the phenomenon of American readers' responses to Memoirs of a Geisha. There are a couple of PhD. Dissertations and a MA thesis that touch on contemporary American publications on geishas, including Kimberly S. Middleton's dissertation You Gotta Chink it Up!: Asian American Performativity in the New Orientalism and Jodi Hua's MA thesis "Gucci Geishas" and the Postfeminist Mission: Situating Postfeminism and the Emergence of a Postfeminist Subject.

Japanese women in general and, by extension, Japanese culture. Being stamped as powerless, obedient, and sexually available, Japanese women in particular, whether they are athletes, college professors, or housewives, are frequently understood by Americans through the image of geisha. For example, Sheryl Wudunn points out that an American reporter described Mikako Kotani who was dressed in a kimono as a “geisha girl serving tea” though she was a synchronized swimmer with an Olympic medal.¹⁹ Trapped within this constructed image that exists in American popular culture, women thus become the target of physical/psychological exploitation and manipulation.²⁰

The knowledge of things Japanese in the United States has also been sorely limited, and this lack of diversity of information on Japan has further helped to fix the American image of geisha. The books, like the image of geisha, frequently emphasize differences and "exoticness" by stereotyping Japanese culture and positioning it in opposition to American values. In “From Ruth Benedict to Herman Kahn: The Postwar Japanese Image in the American Mind” published in 1975, Nathan Glazer points out that major American newspapers and Newsweek strongly depended on three books when describing Japanese culture: Ruth Benedict’s The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,

¹⁹ Sheryl WuDunn, “Paper Fan, Iron Fist,” New York Times 5 May 1996, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 30 May 2003 <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m...> pars. 1.

²⁰ I am not arguing here that all Japanese women are powerless in front of the Westerner. Some, including me, may be conscious about the stereotype, and ignore or differentiate from and fight against it. Others might manipulate the popularity of Japanese women in the West to empower themselves. Still, I believe that many Japanese women, young and old, can be vulnerable to the image of geisha/Japanese women.

Herman Kahn's The Emerging Japanese Superstate, and Chie Nakane's Japanese Society.²¹ In other words, most propaganda largely described Japan "from a distance."²²

Hollywood also helped to promulgate the American imagination of Japan since the early 20th century. Marchetti points out how Hollywood depicted Asia, including Japan, as the threat of "yellow peril" at the early part of the 20th century. Combining "racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East," the term "yellow peril" largely influenced the position of Asians and Japanese among Americans.²³ In addition, John W. Dower points out that the positive image of Japanese in the postwar era "really differed little from wartime stereotypes."²⁴ Even though postwar films depicted a more friendly relationship between Americans and Japanese, the films still depicted things Japanese as exotic and inferior. Moreover, since the 1980s, Americans have been both fascinated with and threatened by the Japanese economical "miracle," Japan's rising economical power.²⁵ Thus, a number of books on Japan examined Japan's economic success, sometimes with admiration, and at other times with animosity and frustration. The film Rising Sun (1993), for example, bluntly describes

²¹ Nathan Glazer, "From Ruth Benedict to Herman Kahn: The Postwar Japanese Image in the American Mind," Mutual Images : Essays in American-Japanese Relations, Priscilla Clapp and Akira Iriye, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975) 146.

²² Glazer, 147.

²³ Marchetti, 2.

²⁴ Marchetti, 134.

²⁵ Mari Suvanto, "Images of Japan and the Japanese: The Representations of the Japanese Culture in the Popular Culture in the Popular Literature Targeted at the Western World in the 1980s-1990s," diss. Jyväskylä Yliopisto, Finland, 2002, DAI-C 64 (2003), 1.

Japanese characters as villains “whose yellow skins and strange manners announce their evil purposes as much as their unfair trade practices.”²⁶ Thus, the image of things Japanese, like geisha, has remained negatively stereotyped despite the change in the U.S.-Japan relationship.

This thesis will examine American images of geisha at the turn-of-the-21st century by analyzing how two American authors and a Japanese former geisha portray the lives and minds of geisha and their wealthy male clients. I explore how supposed “authentic” images of geisha reflect American ideologies, thus calling the American concept of geisha at the turn of the 21st century into question. I particularly study two books on geisha by American authors, Jodi Cobb’s photojournalistic work Geisha (1995), Arthur Golden’s novel Memoirs of a Geisha (1997), and an autobiography of a former geisha, Mineko Iwasaki’s Geisha, A Life (2002). In Geisha, Cobb, a staff photographer for National Geographic, provides numerous photographs she took after obtaining privilege to enter and record the public and private lives of geisha in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Using photographs as evidence and an introductory essay that covers historical and cultural information of geisha and Japanese culture, Geisha seems to provide an authentic and humanized picture.

On the other hand, Golden’s Memoirs is a fictitious story of a geisha that has powerfully rewritten yet, at the same time, perpetuated the turn-of-the-century American

²⁶ Vincent Candy, “Review/Film: Rising Sun: A Tale of Zen and Xenophobia in Los Angeles,” New York Times 30 July 1993, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 9 Aug. 2004 <<http://micro189.lib3.hawaii.edu:2056/universe/printdoc>> pars. 7.

image of geisha. Using first-person narrative and referring to a real former geisha in the acknowledgement, Memoirs, like Cobb's Geisha, claims authenticity in its representation of geisha. The focus on a geisha life story as well as the extensive information on geisha culture and Japanese history implies that Golden's story provides a comprehensive picture of geisha and Japan.

Lastly, I will discuss Iwasaki's Geisha, A Life, which apparently gives a rare story and perspective told by a former geisha. It speaks to the American audience directly in order to counter the American image of the prostitute-like geisha that she believes Golden's Memoirs permeates.

In analyzing these novels, I will employ several theories. First, Orientalism, a theory which brings to light how the West continues to essentialize and subordinate the East, a practice that has been deeply embedded in the construction of Eastern culture since the late 18th century. Scholar Edward Said first developed the theory of Orientalism in his groundbreaking work Orientalism in 1979. Focusing on the European colonial relationship with the Middle East and India, he criticized the unequal cultural, social, and political power relationship between the "East" and the "West." Said discusses a Western construction of a racialized binary image, arguing that an "us" versus the "other" ideology has taken power and control away from the "East." He points out how the West has defined their differences and superiority over the East by constructing a discourse that depicts the East as pre-modern, backward, uncivilized, feminine, and exotic; Said asserts that Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having

authority over the Orient.”²⁷ Because the discourse believes in the inferiority of the East biologically and culturally, as well as historically, it has repeatedly and continuously undermined, disempowered, and oppressed the East in literal, cultural, social, and political fields in the twentieth century.

Though Said’s Orientalism has become a foundation for understanding the unequal binary between the East and West, recent scholars have challenged the limitations of it. In Orientalism, Said argues that Orientalism did not exist in America until the end of WWII because of the absence of American colonization of foreign countries. John Kuo Wei Tchen challenges Said’s view toward Orientalism in America in his book, New York Before Chinatown : Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882 (1999). Paying close attention to a form of “American Orientalism” developed vis-à-vis China, Tchen argues that a distinctly “American” relationship with China began when America was founded in 1776. Unlike Said’s Orientalism that describes the European’s distant colonial relationship with the East, Tchen calls attention to white America’s direct contact with cultural Others in America. He shows how dominant, white Americans have constructed “a sense of [Americans’] own selves in relation to various cultural others.”²⁸

In addition, Lisa Lowe expanded Said’s concept of Orientalism by recognizing the heterogeneity of Orientalists whose situations were “neither uniform nor without

²⁷ Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 3.

²⁸ John Kuo Wei Tchen, New York before Chinatown : Orientalism and the shaping of American culture, 1776-1882 (Baltimore, Md. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) xix.

contradictions.”²⁹ Scholars, such as Reina Lewis and Mari Yoshihara, demonstrate the role white American women play in the construction of (American) Orientalism from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. As missionaries, writers, artists, actresses, and general consumers, the women, both consciously and subconsciously, viewed things Eastern from white European/American Orientalist perspectives. Manipulating their whiteness and its accompanying power, they separated themselves from the “Orient” and empowered themselves by being part of a superior White culture. Lewis also looks at Turkish women who migrated to Europe and wrote autobiographies for European audiences. Being both insiders and outsiders of their home and new cultures, the Turkish women describe their old cultures and lives. Because their depictions are based on their personal memories and perspectives, they are diverse. They thus complicate the role native women play in constructing the image of their own people and culture.

Moreover, American texts continue to focus on geisha in the “traditional” setting; Orientalism stresses timelessness—an unchanging Eastern culture— which negates the fluidity of the culture. The texts tend to portray geisha in the pre-WWII era, which provides a clear contrast between geisha and white Americans readers of the present time. The recent works on geisha by Americans also describe geisha and their culture as “disappearing.” In a recent lecture, Liza Dalby claimed that “they [geisha] are almost

²⁹ Lisa Lowe, Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) 34.

museum pieces.”³⁰ Many book reviewers also express an interest in geisha simply because they are a vanishing artifact; some feel that they are taking part in “preserving [and] witnessing the almost extinct culture.”³¹ In emphasizing the timelessness of the geisha culture, the American texts confine the geisha in a fictitious traditional world, which is polar to the image of a continuously modernizing America. This positioning of the geisha in an unchanging reality works to situate her in a glass case not unlike the early representations of geisha.

Contemporary geisha stories show that American culture continues to see Japanese history, society, culture, and tradition in conjunction with geisha; the portrayal of geisha becomes a window through which to perceive things Japanese comprehensively. By creating a microcosm of Japanese society through geisha, the stories continue to spread a feminine and exotic image of Japan. Even though westernized, industrialized cities in Japan, such as Tokyo, are frequently publicized in mainstream media as hubs for international business, the American obsession with geisha continues to reflect dominant, white American’s search for exoticness and nostalgia in Japan. Thus, in geisha stories in America, including the museum exhibit at San Francisco Asian Art Museum, “ordinary” Japanese are non-existent, except ones who interact with the geisha community, such as clients. American stories on geisha neither explicitly address the geisha’s position in larger Japanese society, nor ordinary Japanese citizen’s relationship with and

³⁰ Eric Goldscheider, “Studying Geisha Life from the Inside Out Anthropologist Joined Subculture of Japanese Women,” Boston Globe. 7 Nov. 1999, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 26 June 2004 <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/printdoc>> N5.

understanding of geisha. Rather, they focus on geisha's perspective toward themselves, Japanese women, and things Japanese, which positions geisha at the center, and thus the focal point, of Japanese culture.

Furthermore, texts on the geisha have been a site to reconstruct an image of Japanese men; as the competitor or ally of American businessmen, American texts specifically reflect the media's image of Japanese businessmen. Since the middle of the 1970s, the Japanese economy challenged and threatened not only the American economy, but also American's stake in their superiority and the image of the inferior "East." As Vincent Chin's murder in 1982 in Detroit or the murder of a Japanese businessman in 1993 in California represents, Japanese men became a menace and target of frustration because of the stronger Japanese economy and the way the mainstream media portrayed Japanese men.³² The media blamed the struggling American economy on the workers of Japanese corporations, especially auto companies, whose products were increasingly visible on American streets. It also described Japanese businessmen as cold, aggressive, and shrewd, as if they were savages in the corporate world. The implication behind this portrayal is that Japanese men do not seem to understand the rules and manners of the "civilized" American corporate world.

In the late 1990s, however, mainstream media begins to describe Japanese businessmen as an American ally. After the long decline of the Japanese economy, the

³¹ a review of *Memoirs* posted on Amazon.com

³² Vincent Chin was murdered by two white men, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, because they thought Chin was a Japanese.

American media depicted Japan as a friendly partner to America, who supports, not challenges, America in political and economical spheres. This image, though pro-Japanese similar to the one propagated after WWII, does not recognize Japanese men as an equal business and political partner of America. Rather, it implies their position as America's supporter or admirer. Therefore, geisha stories construct Japanese female and male images in order to ease American anxiety over things Japanese during a time when Japan continuously challenges the boundaries of the "East" versus "West" binary.

The Orientalist aspects of geisha are, however, juxtaposed with a strong, determined picture of geisha, which is apparently not very different from one of white American (women) at the turn of the 21st century. American's fascination with and appreciation of such a liberated, powerful picture of non-Western women seems to defy the Orientalist position that the West always employs to differentiate and subordinate the East. However, this image mirrors the dominant, white American audience's particular ideologies: third wave feminism and conservatism. It explicates mainstream American women's image of themselves, their relationship with non-Western women, and their anxieties about their own society. Third wave feminism emerged in the late 1980s in response to second wave feminists' criticism of the younger generation (born between 1964 and 1973), calling them "unfeminists" according to standards of second-wave feminism.³³ Second wave feminism, coined "power feminism," denied any images of

³³ Rebecca Walker, To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism (New York: Anchor Books, 1995) 281.

feminine, submissive women that men had historically constructed, and focused on the unity of white women to empower themselves as a group.³⁴ Third wave feminism, on the other hand, challenges the homogeneity of first wave ("victim") feminism and the "anti-feminine" stance of second wave feminism in many ways. For example, it attempts to embrace the complexity and diversity of femaleness in terms of race, ethnicity, and sex. Including different races and sexes in the feminist movement, third wave feminism embraces the variety of experiences women of different races and cultures have. It also allows for a heterogeneity and individuality of female identity. By paying attention to each individual, third wave feminism includes the contradictions, ambiguities, and disunity of female identities, rather than forcing women to fit into a certain image of women. Thus, third wave feminism offers an avenue for American readers to identify with the geisha who show their strength by taking control of their lives as much as possible while still stressing the importance of beauty. Third wave feminism, in its embrace of differences of race and power among women, creates a space where American readers might actually consider the geisha their allies and not an exotic sexual predator she is unable to compete with.

The experiences of several American feminists in China in 1995 also reflect how American women at the turn of the 21st century began to include women issues outside America in the feminist agenda. Reporting on the Forth World Conference on Women

³⁴ Jennifer Drake, "Review Essay: Third Wave Feminisms," rev. of Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation, by Barbara Findlen, and To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism, by Rebecca Walker, ed. Feminist Studies 23 (Spring 1997): 97.

and the NGO forum in Beijing, China in 1995, Mallika Dutt points out that American activists clearly recognize women in non-Western, oppressed societies as feminists for the first time; she quotes Cathy Powell, an attorney with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund as saying, “[a]lthough I was depressed about the U.S. women’s movement, I felt very proud to be part of a global movement which has been a source of great inspiration in my work.”³⁵ Powell’s comment reflects Western women’s acknowledgment of non-Western women as partners in the women’s movement.

The fascination with geisha life might also manifest the notion of conservatism, which also gained popularity among dominant white Americans at the turn of the 21st century. While not denying geisha strength and intelligence, contemporary geisha stories in America tell of a more traditional, controlled lifestyle, culture and society experienced by women. There are several books that examine and problematize how the media depicts contemporary American women from a conservative perspective. For example, in The Mommy Myth: the Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women (2004), Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels look at the American anti-feminism movement that has continued to grow in the 1980s and 1990s. The authors pay close attention to how the media consistently sends a message that it is better to keep women in their “place” as wives and mothers. Particularly, in chapter ten, Douglas and Michales study Dr. Laura Schlessinger, a radio talk-show hostess whose program began in 1994

³⁵ Powell qtd in Mallika Dutt, “Some Reflections on U.S. Women of Color and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and NGO Forum in Beijing, China,” Feminist Studies 22. 3 (Fall 1996): 520.

and “rapidly drew a listener base of nearly twenty million.”³⁶ As a “born-again” anti-feminist and political conservative, Dr. Laura advised those women who are unhappy and/or cannot marry that it was because they were too strong, free, and selfish. Thus, The Mommy Myth and other books that address the growing popularity of anti-feminism might explain how the geisha’s traditional, organized, controlled life and society may be alluring to many Americans. While sympathizing and feeling superior to geisha because of the latter’s limited power and control over their lives, American readers are captivated by the geisha’s restricted lifestyle, organized around rules bound in tradition.

Thus, the contemporary American image of the geisha, which is humanized and empowered, and stereotyped and disempowered at the same time, represents mainstream Americans’ identities and perspectives about themselves as well as their economical, social, and cultural relationships with Japan. The images manifest America’s self-image more than geisha stories from their perspectives, despite the fact that they are presented as thus. Though the American image and understanding of the geisha expanded to some degree by the end of the 21st century, the essential concept of geisha is fundamentally unchanged; the idea of geisha, as it is perpetuated in America, is eroticized and focuses on their supposed powerlessness and submissiveness. This eroticizing of the geisha has also manifested in a misrepresentation of Japanese women in general and, by extension, of anything Japanese (society, culture, and men). American popular culture has

³⁶ Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, The Mommy Myth: the Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women (New York: Free Press, 2004) 309. Dr. Laura Schlessinger has a several

constructed this feminine, weak, and passive image of the geisha as a representation of Japan and placed it in juxtaposition against American values, such as individualism, independence, freedom, and gender equality. Through my analysis, I will question and criticize the perpetuation of this "powerless" image of geisha that has resulted in the misunderstanding of Japanese women and culture. I will critique how the images in these texts reflect American values and the dominant white American culture's feelings towards Japanese culture at the turn of the 21st century.

In Chapter 1 of my thesis, I examine Jodi Cobb's photojournalistic work, Geisha, published in 1995. Analyzing her introduction along with the seventy-seven photographs, I study how Geisha apparently reveals the diverse, complex, and private side of geishas. Cobb stresses her femaleness and the authenticity of her depictions of geishas through her essay and photographs. Geisha conveys geishas' strength and pride, and empowers geisha to some degree. Yet, it ultimately demonstrates how geisha are confined and underprivileged in Japan's class-based society. Emphasizing their limited freedom and lack of independence, the text controls the image and power of geisha. The text also pays particular attention to Japanese men in the private spaces of ozashiki. It shows childish, drunken, and disempowered men, who defy the image of Japanese men perpetuated in the mainstream media from the middle of 1970s through the early 1990s. Cobb's work seems to reflect the cold, arrogant image of Japanese men as depicted in the 1992 film Rising Sun.

Chapter 2 focuses on an analysis of Arthur Golden's Memoirs of A Geisha. This novel is a success and romance story about protagonist Sayuri who becomes a fine, cultured, and popular geisha. In the story, Sayuri creates a sense of home with her long-time "prince," the Chairman Iwamura. Yet, Memoirs constructs the image of a geisha who is trapped in a childlike mentality. Confining her to an adolescent mentally, the novel gives us a disempowered, innocent, and powerless geisha. The prince in Sayuri's fantasy, the Chairman, embodies the image of Japanese businessmen as being friendly and reserved characters—an image constructed in the American media in the late 1990s. Like Cobb's Geisha, the male characters in Memoirs mirror America's relationship with Japan and reflect dominant white America's feelings towards Japan.

In Chapter 3, I turn my focus to former geisha Mineko Iwasaki's autobiography Geisha, A Life. Specifically attempting to challenge the image of geisha as prostitute that Memoirs perpetuated, Iwasaki constructs an individual who is professional, responsible, and powerful. Her allegedly empowered self-portrayal, however, also endorses American values of freedom, individualism, and independence. By claiming her compatibility with mainstream American values, Iwasaki negates the geisha culture and immensely flatters Americans and their culture. By positioning herself, and geisha in general, as being of a higher class than "ordinary" Japanese women, possessing agency, experiencing freedom in their own lives, and having unique life experiences, she constructs an image of geishas based on American ideologies.

Chapter 1

Jodi Cobb's Geisha: The Life, the Voices, the Art: Empowered Geisha and Disempowered Japanese Businessmen

[Yuriko] was appalled by the image abroad of Japanese as still, serious, formal workaholics. Eager to show Japan's warm side, she opened her daily life to my camera.¹

Composed of an essay and three interviews with seventy-seven photographs of geisha taken in Kyoto, Japan, Jodi Cobb's Geisha: the Life, the Voices, the Art seemingly reveals intimate and diverse portraits of geisha in their public and private lives.² The geisha community has traditionally remained secluded from the public eye, in part to maintain its traditions, and partly to protect its clients who are often top politicians and reputable businessmen. In addition, geisha have traditionally been restricted to their exclusive teahouses out of concern for how they are represented in public. In this hidden, secretive community, Cobb, a staff photographer at National Geographic Magazine, was given a free hand to document their activities. Geisha sheds light on the geisha's everyday lives in their houses (*okiya*) and their professional activities as traditional dancers and entertainers in private tearooms (*ozashiki*).³

¹ Jodi Cobb, Geisha: The Life, The Voices, the Art (New York, Alfred A Knoph, 1995) 2.

² An article of the same title appears in National Geographic in October, 1995. It includes a shorter version of her introductory essay in Geisha and photographs with captions that briefly explains the location, ritual, and/or Cobb's understanding of the photographs.

³ Geisha in Kyoto live in their proprietress' house in geisha districts. The house is mainly a living quarter for geisha, the proprietress, maids, and so on (only women are allowed with the possible exception of young boys). Geisha in Tokyo districts usually commute to teahouses and other party rooms for work from their own homes and apartments.

In her introductory essay, Cobb describes her experience as a photographer in geisha communities, the geisha life and culture, as well as the geisha's role in Japanese society. She relies specifically on the experiences of two women, Yuriko, a proprietress in Kyoto, and Mayumi, a fifty-four-year-old geisha in Tokyo, both of whom allowed Cobb to document their day-to-day activities. Through her conversation and interviews with the two women, Cobb essays the geisha's sufferings, devotion to work, and accomplishments as professional dancers and entertainers. She also illustrates how their traditional role is maintained by Japan's class-based society.

In the essay, Cobb explains that geisha, who mostly come from lower class backgrounds, are protected and separated from Japanese society within their own unique community. There, they enjoy greater freedom and independence than is common for other Japanese women. Because of their impoverished backgrounds, geisha have nothing but themselves to offer when they enter their profession. However, through years of training and self-discipline, they ultimately become accomplished dancers, musicians, and refined conversationalists. Geisha thus empowers and shows the agency geisha have in their own lives. Cobb's photographs further serve to humanize and diversify geisha personalities by exposing the real women who exist underneath the makeup and kimonos. The photographs capture them during their off hours, laughing together, chatting, reading, sleeping, and smoking. The photos also convey the degree of seriousness and professionalism required in preparing themselves for work, displaying a side of their

Ozashiki is a Japanese traditional room floored with tatami mats. Here, ozashiki particularly means a tatami

personalities rarely seen in public. Cobb's pictures also remind us that not all these women are young, as the Western-based Orientalist image of geisha would have Americans believe.

Geisha seems to celebrate the diversity of geisha from teenage novitiates, known as *maiko*, to veteran geisha in their sixties and seventies.⁴ Cobb's camera also captures their clients, the Japanese men who patronize the *ozashiki* where geisha provide entertainment. There, as Cobb's essay indicates, geisha take control of both the party and their clients. Unlike the serious, aggressive image of Japanese men perpetuated in the American media, the photographs reveal these men being supervised and coddled—an almost playful victim of the geisha—the book includes a photograph of a man who has lost a party game and is stripped of his clothes (Fig. 11). Judging by the photos, many of these men appear to be too intoxicated to recognize what is going on.

Introducing geisha voices and private personalities through essays, interviews, and photographs, Geisha claims to shed light on a variety of geisha figures that seemingly contradict Orientalist ideas. Ian Buruma states in the introduction that Cobb's photographs "penetrate the surface, to enter into the closed world that exists behind the image of the geisha, and ... show[s] her in a way most of us have never seen before."⁵ By

room where geisha entertain clients.

⁴ Maiko is an apprentice geisha. Under a big sister's care, she gets a training to become a geisha in a few years.

⁵ Ian Buruma vii in Cobb. Ian Buruma is a writer who contributes articles regularly to the New York Review of Books, and has published works such as A Japanese Mirror, The Wages of Guild, and Playing the Game. Born in the Netherlands and educated in both Holland and Japan, he has spent a great deal of time in Japan and Hong Kong, specializing in Asian issues.

going inside the geisha community, Cobb demystifies and empowers them to some degree while disempowering Japanese men. Yet Geisha reflects American values and mainstream American attitudes towards Japan. Implicitly claiming that her gender places her in a position of authority, Cobb proclaims that geisha are victims of Japan's class-based society, confined to the passive role of perfecting themselves as the Japanese feminine ideal. Significantly, Geisha documents geisha empowerment only within their own community, and their inability to challenge the society-at-large supposedly distinguishes them from white, middle-class American women. Many American middle-class women have expressed an interest in the lives of non-Western women whose social and cultural accomplishments supposedly lag far behind those of white American women. For them, Geisha serves as a source to learn about and relate to their sisters in an Eastern land who do not enjoy the degree of power and freedom they experience. Furthermore, Geisha displays principles of third wave feminism in that it delves beneath beautiful costumes and masks to reveal the strength and pride geisha experience as women. Concurrently, since the 1990s, the third wave feminist agenda has embraced feminine beauty as well as strength, and recognizes both attributes as positive characteristics to be embraced by women. This movement toward accepting that neither beauty nor strength is necessarily exclusive makes it possible for some American women to understand and sympathize with the geisha's sufferings and sacrifice.

While Geisha empowers Japanese women, by portraying wealthy Japanese men as weak and childish in the private spaces of *ozashiki*, it disempowers and emasculates

Japanese men and society at a time when both were perceived as threatening to the American economy. Emphasizing the Japanese class system that traps people within prescribed roles, the book presents Japanese men and society as pre-modern, feminine, and backward, an image different from that portrayed in mainstream American media. Although the disempowered Japanese male may not seem very different from his white American counterpart from a feminist perspective, the Japanese male's entrapment in a hierarchical society undermines his status as a man. The depictions of Japanese men and society in Geisha, therefore, seem to mirror America's anxiety, doubt, and frustration towards Japan when it was challenging the West economically and culturally from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. It also illustrates a fantasy Americans have of ancient Japan as a place of beauty and pre-modernity while reassuring Americans of the superiority of core American values at a time when their society was losing confidence in such values.

Furthermore, Geisha reflects white middle-class American's nostalgia and longing for a more traditional society. In Cobb's essay, Yuriko, Mother of an okiya, says that she "was appalled by the image abroad of [the] Japanese as stiff, serious, formal workaholics. Eager to show Japan's *warm* side, she opened her daily life to [Cobb's] camera."⁶ The "warm" side of Japan seems to correlate to the traditional, childish, and emotional side of the Japanese. This image is opposite from the "cold" side: the civilized, mature, and modern Japan that American media depicts as the norm in Japanese society. In this sense, America associates itself with Japan's "cold" side because detachment

coincides with concepts of modernity by valuing qualities such as individualism, equality, and freedom. These values can have negative aspects: individualism keeps people apart; the notion of freedom can create a lack of unity, control, and solidarity among people; and the separation and distance from traditions can result in life without roots, history, or a shared culture. Because a growing number of Americans feel isolated and anxious about American values, they frequently search for a warmer, more humane set of values outside of American society. Thus, by discovering and exposing Japan's "warm" side, Geisha not only attempts to differentiate America from Japan, it also reveals America's fascination with the warm, traditional values that many Americans cannot find within their own society.

Legitimizing Geisha Stories and Mindset: Concerning Her Authority and Superiority as a White Woman

Jodi Cobb has been affiliated with National Geographic Magazine as a staff photographer since 1978, specializing in the Middle East and Asia. According to an interview with her posted on "The Master Series" by pdnonline, Cobb had been "around the world twice with [her] family" by the age of 12.⁷ Since then, she has been fascinated with exploring and telling stories about different people and places in the world.⁸ She obtained a Bachelor's degree and Master of Arts in Journalism from the University of

⁶ Cobb, 2. *Italic is mine.*

⁷ Jodi Cobb, interview, "Jodi Cobb," PDNonline, Transcript, 12 Sept. 2003 <http://www.pdngallery.com/cobrand/nikonnet/masters/jodi_cobb/> pars. 5.

⁸ Cobb, pars. 5.

Missouri, and began her career in local newspapers. After a few years freelancing with National Geographic, she accepted a position as a staff photographer. She later became the first woman to be named White House Photographer of the Year in 1985. Her achievements also include becoming one of the first photographers to cross China when it was reopened to the West in the 1970s, and is one of the few Westerners to document the lives of women in Saudi Arabia—her work appeared in an article in the magazine in 1987.

As the first photographer allowed inside the geisha community, she was assigned to take photographs for the project “A Day in the Life of Japan,” where 100 photographers took photographs of “Japanese life” for period of 24 hours.⁹ She decided to further pursue her own interest in geisha by going back to take more photographs for “six months... over a three year period,” using her vacation time; she wanted to record “the last generation of true geisha [and]... document this dying tradition.”¹⁰

Since Liza Dalby’s previous work, also entitled Geisha, set the standard by providing stories about geisha through Dalby’s first-hand experience as a geisha in an ozashiki, obtaining information from inside the geisha community was vital to support the authenticity and legitimacy of Cobb’s project. Depicting herself as intimately involved in that community, Cobb emphasizes her gender as an effective tool for interpreting the geisha’s stories. Indeed, Cobb claims her status as a woman entitled to interpret the geisha community. Moreover, she emphasizes her relationship with them by

providing first-person descriptions from geisha themselves to illuminate the activities depicted in the photographs. In addition, employing such a technique further reinforces her essay “as a form of evidence.”¹¹ Cobb, however, diminishes her role by crediting two geisha, Mayumi and Yuriko, in helping her assemble her book. By relying on their expertise, Geisha seems to be an irrefutable authentic representation of geisha. Yet it is obvious that Cobb’s status as an American photojournalist and her affiliation with a major U.S. magazine provided the means of access. Mayumi and Yuriko may have indeed helped Cobb accomplish her project; however, this was possibly at the behest of persons connected with National Geographic. Yet, the narratives in the book make it seem as if the women voluntarily participated in the project by providing advice and counsel.

The editorial agenda of her magazine also shaped and influenced how Cobb portrays the world outside of America. In their 1990 study of the political and cultural agenda of National Geographic Magazine in the twentieth century, Reading National Geographic, Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins scrutinize images the institution creates for a privileged, white middle-class American male audience. Sending photographers to remote places to take pictures as evidence, the institution presents its photographic images as factual, scientific depictions of the non-Western world.¹² Yet

⁹ Cobb, pars. 22.

¹⁰ Cobb, pars. 22 and 25.

¹¹ Catherine A Lutz and Jane L. Collins, Reading National Geographic (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1993) 28.

¹² Cobb, 2.

Lutz and Collins point out that the magazine actually creates safe, primitive images of non-Western people and places that say more about white, middle-class American desires and anxieties than they do about the cultures they are supposed to represent. In addition, by observing the process of assembling an issue of National Geographic, and interviewing the staff, Lutz and Collins show how the interests of white, middle-class American men control the selection of topics to be essayed photographically.

Similar to a photo essay in National Geographic, Cobb explicitly acknowledges her presence and her friendly, unthreatening position within the geisha community in the text of her essay. Though Cobb does not appear in any of her photographs, she refers to her physical presence within that community as well as her emotional support and empathy toward the geisha. She also emphasizes that what she saw and heard guided her in creating Geisha. By visually removing herself Cobb creates the sense that the work is factual and authentic rather than an interpretative selection of images based on preconceived ideas. In fact, at the beginning of her essay, she describes herself as a student of the geisha community who documents the geisha's feelings, lives, and culture.¹³ Cobb's self-proclaimed role as a student of the geisha community suggests that it is the geisha who are in control of the product. Cobb recounts one of her experiences saying that during a training session, Mayumi, a middle-aged geisha, pushed Cobb's head to the floor with "her tiny, perfectly manicured hand" when Cobb was not bowing low

¹³ Cobb, 2.

enough.¹⁴ Thus, Cobb, like Liza Dalby before her, learned about the geisha community directly from geisha themselves and seems to be an obedient student who learns and absorbs their culture. Her depiction of herself reflects a trusting, intimate relationship that does not seem to threaten or influence the geisha. It also suggests Mayumi's respect for and acceptance of Cobb as her student. Furthermore, Cobb's depiction shows how much she enjoyed learning about the geisha from a distinguished member of the community. The depiction of Cobb's head being pushed to the floor places her in a subdued and disempowered position, diminishing her own power and influence as a white American woman who represents a multi-million dollar magazine. Precisely because of Cobb's submissiveness, her authority over Geisha is masked, and her essay and photographs seem to testify to the authenticity of the information in the text. Cobb's positioning thus deemphasizes and blurs her agency. Cobb's willingness to comply with the customs and culture of the geisha highlights her alleged powerlessness in front of them and is presented as if her essay and photographs came directly from the geisha themselves. This obscures not only the chasm between her and the geisha in terms of race, nationality, and class, but also her perspective and power in portraying them. Cobb's eyes, ears, and camera seem to be merely devices to project images that the geisha voluntarily expose.

Cobb not only emphasizes her closeness with Mayumi and Yuriko, she also accentuates their influence on her work in creating and organizing Geisha. At the beginning of her essay, Cobb states that she is merely transmitting stories told to her by

¹⁴ Cobb, 2.

the geisha to better express their individual points of view. Through her experience in the geisha community, she says she “discovered the women behind the masks, came to know their truth.”¹⁵ Thus, Cobb asserts that her portraits of the geisha are based on her experience in their community and are not derived from simply reading books about them. Though Cobb cannot speak Japanese and Yuriko and Mayumi do not speak English, Cobb emphasizes her direct relationship with them and implies an ability to understand their culture: she says, Mayumi “spoke only a few words of English, but with sign language and her own version of charades, she led me through the intricacies of geisha behavior.”¹⁶ It seems likely that Cobb had access to a translator who was familiar with Japanese customs. Yet, the absence of any “language issues” in the text seems to imply that their language barrier did not inhibit Cobb in compiling an accurate portrait.

Geisha also explicitly states the two Japanese women’s intentions to open the geisha’s secret lives to the American public. Showing how their intentions shaped her project, the text uses the women’s voices to emphasize their active participation in it:

[Yuriko] was appalled by the image abroad of Japanese as stiff, serious, formal workaholics. Eager to show Japan’s warm side, she opened her daily life to my camera [. . .].¹⁷

Mayumi (a middle-age geisha in Tokyo) wanted the world to see the worth of these women whose lives had been hidden for so long.¹⁸

¹⁵ Cobb, 2.

¹⁶ Cobb, 2.

¹⁷ Cobb, 2.

By stating their reasons for permitting Cobb to enter their community, Geisha seemingly displays the centrality of the geisha's roles in the text; it is presented as if Cobb was asked to help document their lives and perspectives. Again, this implies that her project reflects them, and not her own American perspective.

At the end of Geisha, Cobb also demonstrates that she obediently listened and supported each geisha's perspective. In one of her comments, Mayumi explains how geisha's lives flourish by mastering art performances, even though "[they] may enter with nothing," their lives are much better than prostitutes'.¹⁹ Here Geisha shows how Mayumi instructs Cobb to make this comment "the final thing in [her] book" and Cobb acquiesces with an explanation on the last page of the text to elucidate Mayumi's perspective.²⁰ This example illustrates how Cobb empowers the geisha involved in her project and demonstrates Yuriko and Mayumi's influence. Cobb's editorial decisions seem to suggest that Geisha is a collaborative work authored by the three of them.

Cobb's experience with Mayumi and Yuriko, however, was possible not because she became their obedient student as Cobb states, but because of her profession, gender, and nationality. Because geisha traditionally veil their lives and their profession to the outside world, Cobb's status as a staff photographer for National Geographic enabled her to obtain permission to enter their community. Moreover, her identity as an American female also helped her gain access to the two geisha who guided her photographic work

¹⁸ Cobb, 2.

¹⁹ Cobb, 112.

²⁰ Cobb, 112.

on this project. In addition, her gender made it possible for her to work on the project since it would not have been easy for a male to take photographs of geisha asleep or changing their clothes, and because the geisha society, especially in Kyoto, restricts males from their homes and private spaces.

Her American nationality is another key element in her relationship with Mayumi and Yuriko. According to Cobb, both of them saw Cobb's project as an opportunity to correct misconceptions about geisha through National Geographic which has worldwide distribution. The fact that Mayumi became Cobb's teacher and guide in the geisha community was also possible because Cobb is a white American. If Cobb were Japanese and did not know the geisha culture, she would likely have been scorned and disrespected by the geisha and would not have enjoyed such close relationships.²¹

Thus, despite only a short stay and brief acquaintance with the geisha community, Cobb asserts the truthfulness and authority of her work. She underscores its authenticity by emphasizing the important roles Mayumi and Yuriko play in the geisha community and identifies herself as merely a female photographer, (i.e., as if her race, nationality, and cultural differences have no bearing on her project). She emphasizes her gender largely because it was one element that permitted her to gain access to the geisha, but

²¹ A classmate, a white American male PhD. Student acquired access to a couple of Japanese schools to research a group of social outcasts in Japanese society. He said that it was not very difficult for the schools and communities around the schools to accept him, presumably because of the image and higher status of a white American male. On the other hand, a Japanese female PhD. student he met in Japan was unable to gain access to schools and communities, though she has been studying the group much longer than he, and was known by the community leaders. In addition to gender which could be a factor in their different experiences, as an insider of Japanese society and outsider from a group of the outcasts, she may have been trapped in history, culture, and politics.

uses it to claim that she metaphorically speaks the same language as the geisha—that she shares and understands their experiences and feelings. In addition, she maintains that she was able to “enter” the geisha’s minds through her extensive interviews with Yuriko and Mayumi.²² But by not explicitly addressing her position as a white American woman, Cobb blurs the chasm between her and the geisha that could undermine the legitimacy of her work. She does not acknowledge that her status as a white, American female, in addition to her position with a major magazine, may have been the true means of access into the geisha community. Although she may have stood out as a white woman during her stays with the geisha, her whiteness is almost entirely invisible in the book, nor is mention made of any associated drawbacks and privileges.²³ Through Cobb's dismissal of her own position of power, she presents herself as a comrade of the suppressed geisha. Thus, Cobb’s position in the text reflects a white woman’s Orientalist attitude towards things Eastern. By linking herself with the geisha through her gender, and by claiming to empower them through her photography, she in fact demonstrates her “representational power” over geisha.²⁴

²² Cobb, 2.

²³ Only once does Cobb reveal that not all geisha seem to agree with Cobb’s presence and work in the community (2).

²⁴ Mari Yoshihara, Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 79.

Good Daughters in a Bad Time: Empowering Geisha in the Geisha Communities and Victimizing Them in Japanese Society in Cobb's Essay

In her 10-page essay, she constructs images of geisha and things Japanese, which mirror American ideas about Japan far more than they attempt to accurately represent geisha, as she claims. Through her extensive interviews with Yuriko and Mayumi, and her research based on English language publications such as Liza Dalby's Geisha, Cobb's essay claims to empower "the last generation of true geisha."²⁵ She claims that exposing the geisha's alluring feminine power in their white makeup and silk kimonos demonstrates their inner strength, professionalism, and pride as women. Nonetheless, despite her unusual access to their community, Cobb's depictions of geisha are stereotypical and collective, emphasizing femininity and the exotic, and stay firmly within the Orientalist image. In addition, by blaming Japan's class-based society, Geisha victimizes geisha as women trapped in their community, unable to improve their underprivileged position in Japanese society. Furthermore, Mayumi and Yuriko's biographies, while essaying their strength and sacrifice, reinforce the Orientalist image of geisha as dependent on men. Cobb's essay, therefore, reflects what white American women want to believe, that despite their beauty and commitment to tradition, geisha are victims of Japanese society.

²⁵ Cobb, 14.

Empowering Geisha Images

Drawing largely on her interviews with Yuriko and Mayumi, Cobb introduces geisha that are “good daughters (who do) their family duty” by leaving their homes and devoting their lives to being geisha.²⁶ They are neither submissive, powerless women, nor “naughty (ones) trading sexual favors for material gain.”²⁷ Instead, the geisha devote their lives to perfect their traditional art performances and beauty, making the most of their situation. Thus, Geisha shows these devoted women advancing their status from the ranks of the underprivileged into a triumphant symbol of the Japanese woman and traditional Japan. Cobb writes:

Rising above her miserable origins, through discipline and talent the geisha created a life of beauty. She made herself into the image of the perfect woman, the embodiment of Japanese culture and refinement, a living work of art. That was the source of her pride, and of her salvation.²⁸

Emphasizing their impoverished backgrounds, Geisha acknowledges the sacrifice geisha have made for their families. Instead of dreaming of better lives, they focus on beauty and traditional arts to elevate themselves into “a living work of art.”²⁹ This depiction not only stresses that a geisha is not simply a beautiful product of Japanese tradition, it also recognizes the geisha’s determination to control their lives as much as possible. Geisha acknowledges a geisha’s ability to become a refined conversationalist, dancer, and

²⁶ Cobb, 5.

²⁷ Cobb, 2.

²⁸ Cobb, 5.

financially independent woman, despite having entered her profession as a young girl, knowing nothing of art or culture.³⁰ In “her obsession with perfection and her disciplined devotion to the arts, she became Japan’s unparalleled guardian and conservator of tradition.”³¹ Thus, Cobb does accentuate the geisha’s agency—clearly separating them from previous American images which depict geisha as passive, powerless prostitutes and doll-like women.

Although Cobb describes Mayumi as her teacher and emphasizes her assertive character, Cobb also describes Mayumi’s hand as “tiny and perfectly manicured.”³² These characteristics juxtapose Mayumi’s strength with her beauty and fragility. Again, the image of geisha as being strong inside and beautiful outside fits the agenda of third wave feminism at the end of the 21st century. Unlike second wave feminism that discouraged femininity and denied the traditional images of women constructed by the dominant white male society, third wave feminism not only embraces women’s power but also celebrates “who they are” as feminine beings. Third wave feminists “might enjoy pornography, want to shave their legs, wear makeup and dresses, join the army, be a man, get married, or do anything else that might compromise the perceived idea and ideal of

²⁹ Cobb, 5.

³⁰ Cobb, 8.

³¹ Cobb, 14.

³² Cobb, 2.

what a feminist is.”³³ Thus, Geisha's revelation of a geisha's power underneath her beauty reflects many American's women's self-image.

Geisha also distinguishes geisha from Japanese women in general, who, Cobb maintains, have less control of their lives. This further elevates the status of geisha, who were previously depicted as underprivileged figures at the bottom of Japan's class-based society. The text portrays Japanese wives as women trapped in a traditional role that requires them to give birth to children, (especially boys) but have no control over their husbands and themselves. Cobb argues:

Women, though now highly educated, are even today defined primarily by their roles as wives and mothers...Despite the often harsh realities of this world, a geisha [on the other hand] could gain an education of sorts, acquire an art, make her own money, establish an independent identity, run a business, pursue romance and sometimes find true love.³⁴

Thus, the text affirms the geisha's advantages in Japan's hierarchical society in terms of class and gender. It presents the possibilities geisha have to enjoy a free, independent life that does not seem to be so different from what white American women can have.

Portraying geisha as determined, independent women who have more freedom and agency to control their lives than ordinary Japanese women, it seemingly asserts geisha's

³³ Stephanie Gilmore, "Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Third Wave Feminism in the United States," rev. of Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation, by Barbara Findlen, and To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism *Journal of Women's History*, Rebecca Walker, ed, 12. 4 (2001): 14 pars, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 23 May 2004 <<http://micro189.lib3.hawaii.edu:2083/universe/printdoc>> pars. 2.

superiority over them. It also challenges the perception of geisha's underprivileged status in Japanese society.

Victimizing and Disempowering Geisha in the Orientalist Framework

Cobb's depictions of geisha do not entirely contradict the previous Orientalist image of them that focused on their submissiveness, powerlessness, and sensuality. While depicting their inner strength, Geisha sympathetically characterizes geisha as victims of circumstance in Japan's class-based society. Their image remains within the Orientalist framework through descriptions of them as beautiful, devoted art performers who are also victims of their society in collective terms. In addition, Mayumi and Yuriko's biographies reinforce this image of geisha by emphasizing their strong connections with men, instead of one with the arts. Geisha's depiction of the boundaries geisha live within prohibit the very things Americans cherish, such as power, freedom, and independence, and places them in an inferior position to Americans; they can only enjoy their advantages within the confines of the geisha community and through the benevolence of a male benefactor. By confining all geisha within their community, Geisha emphasizes their powerlessness and their oppressed circumstances.

In the end, Cobb's depictions of geisha, their community, and culture are reduced to a collective image that reflects previous American impressions. She describes the images through the senses of seeing, feeling, and smelling, so that they seem vivid,

³⁴ Cobb, 6.

realistic, and authentic. For example, she summarizes geisha culture as “sensual” with “silk on soft skin, the aroma of fresh *tatami* and warm sake.”³⁵ By specifically pointing out the silk material of the kimono, the condition of the geisha’s skin, the crisp *tatami* mat on the floor, and the aroma of sake, she provides specific details concerning the geisha’s immediate surroundings. These realistic images conjure a sense of authenticity. Her depiction, however, is far more representative of American fantasies about the exotic appeal of the Japanese than a realistic portrayal of that culture.

While stressing her first-hand experience and attempting to update the image of geisha, she masks the fact that her portrayals give a collective and Orientalist impression of them. For example, Cobb explains differences between the transformation of a *maiko* and a geisha quite visually, albeit homogeneously:

When a *maiko* enters a party, there is a gasp, no matter how jaded the company. She is preposterously cute. The chalk-white makeup, crimson bee-stung lips, long swaying *obi* and swinging sleeves give her a goofy but irresistible appeal... At about twenty she will become a full-fledged geisha. She is now more gracious, more at ease with men... Her beauty, rather than the extravagant artificiality of the *maiko*, becomes an elegance based on her harmony with the season and the occasion.³⁶

It is as if Cobb were talking about someone she knew rather than describing what she saw as a common characteristic among many geisha. Through her depiction, it is not difficult

³⁵ Cobb, 11.

to imagine a maiko who seems slightly childish and odd, but cute—a girl dressed in women's clothing. A twenty-something geisha, on the other hand, is elegant, refined, and mature. Thus, the detailed, contrasting depictions of how a maiko and a geisha look brings the reader into an ozashiki. Her portrayals, however, remain stereotypical and collective, in that they do not leave space for individual differences of beauty, personality, and behavior. Thus, her generalized, feminized image of geisha mirrors Orientalist images of them.

Cobb also places the geisha's community and culture in opposition to American values of freedom. She describes the geisha's traditional dance as "the subjugation of self" as opposed to "the art of self-expression," for "[j]ust as the Japanese measure the worth of individuals by how closely they conform to group expectations, so they measure art by how closely it conforms to a set pattern, an ideal."³⁷ It emphasizes that Japanese dancers are taught to emulate perfectly, thus erasing and denying the dancers' originality and identities. Cobb's description of the dance class emphasizes the total authority of the teacher: "[a]t sight of her [ninety-year-old master Yachio Inoue], geisha freeze into silence, drop to their knees and bow to the floor."³⁸ Note that Cobb does not include any individual geisha's feelings about the class, the teacher, or about the art of dancing at all. The essay thus positions geisha culture as essentially authoritarian and submissive—

³⁶ Cobb, 8.

³⁷ Cobb, 11.

³⁸ Cobb, 11.

where obedience is essential to success. This emphasis on the uniformity of things Japanese is in opposition to American values.

Not only does the essay stereotype and homogenize the images of geisha and their culture, it does so to underscore the geisha's status as victims of Japan's class-based society. Japanese society has sustained the geisha community as a sanctuary for poor women, yet the geisha community symbolizes the geisha's powerlessness within that society: they are unable "to change the larger culture, or their place in it."³⁹ According to Cobb, Japanese society has determined the position of Japanese individuals "for centuries."⁴⁰ "[W]hether farmers or samurai," housewives or geisha, "they were mostly prisoners of their class and occupation."⁴¹ In a society "where a woman's place was either in the home or in the brothel," poor women, if they were "exceptionally clever or beautiful," were forced to enter the geisha world.⁴² Because of debts accrued from her care and training at the okiya, they were "essentially slaves" without recourse unless a wealthy male client paid off her debts and thoroughly supported her geisha lifestyle.⁴³ Thus, while largely blaming the anti-modern class system, Geisha exposes the geisha's helpless, oppressed condition. Though asserting geisha's strength to some degree, it does so within defined limits; geisha may be trained professionals and more financially independent than ordinary Japanese women, but only within the cage of the geisha

³⁹ Cobb, 5.

⁴⁰ Cobb, 6.

⁴¹ Cobb, 6.

⁴² Cobb, 6.

⁴³ Cobb, 6.

community. By blaming Japan's hierarchical society, they do not seem weak and inferior as had been believed, but rather victims. At the same time, however, Cobb does not offer any evidence of geisha who criticize or rebel against their circumstances; on the contrary, the text promotes their pride as geisha and the sacrifices they make for survival. Such cultural and social controls leave no space for mobility and flexibility and serve to establish a considerable difference in status than that experienced by white American women in the mind of the reader.

At the end of her essay, Cobb includes Mayumi and Yuriko's life stories. Though the text does not explicitly say, Cobb seems to have interviewed them. The stories are not only told in the first-person narrative, but are also colloquial. Furthermore, the stories include the depictions of their particular behaviors during their conversations in parentheses, such as "Mayumi looks down at her lap and laughs" and "Yuriko begins to cry softly."⁴⁴ Though the women's stories apparently expand an image of geisha to some degree, the stories seem to focus on their dependency on men and their submissiveness and powerlessness in the confined society, ironically reinforcing an exotic, feminine, Orientalist image of geisha. Using the geisha's voices to tell their stories legitimizes American images of geisha as authentic.

Mayumi, whose mother was sold to an okiya as a young girl, is an illegitimate child, the offspring of a geisha mother and her male client who "had many other

⁴⁴ Cobb, 17-18.

women.”⁴⁵ Her autobiography focuses on three points: her relationships with males, her strong connection with her mother, and her pride and sacrifice. As a daughter of a geisha, she took a traditional course to become a geisha from the time she was six years old. Without mentioning specific examples, she discusses her relationships with men, noting that they began at an early age: she “acquired (her) first patron in the traditional way,” through a relationship that was “more business than romance.”⁴⁶ She does not say how old she was when she met her first patron, nor how many men with whom she has had relationships. Yet, she “was fond of them all.” She explicitly states that her relationships with men were not entirely for business because she liked them, and she never depended on her patrons financially. She does, however, mention other geisha’ dependency on men. Because most geisha are poor when they enter the geisha community, “several —many — of them began the search for a patron...as early as eleven.”⁴⁷ She eventually found the right man, though he was married and had children. Yet, when his wife found out about their relationship and demanded a divorce, Mayumi decided to wait until his children were grown; she says, “[i]f their father had divorced to marry someone like me, their career and marriage possibilities would be in jeopardy.”⁴⁸ Thus, Mayumi shows strength and an understanding of her underprivileged position in Japanese society and how she must sacrifice as a geisha. Although she states that she does not rely on men financially, her story emphasizes her powerlessness and limited possibilities to be happy,

⁴⁵ Cobb, 14.

⁴⁶ Cobb, 16.

⁴⁷ Cobb, 16.

independent, and free. Thus, by depicting the centrality of men in geisha life, the book furthers an Orientalist image.

Yuriko, mother of an okiya, tells a different life story as a geisha, yet she also focuses on an unfulfilled love relationship. Unlike Mayumi, Yuriko was sold to a hospital in the countryside by her own mother. After she was discovered by a mother of an okiya in Kyoto when she was seventeen years old, she went through a geisha's traditional path, *mizuage* (a maiko's first sexual experience).⁴⁹ At the age of twenty-two, she left the geisha community and opened a small club. Though she fell in love with a man who did not want to leave her, she eventually "sent him home to his family because of his responsibilities to them, but [was] waiting and hoping."⁵⁰ She "promised [her] lover that [they] will marry in [their] next life."⁵¹

Yuriko also includes her story as a proprietress of her okiya. It reveals the story about the business of an okiya, a rare insight into a proprietress's ideals and the problems she encounters running the business. Her account focuses on her efforts to raise a maiko

⁴⁸ Cobb, 17.

⁴⁹ Mizuage in the geisha world is believed to be an apprentice geisha's initial sexual experience with the highest bidder who is supposed to be a respected client of the geisha society. It is believed to be necessary for an apprentice geisha to be a virgin, because the cost of mizuage helps to pay the debt she owes to her proprietress who spent money to buy the girl (before WWII was over) and also pay for her living, training, and kimonos. After the mizuage ritual, the girl becomes a geisha, and tries to find a patron, so that the patron would pay for her and she can become independent from her okiya. Because geisha were believed to be forced to go through mizuage in pre-WWII era, the ritual supports the idea that geisha are prostitutes. The anti-prostitution law of 1958 officially prohibited the mizuage ritual, and now girls choose to become geisha. I do not believe it is still practiced. Yet, the fact that geisha do not talk about their societies traditionally makes their lives mysterious and secretive even in Japan.

⁵⁰ Cobb, 20.

⁵¹ Cobb, 20. Before WWII, being atotori might have been crucial among geisha for their successful careers because for those who were taken away from their actual parents and sold to okiya, the legal entitlement of their home meant financial and professional stability.

properly to become a geisha, and on her expectations of a maiko and of the *atotori*, successor of the house.⁵² Yuriko wants Kyoto maiko to be virgins, to have “a sense of reality, independence, and their own will...”⁵³ She also says that she would choose an *atotori* who does “not have an opposition between their public and their private selves.” Yuriko's position stresses the importance of virginity in the geisha profession, like the American image of geisha. However, Yuriko also gives a contradicting ideal image of geisha: a trustful geisha should not have two faces, unlike the American image of a geisha whose emotions and intentions are completely hidden under a mask. Her account also gives a glimpse of a disappearing geisha culture, and how Western culture is creeping into the geisha community: “The notion that an entire life can be dedicated to beauty is fast vanishing.... This may be the last generation of true geisha.”⁵⁴ A good example is Yuriko's daughter, who resists conforming to the tradition and prefers learning the piano, a Western instrument. Yuriko says that her daughter embodies “the first generation of geisha daughters to have [their] own will.”⁵⁵ In this way, though Yuriko exposes different characters of geisha to some extent, the text does not further explore them; Cobb's introductory essay that focuses on geisha traditional culture and society does not correlate to Yuriko's story as a proprietress in the contemporary setting.

⁵² The geisha house is owned by a proprietress. Because geisha does not marry and those who marry leave the house, a proprietress needs to find a successor of the *okiya*. Yuriko apparently has a young daughter and a son. Yet, since the daughter is not interested in the geisha profession at all, Yuriko is willing to choose “one of [her] geisha or maiko to inherit” her house (Yuriko qtd. in Cobb, 21).

⁵³ Cobb, 20.

⁵⁴ Cobb, 14.

⁵⁵ Cobb, 20.

Thus, though it is not clear how Cobb interviewed these women, the prompts she used, or if the women talked about men voluntarily or not, their stories ultimately perpetuate the image that Cobb constructs in her essay: geisha have strength and agency within their communities, but depend on men financially and/or emotionally.

Furthermore, Cobb's essay mirrors another typical Orientalist depiction: it pays particular attention to the old-style traditional images and culture of geisha as perceived by the West. Cobb especially focuses on the pre-WWII geisha world, with less attention paid to the transformation of the geisha community after WWII, even though her documentation occurred in the 1980s and '90s. Although she mentions that geisha now enter the community by their own free will, she quickly returns to an image from before the war when a young, innocent, uncultured girl was sold to a geisha house to become a refined woman.⁵⁶ Thus, she talks about the present very briefly, providing no more than 10 sentences on the subject, then quickly returns to a traditional picture of the geisha community. This portrayal works to better place geisha society in contrast to modern American society. In addition, Cobb makes little reference to exact timeframes, preferring ambiguous phrases, such as "for centuries" and "until recently."⁵⁷ Often, she talks about the social and cultural rituals of geisha and Japanese society in the past tense as if the old ways still existed exactly as they did more than fifty years ago. For example, the essay mentions the scarcity of romance between Japanese women and men, explaining that "in this society...casual contact between men and women, the play of the

sexes, is not a part of daily life.”⁵⁸ Growing up in Japan in the 1980s and 1990s, it is difficult for me to believe Cobb’s depiction of the Japanese male/female relationship. She seems to suggest the unimportance of time in Japanese history and that the Japanese may not have changed very much. This is a typical Orientalist view, in that the West has defined the East as unchanging and pre-modern, and as such, social and cultural development is irrelevant. Moreover, using “Judeo-Christian beliefs,” Cobb denounces Japanese male-female relationships as having no romance and promoting the practice of secretive “sensual pressure.”⁵⁹ Such an encapsulated, frozen-in-time society is not only non-threatening, but is an agreeable fantasy for the allegedly “civilized,” fast-changing America and the West.

Challenging and Diversifying the Image of Geisha: Geisha in Photographs

The photographs in Geisha purportedly present actual contemporary geisha without Orientalist construction and interpretation. Cobb provides seventy-seven photographs which claim to expose vivid, intimate, and diverse portraits of geisha not seen before in public. The photographs are divided into three themes: “A World of Art,” focusing on geisha on and off stage during their dance performances; “Inside the ‘Pleasure Quarters,’” revealing geisha in their private homes and rooms; and “Selling Dreams,” showing them as entertainers in ozashiki. The geisha’ attitudes and expressions

⁵⁶ Cobb, 8.

⁵⁷ Cobb, 6.

⁵⁸ Cobb, 6.

captured in these photographs as they go about their day give a comprehensive view of their lives as girls and women, and appear to challenge the stereotypical Orientalist portrayal of geisha as doll-like figures. Cobb focuses her camera on everything from young geisha who laugh, hug, and smoke freely to the wrinkled faces of old geisha under white make-up. In particular, the photographs of older geisha faces defy the image of geisha as young and childish. She also reveals the transformation process these women undergo before meeting their clients: donning kimonos, wigs, special make-up, and decorative touches to challenge the notion that geisha are born to their role as professional entertainers. Unlike previous Orientalist images, the photographs appear to shed light on geisha as complex and diversified figures. Since there are no captions to explain each photograph, they can only be understood by reading the essay. Therefore, the photographs endorse what the essay says: geisha are strong, resolute beings, devoted to the perfection of beauty and traditional art performance, but they are also victims of Japan's class-based society.

Many of the photographs expose geisha in private spaces, such as at home and backstage at public dance performances. One of the very first photographs in Geisha shows a young geisha seated in a taxi (Fig. 1).⁶⁰ The white makeup on her face combined with her unique kimono, hairstyle, and decoration clearly distinguishes her from an ordinary Japanese woman. She is holding up a white hand mirror, studying her face and hair. Her eyes scrutinize her meticulous image seriously, an act which seems to show her

⁵⁹ Cobb, 6.

professionalism. She looks neither happy at wearing a beautiful kimono and makeup, nor demure and fragile like the American popular image of geisha. Her sharply focused gaze appears to demonstrate her intelligence, seriousness, and personal independence, characteristics not usually associated with geisha.

Geisha's photographs also capture the extensive preparations geisha undergo putting on their makeup, kimono, and wig. A photograph on page 33 was taken inside a dressing room where soft sunlight shines through white curtains (Fig. 2). A geisha sits straight on the *tatami* mat floor while a man applies makeup to her face. Her head is wrapped in a purple cloth, her face and neck are painted white, and she wears a light kimono. A boy (is he her child or nephew?) sits behind her, leaning on her back. Another geisha sits beside them waiting to be made up, her head also covered with a purple cloth, as two assistants wrap a white cloth around her body. This photograph has neither a glimmer of sensuality nor an oppressive atmosphere as Cobb describes in her essay. The geisha and their assistants look serious and professional. The image communicates the impression that there is no trick, mystery, or fantasy involved in creating a geisha's look. It is a craft. The boy adds to the impression by looking bored and lonely, maybe because he has waited a long time for the women to be ready. His presence not only blurs the line between work and home, but adds a dimension to the character of geisha previously depicted as being strictly concerned with her adult male clients.

⁶⁰ Cobb, 3.

Another photograph on page 83 captures a geisha sitting before a mirror, gently covering her exhausted eyes with her hands (Fig. 3). It appears to be taken at the end of a long day. She is not distinguishable as a geisha in that she neither wears a kimono, the white makeup, nor a wig. Next to her dressing table is a Buddhist altar in which there are pictures of two men, a small Buddha, two oranges and other traditional offerings. Though it is impossible to know who the men in the photographs are, her care and commitment towards the deceased is clear.⁶¹ Such photographs present a humanized portrait of geisha not usually seen in public. Cobb's focus on their private lives sheds light on them as women of flesh and blood far removed from the air of mystery and sensuality they work so hard to create.

However, some photographs directly reflect previous Orientalist concepts of geisha. The cover photograph, for example, is a tight close-up of a geisha's lacquered, red lips (Fig. 4). The framing is so close that the texture of the lips is visible. Such an image is representative of the highly feminine and erotic image of a geisha— by isolating her lips, the image objectifies a portion of her body, exploiting it for its erotic content. Cobb also pays particular attention to the femininity of geisha by focusing on their naked shoulders, the young geisha's red kimonos, and the traditional socks that symbolize mature sexuality. These Orientalist, erotic images are further essayed elsewhere: there is a photograph that shows four women bathing outdoors, surrounded by a fence, trees, and

⁶¹ In his introduction, Ian Buruma describes this photograph; "two hands applying cream to a hidden face, beside an altar with photographs of a deceased old man (a father? a patron?)" (viii). Speculating on the

stones (Fig. 5).⁶² The camera, as if the photographer Cobb were also in the bath, is positioned by the water, looking slightly upward at the four women. The camera is so close to the women and the water is so clear that the picture hides almost nothing. This picture strengthens the erotic aspect by providing the viewer with a voyeuristic thrill. At the same time, the intimate distance between the camera and the women promotes their sexual availability. In other pictures, Cobb plays with one of the most popular Orientalist themes — the juxtaposition of the East with the West. By contrasting a geisha in a light blue kimono with a red, muscle car passing by, or a geisha in full dress standing on the platform at a bullet train station near a billboard image of a white woman in a black business suit, Cobb is making a comparison between modern, Western technology, with its characteristic speed and aggressiveness, and the intricate aestheticism of Japanese tradition (Fig. 6 and 7). This juxtaposition of supposed opposites illustrates the strange, yet persistent coexistence of the traditional East within contemporary Japan's western-influenced society. In addition, these photographs exploit and manifest America and the West's fascination with such binaries.⁶³ Although Japanese society seems to be modern and similar to the West, the continuing existence of geisha reinforces the image of Japan's exotic past that has supposedly been left behind.

possibility of having a patron's photo in an altar, his comment fantasizes a geisha's relationship with a patron.

⁶² Cobb, 71.

⁶³ In her dissertation "Images of Japan and the Japanese," Mari Suvanto extensively discusses the juxtaposition of modernity with pre-modernity in the image of Japan the West created in literature in the 1980s and 1990s.

When the photographs are read in conjunction with the essay, an immediate relationship is established. The essay speaks for the photographs and vice versa, but in doing so the information that each photograph carries loses its power to some degree.⁶⁴ The essay and photographs work together to construct a tragic image of geisha rather than one that is empowered and resolute. In some photographs, such as one on page 27, the geisha have serious, impassive expressions (Fig. 8). Geisha might be nervous before a stage appearance or are experiencing a moment of reflection. However, because of the pessimistic portrayal of geisha in the essay, the photographs are likely to be read as if they are unhappy because they are forced to be performers; as Cobb states, they look “isolated, lonely...[and] convey the sadness of the world of a professional performer.”⁶⁵ In this way, Cobb establishes the mood of the pictures through her essay.

The photographs also reinforce the trapped image of geisha in the geisha community, depicting them as tame, quiescent, and domesticated. Because the essay informs that the geisha are unable to change their social status, it likewise suggests that they have no choice about being a geisha. In addition, although the photographs expose the daily transformation of these women into geisha, they do not document their lives outside their professional community. For example, there are hardly any photographs of them with their real families and friends who live outside the community. There are no geisha depicted on their days off. Instead, the women in the photographs are either

⁶⁴ According to Amazon.com readers' responses, those who are interested in geisha want to know more details about their lives and culture. Therefore, I assume that many readers read Cobb's essay to search for new information.

preparing themselves for the day's work or are seen at the end of a long day. Whether they are smoking or meditating, laughing or sleeping, they still look like geisha in their formal makeup and attire. By showing their devotion to their profession, the photographs emphasize their entrapment. In putting on their white makeup, be they young or old, they are submissively living geisha lives. In addition, although the geisha in Geisha are more than passive sexual objects, there are no photographs that capture negative, frustrated, or rebellious images. The lack of any rebellious images may be simply due to the geisha's desire to control their public image; they might not want to reveal their emotions and personal conflicts. Still, our limited access to the geisha's emotions and private lives only strengthens the prevailing image of them as powerless and passive. In this way, the absence of agency in controlling their lives emphasizes their passivity and willingness to follow a tradition that continues to confine them within the geisha community. Geisha's highly selective depictions constructs an image of them as voiceless beings, and maintains the Orientalist view of them as exotic, passive, and inferior.

Therefore, in reading the photographs with the essay, the contemporary image of geisha is Orientalized due to the Orientalist slant of the essay. The essay focuses on the lives, experiences, and rituals of geisha before World War II in order to portray the traditional, "true" image of geisha. However, the photographs were taken in the early 1990s, and many young and middle-aged geisha might never have experienced the social conditions the essay describes. Thus, between the essay and the photographs, Geisha

⁶⁵ Buruma, ix in Cobb.

produces a conflicted image of a Japanese cultural institution. Even though Cobb emphasizes the authenticity of her photographs based on her actual experience in the geisha community, she implicitly constructs American images of them that reinforce the old Orientalist stereotype.

In addition, although there are no captions that explain individual photographs in historical, cultural, or personal contexts, Cobb places quotes next to most of the photographs that are either about them, made by geisha themselves (e.g., some are from Mayumi and Yuriko while others are anonymous), or are taken from old geisha songs and poems. The juxtaposition of the photographs with randomly selected quotations does not help the reader to understand the specific context of each photograph at all. By failing to represent actual geisha voices, the captions overtly construct Orientalist images.

Moreover, through her exclusion of geisha quotes with the photographs, Cobb is also silencing these women and choosing to speak for them. For example, some personal quotations are anonymous, making it impossible to know if the comment came from a geisha in the photograph or not. A photograph on page 75 focuses on the small feet of a young geisha who is lying down on a mat (Fig. 9). Her red underwear is seen coming down to her ankles, and she wears *tabi* (socks worn with a kimono). Next to the photograph (on page 74), a quotation informs us that in the geisha culture the color red symbolizes eroticism and “men find the sight of a foot in *tabi* very sensual.”⁶⁶ Moreover, she mentions that red signifies a girl’s adulthood, because a *maiko* changes the color of

her lingerie from white to red after her experience of mizuage.⁶⁷ Through the “Kyoto geisha’s” comment, the reader is supposed to comprehend the context of the photograph, which is what the color red symbolizes in that culture. Since the girl in the photograph probably became a geisha after the anti-prostitution law of 1958, she probably have not experienced mizuage. Yet, the quotation encourages American readers to understand the photograph in a certain way, juxtaposing an old idea with a new image.

Other quotations are taken from old poems and songs. On page 107, a photograph depicts a young maiko lying on her stomach in bed, writing something in a small notebook (Fig. 10). The room is dark, illuminated by the warm glow from a single lamp. It is impossible to know what she is writing — it could be a journal, a letter, or just a memo. To the left of the photograph, on page 106, a lyric to a song complements the image. It is a quotation from Comrade Loves of the Samurai and Songs of the Geisha by E. Powys Mathers published in 1972. The geisha song lyrics follow:

The night is black
And I am excited about you.
My love climbs in me, and you ask
That I should climb to the higher room...

By juxtaposing the old poem that refers to a love letter next to the image of a contemporary maiko, the text assumes that the maiko is writing a love letter. This connection between a maiko/geisha and a man again reflects the stereotypical Orientalist

⁶⁶ Cobb, 74.

view, and fails to recognize the geisha's identity, voice, and the difference in time period between the photograph and the quotation. Although the juxtaposition of an old geisha song with the image of a contemporary young geisha might be intended to aestheticize the photograph, it is a distorted manipulation of the geisha's identity. Such old poems and songs promote the image of geisha as eroticized beings, and blur the differences between the old and contemporary circumstances of geisha. The quotation packages the maiko into a dated, Orientalist fantasy, regardless of the fact that the photograph was taken in recent times, not to mention that the poem was written by a man. Furthermore, although this photo reveals a private geisha figure on her bed, Geisha presents it in the chapter of "Selling Dreams," which gathers photos of geisha in ozashiki with clients, rather than "Inside the 'Pleasure Quarters'" where photographs expose geisha who are in their private spaces. This provides a picture that geisha are associated with men's dreams even in their private time and spaces, which promotes an old stereotypical image of geisha.

The Images of Disempowered Japanese Businessmen as Depicted in Cobb's Essay and Photographs

In addition to exposing the contemporary geisha within public and private spheres, Geisha also reveals the Japanese male as he interacts with geisha in ozashiki. Geisha reveals politicians and businessmen as socially oppressed and childish at a time when they were depicted as intimidating and insincere in the American media in the

⁶⁷ Cobb, 74.

1980s and '90s. Because of the economic success of Japan, the American media portrayed Japanese men as shrewd, cold, and determined, capable of overtaking and dominating the American economy. Geisha's portrayal of Japanese men challenges such assumptions by disempowering and emasculating them. It exhibits Japanese politicians and businessmen in situations where they hardly seem as shrewd as Americans have been led to believe. Cobb shows Japanese men as childish and in need of attention in order to promote an image of geisha as tough, maternal figures. Cobb explains that these men are, like the geisha, victims of a rigid, oppressive Japanese class system and that an ozashiki serves as a refuge where they can let go and be themselves. By emphasizing their oppressed condition within Japanese society, the men's "true" selves are revealed only in the traditional haven of the geisha community. Thus, Geisha is able to reassure American readers of the superiority of their society and its values.

In her essay, Cobb asserts that Japan's rigidly hierarchical society oppresses both women and men.⁶⁸ She argues that although the men control every sphere of the society but the household, they, too, are "prisoners of their class and occupation," and like a geisha, "[a man's] first loyalty is to his employer, and not his family."⁶⁹ They are psychologically oppressed because Japanese society requires each individual's dedication to a group such that private emotions have to be masked.⁷⁰ At home, men and women

⁶⁸ Cobb, 6.

⁶⁹ Cobb, 6.

⁷⁰ Cobb, 6.

lead virtually separate lives, their roles fixed and inflexible.⁷¹ Since marriage is a duty arranged by one's parents, it does not provide a place for men to relax and unwind. In addition, because marriage only provides a man with offspring and financial responsibilities, and not romantic love, a man does not always have an attachment to his wife. As a 90-year old Kyoto client is quoted as saying, "[i]f I married someone I really loved, I would have to be very obedient to her, and I didn't want to be controlled by my wife."⁷² Being free of the guilt and restraint of Judeo-Christian beliefs, Japanese culture, with its Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto legacy, places sex at the center of the natural realm.⁷³ Thus, according to Cobb, the geisha community has been a refuge for men who are bounded by social and familial responsibilities that deprive them of their pleasure to play with women. Therefore, if a man can afford an extravagant evening with geisha, an ozashiki provides a sanctuary that frees him from the pressure to conform.⁷⁴ Geisha sympathetically informs us that an ozashiki is the only place for a man to "play and laugh and say what's really on his mind, be babied and coddled and cuddled and adored." Thus, the men, too, wear their socially appropriate masks in public, which can only be removed in an ozashiki.⁷⁵

Cobb claims, as a refuge where men seek relaxation, the photographs taken at ozashiki offer a rare glimpse into the Japanese men's true selves. Their childish, drunken

⁷¹ Cobb, 6.

⁷² Cobb, 21.

⁷³ Cobb, 6.

⁷⁴ Cobb, 12.

⁷⁵ Cobb, 14.

behavior is presented as “hopelessly feeble and irresolute,” and Cobb’s essay repeatedly refers to the men’s “rowdier routine” in an ozashiki.⁷⁶ At the beginning of the party, the geisha and male clients play their roles politely as the women pour sake and dance flawlessly, and the men acknowledge their beauty. Yet, as the alcohol takes effect, the men soon pay no attention to the geisha, the music, their manners, nor the costs incurred by the party. Cobb relates:

At a hot springs party, two men in cotton summer kimonos dance cheek to cheek. Two others, their napkins wrapped around their heads like samurai headbands, pull down a man’s underwear as he waltzes with a geisha. No one notices.⁷⁷

Because geisha at resorts focus mostly on entertainment rather than traditional art performances, geisha in Kyoto never identify themselves with them. Yet, the difference in atmosphere is not important here; the men’s silliness and childishness remain unchanged. By emphasizing social and cultural pressures impacting the men such that drinking in ozashiki is their only form of release, the photographs underscore the Japanese male’s dependency on geisha. By exposing the men’s oppressed lives and their childish behavior, Geisha undermines the Japanese male’s power.

Some photographs in Geisha also reinforce an image of Japanese men as uncivilized, as they are depicted in Cobb’s essay. In the final chapter of Geisha “Selling Dreams,” the photographs focus on geisha who pander to male fantasies by obediently

⁷⁶ Buruma, qtd. in Cobb xi.

portraying “the image of the perfect woman.”⁷⁸ Yet the photographs call more attention to the control the geisha exert over their male clients. For example, one photograph shockingly exposes a man completely stripped by a geisha because he lost a game (Fig. 11).⁷⁹ Next to him, a geisha looks down on the floor and is smiling at the man’s ridiculous situation. Five other male guests are laughing at the naked man, while an old geisha calmly plays a musical instrument. These men seem to enjoy being silly and childish instead of being embarrassed or offended by losing a game to a geisha. Another photograph shows a man crouching on the floor, leaning over a low table, barely able to hold his beer cup (Fig. 12). He seems oblivious to the two elder geisha next to him and the cash (probably the equivalent of \$100 or more) that passes between them. The photograph portrays the geisha tolerating the man’s drunken condition because the *ozashiki* is their place of business and it does not matter if he is drunk or not. On the other hand, it is difficult for American readers to understand the man’s situation. In the end, because her essay explains that the men have no control over their lives and are, like geisha, subject to the oppressive demands of their culture, their playful, childish behavior seems representative of their true selves.

Geisha tries to deconstruct the Japanese male’s strong public image by calling attention to his powerlessness within Japan’s hierarchical society, underscored by his weak, childish behavior in *ozashiki*. It also undermines his predilection for hard work by

⁷⁷ Cobb, 12.

⁷⁸ Cobb, 5.

⁷⁹ Cobb, 99.

showing that he does so only because of his loyalty and obligation to his company and Japanese society. Thus, the male's cold, aggressive, public image is neither expressive of his true nature, nor of his true desires. In this way, Geisha minimizes the power of Japanese society, culture, religion, and its key actor, the Japanese male, in order to refute the image of Japan as America's true competitor. Thus, by calling attention to the private emotions of Japanese businessmen, Geisha refutes and erases the ferocious image of Japan in the person of the Japanese businessmen while soothing American fears and anxieties directed at them.

Jodi Cobb's Geisha appears to expose geisha's private lives by providing glimpses of their personal, individual characters through photographs taken within their community. Combined with her essay, however, Cobb's text fails to offer a deeper, more realistic and heterogeneous understanding of geisha. Because Cobb's essay is reflective of Orientalist views, and her photographs lack sufficient explanation, Geisha does not progress beyond the Orientalist image of geisha; the women are still depicted as exotic, titillating, and powerless. While illustrating the geisha's strength and power within their own community, Geisha demonstrates that the geisha's power over their lives is limited, and they are presented as oppressed figures. Concurrently, Geisha constructs a weak, inferior image of Japanese businessmen, constrained by unwanted obligations to work and family. Yet, by emphasizing her presence in the geisha community and her connection with two members of that community, Cobb reinforces constructed images of

contemporary geisha and Japanese businessmen and legitimizes their supposed authenticity. These images, which are in the framework of Orientalism, mirror American fears of Japanese power and the American desire for the continuous containment of Japan.

As Cobb briefly mentions in her essay, it has not been easy to reveal geisha society to the public until now because of the geisha tradition of protecting their customers' anonymity. In fact, nearly all of the geisha but the two who were interviewed remain anonymous by personal request. Cobb's essay touches on her difficulties in not always being welcomed by the geisha, suggesting that the highly selective nature of her documentation may have been the result of limited access. However, the conditions of her work are not at issue in this paper. Rather, the problem I have been addressing is that she distorts the figures and voices of actual geisha while proclaiming the authenticity and authority of her work without explicitly acknowledging her own position of privilege and bias. In addition, Cobb disempowers both Japanese women and men to promote white America's sense of racial and national superiority by exercising her racial, national, and cultural power to define things Eastern.

Chapter 2

A Lifetime Child, Geisha and a Friendly Japanese Businessman in Arthur Golden's Memoirs of A Geisha

Memoirs of a Geisha, a novel by Arthur Golden, has worked to popularize an image of the geisha that is more personal and complex than the doll-like, one-dimensional stereotype that has preceded it in the American mind. With its “utterly convincing narrator,” a fictional former geisha who lived in New York for three decades, the novel has sold more than 4 million English copies since its debut in 1997 in the United States.¹ The novel appeared on the New York Times bestseller list for fifty-eight weeks in 1997 and 1998. It has touched not only individuals but also groups of readers as demonstrated by one reading group in Illinois who met to discuss Memoirs while seated on the floor, sipping green tea.² It has also prompted both the publication of books about geisha by various American writers as well as English translations of old Japanese books and films about geisha.³ The geisha image from Memoirs inspired fashion designers to create Western versions of clothing that were patterned after the kimono, a trend that was

¹ Joseph L. Galloway, “Protests of a Geisha,” U.S. News & World Report 13 March 2000, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 30 May 2000 <http://web.lexisnexus.com/universe/document?_m=...>: 12, Anne Allison, “Memoirs of the Orient,” Journal of Japanese Studies 27:2 (2001): 383.

² Alec Foege and Nancy Day, “Geisha Guy,” People 23 Nov. 1998, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 11 Sep. 2003 <http://web1.epnet.com/DeliveryPrintSave.asp?tb=1&_ug=dbs+2+fic+19+ln+en-us...> 89.

³ Although originally produced in Japan in 1979, the film “The World of Geisha” was released in American in 2003. In this film, geisha are described as prostitutes.

taken up by the singer Madonna.⁴ Calling Memoirs the “Cinderella of the Orient,” film director Steven Spielberg expressed interest in making a film based on the story.⁵ Memoirs has also been translated into thirty-three languages. In Germany it appeared on the bestseller list, while in Japan, after overcoming difficulty finding a translator, the Japanese version of Memoirs, titled Sayuri, was finally published in 1999 and received mixed responses. Memoirs has thus circulated the image created in the novel throughout many parts of the world.⁶

Memoirs is a fictitious autobiography of a former geisha, Sayuri Nitta. Her story is told from the perspective gained in her later years spent in New York, where she lived for three decades. As portrayed in the novel, an American scholar of Japanese history obtains Ms. Nitta's permission in the late 1980s to record her life story for American readers—with the understanding that it will be published only after her death. Set between the 1930s and early post-W.W.II in Kyoto, Japan, Memoirs is a coming-of-age story which unfolds during a significant transition in Japanese society.⁷ The protagonist is

⁴ Ruth La Ferla notes in the caption of a photo that “Madonna wore a red vinyl obi and gown with jumbo kimono sleeves” to the Grammy Awards in 1999 (Ruth La Ferla, “Old Trick: Daring to Conceal; Geisha chic's allure derives from wrapping and reticence,” New York Times 9 May 1999, LexisNexis Academic. U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 30 May 2003 <[http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?m...>](http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?m...)).

⁵ According to “Greg's Preview Thoughts” from <http://movies.yahoo.com>, Spielberg will produce rather than direct a film based on Memoirs. Rob Marshall, director of Chicago, is enthusiastic about directing Spielberg's film, which is to be released in 2005 through a joint venture between Miramax, Sony, and DreamWorks.

⁶ Galloway, pars. 1.

⁷ Memoirs shows Sayuri before, during, and after WWII, which enormously influences her life and the geisha society. American people and culture step into Japanese society more visibly and transform it from a relatively closed society to an open one after WWII because of Japan defeat in WWII.

Chiyo, a poor Japanese girl who is sold to a geisha house and eventually becomes one of its most popular geisha, Sayuri Nitta.

Born to poor, debilitated, and dying parents, Chiyo grows up in the small town of Yoroido on the Sea of Japan. She becomes aware of her underprivileged circumstance during her childhood in Yoroido. When the president of a local company in Yoroido pays attention to her by inviting her to his home, she dreams about being adopted and having what her poor family can't give her. Contrary to her fantasy, the president of the local company sells Chiyo to an *okiya* (geisha house) in Kyoto and her less attractive big sister to a brothel. Chiyo is nine years old at the time she is sold.

Though she is fascinated by the luxurious kimonos, the beginning of Chiyo's indentured life is not easy; she is unable to make sense of her existence in the geisha house. Working as a maid, she is also at the bottom of the hierarchy in the *okiya*, and a young, mean, popular geisha in the *okiya* bullies her all the time. Yet she attracts the attention of others in the geisha community, in part owing to her unusual gray eyes, which symbolize beauty and uniqueness as well as fluidity and flexibility in Japanese culture. Her life begins to improve when Mameha, one of the most popular geisha, officially becomes Chiyo's "big sister." Mameha tames and educates Chiyo to rid her of "peasant" behavior, leading her through the traditional rituals of geisha life, including *mizuage*.

Ultimately, Chiyo is named Nitta Sayuri, indicating she is a geisha of her Nitta *okiya*, and becomes a refined, experienced, and successful geisha. Although Sayuri

experiences many difficulties adjusting to life as a geisha, she strives to excel, partially because she has no better life than the one she has in the geisha community. Sayuri also dreams that she will someday become the mistress of her prince charming—the chairman of a large electronic company who once treated her kindly at a miserable moment in her early experience as a maid. Eventually, her relationship with powerful male clients—and the high bid that is earned for her mizuage—secure her a respected position in the okiya and in the community. Eventually, she does become the mistress of her long-desired prince, the Chairman. After retiring from her profession and creating a comfortable home with him, she decides to move to New York—alone—so as not to jeopardize the Chairman's family affairs through her presence as his mistress. In New York, she entertains Japanese businessmen who live or come there, just as she used to do as a geisha.

Liza Dalby and Jodi Cobb had already introduced contemporary non-fictional portrayals of geisha in 1983 and 1995 respectively. Yet, neither of their works captured large general audiences nor generated a fascination with geisha as Memoirs has. “Part historical novel, part fairy tale and part Dickensian romance,” Memoirs, narrated by a former geisha in Kyoto, invites readers into an alien yet familiar world by constructing a fictitious romance and success story set against a titillating exotic background.⁸ In this woman's coming-of-age story, Memoirs lets readers walk through the protagonist's

⁸ Michiko Kakutani, “Book of the Times; A Woman's Tale, Imagined by a Man,” rev. of Memoirs of a Geisha, by Arthur Golden, New York Times 14 Oct. 1997, LexisNexis Academic. U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu. 30 May 2003 <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m...> pars 3.

(Sayuri) experiences alongside her; Golden tells the New York Times staff writer Dinitia Smith that he created a child character so that “the reader could share her sense of wonder at each new experience.”⁹ The first-person narrative also makes it easier for American readers to “slip into” Sayuri’s mind and the unfamiliar world, putting the readers’ racial, cultural, and class differences behind.¹⁰ In addition, even though many American readers might not have been familiar with Japanese or geisha history and culture, the background information Memoirs provides allows the reader to understand Sayuri’s circumstance in the larger historical and cultural context. Moreover, the focus on Sayuri’s life and mind humanizes the image of a geisha and demonstrates the complexity of her life and geisha society as a whole. Her success story—going from being poor to becoming the most successful geisha and a mistress of a president of a large company due to her beauty, determination, and strength—empowers her as a woman and a geisha. Thus, Memoir's careful attention to a geisha’s personal life through the inclusion of the geisha's point of view appears to give an intimate and comprehensive picture of a geisha and her society. Golden's story is both convincing and powerful to the Western reader, seemingly challenging the previous one-dimensional Orientalist view and portrayal of a geisha.

The popularity of Memoirs, however, is a testimony to general, white, middle-class, American readers' perceptions about their relationship with Japan at the given time more than it is an accurate representation of the geisha. Whether the images of things

⁹ Smith, Dinitia. “Man Who Dared To Write About a Geisha’s Mind,” New York Times 29 December 1998, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 20 May 2003 <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m. . .> pars. 20.

Japanese are positive/non-stereotypical (such as those created by depicting a humanized and empowered geisha) or negative/stereotypical (by conforming the images to an Orientalist framework), they are American constructions that tell more about American values and dominant white Americans than they do of Japanese. Sayuri's complex, humanized character embodies the idea of third wave feminism: it is through her self-acknowledged beauty and strength that she creates a successful life as a woman and a geisha. Moreover, Sayuri's life story is set in a traditional environment, speaking to some readers' interest in conservatism, which surfaced during the 1980s. The story thus invites intrigue on two accounts: her survival and success within the confined geisha society make readers sympathize with her hardships; and readers are fascinated by the depiction of her life in the more controlled and traditional, and at the same time exotic, society.

While creating a comfortable proximity between a geisha's experience and American readers (especially white middle-class American women), Memoirs also constructs a safe distance from the readers by exoticizing, eroticizing, and disempowering Sayuri's character and, by extension, her life. The story juxtaposes empowered and disempowered, familiar and unfamiliar, with Sayuri representing the "Other" positioned against an American background.¹¹ Shaped by American and Orientalist perspectives, it creates a victimized and childlike geisha character that is

¹⁰ A review of Memoirs posted on Amazon.com

¹¹ Edward Said in Orientalism discusses the West's construction of an imaginary "Other," things Eastern, as opposed to the "Us," Western. Using the social, cultural, and political power of the West, the Westerner constructed and spread the notion that the "Other" represents anything un-Western, such as pre-modernity,

trapped in the mentality of “Chiyo,” her childhood name. The mentality of “Chiyo” immobilizes and numbs Sayuri's ability to have agency over her life because of the powerlessness and inferiority that “Chiyo” feels. Because of this mentality, she remains passive and submissive in the face of power and craves a powerful figure that will give stability to her life. By portraying Sayuri as a character whose childhood mentality overpowers and oppresses her despite her success as a geisha, Memoirs fundamentally takes power away from her. In addition, Memoirs particularly focuses on the exploitation of her body, what she wears, and her relationship with males. This reinforces the Orientalist image of a geisha as a commodity, displayed and victimized by males.

The story also locates the geisha's life during a significant transition period in Japanese society, the pre-WWII to the post-WWII period. The positioning of the story at this particular time reflects America's general interest in the social changes that allow for a coexistence of old and new societies; the juxtaposition of Japanese tradition and the modern West creates an exoticness and strangeness because they are portrayed as representing opposite ends of the world —reinforcing an “us” and “other” mentality.¹² In addition, Sayuri's story mirrors America's obsession with pre-modern society and the dying traditions of the “Other,” which gives a nostalgic feeling for a place that is “lost in civilization.” Memoirs thus constructs an exotic, yet seemingly empowered portrayal of a

femininity, backwardness of the society, culture, and people. The notion is used to completely separate the imaginary West from the imaginary East to position the West as superior to the East.

¹² Memoirs shows geisha's life and her society before, during, and after the WWII. The recent film The Last Samurai also focuses on the period of social transition (around 1868) in Japan.

geisha's life story that fits into the values, desires, and longings of white middle-class Americans.

The portrayal of Japanese men in Memoirs also reflects a particular perspective, one that is depicted in Western mainstream media at the time. As an article in Newsweek on March 17, 1997, "Dimming the Sun," indicates, the failure of the Japanese economy made it no longer necessary for mainstream media to depict Japanese businessmen as threatening, cold, and unpredictable. Instead, it predicts that the Japanese are becoming "more savvy, less frightening and probably working with a partner in America."¹³ In addition to the recession that softened the American view toward Japanese men, the increasing competitiveness in the political and economical world might be linked to the "improved" status of Japanese; America needed to consider Japan, whose economical and technological powers are undeniable, as its partner. Memoirs emphasizes an ideal male figure, embodied in the Chairman Iwamura, who is a reticent, generous, and an understanding father figure for Sayuri. He is smart, but neither overwhelmingly powerful nor cold. As the Newsweek article aligns a changing set of characteristics with Japanese businessmen, Memoirs likewise portrays a wealthy, intelligent Japanese man. However, his character reflects the image of Japanese businessman as a supportive ally to America. Creating the Chairman as Sayuri's prince, the story also speaks to conservatives in America, because of the Chairman's traditional, generous, matured character. The ideal male figure as characterized in Memoirs fits many Americans' expectations at the end of

the 21st century—Japanese men are friendly and cooperative, as well as respectful representatives of the traditional Japan as they see it.

Authenticizing the Novel

The author, Arthur Golden, spent many years researching, developing, and writing his story about a geisha. Though coming from a family who owns a majority of The New York Times Company stock, Golden lived in Chattanooga in his childhood, relatively distanced from his relatives' lives in New York. While acquiring a Master's degrees in Japanese history at Columbia University and English at Boston University, he lived in Beijing, China, studying Chinese Mandarin in 1980, and worked at a magazine company in Tokyo in the early 1980s. It was then, in Tokyo, that he became friends with a Japanese man whose father was a businessman and mother a geisha.¹⁴ Inspired by his friend's background, Golden eventually decided to write a life story about a geisha. He "read anything [he] found on the subject, in English and in Japanese," and produced two 800-page drafts in 7 years. He then got the chance to interview a real former geisha, Mineko Iwasaki, in Japan; his interview with her made him realize that everything he had learned to date was wrong. His meeting with Iwasaki resulted in his throwing away of the two drafts entirely. He decided instead to produce a fictitious geisha's autobiography in the first-person; Golden claims, he knew [he could] fake the past...[and] it turns out the

¹³ Jeffrey Bartholet, "Japan: Dimming the Sun," Newsweek 17 March 1997: 39.

¹⁴ Jeff Giles, "Well, If the Kimono Fits," Newsweek 20 October 1997, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 30 May 2003 <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m...> 56.

same skill goes into faking another gender.”¹⁵ Golden also asserts that his intimate understanding of his mother, sister, wife, daughter, and female friends provided him insight into a female character: he says, “[i]f I could understand and sympathize with their points of view, perhaps I could do the same with Sayuri's.”¹⁶ In contradiction to Mrs. Iwasaki's accusation that Memoirs is loosely about her life story, Golden claims that he mostly acquired information about geisha traditions and rituals from Mrs. Iwasaki, but did not use her personal story. After spending 10 years researching and writing, Golden created a convincing geisha character, chronicling her survival and romance, which mesmerized and captivated many white middle-class American readers.

As the paperback cover of Memoirs implicitly indicates, it is a novel, not an autobiography. Yet, it became more than a fiction for many American readers; Rinkoo H. Ramchandani, an Indian researcher who lives in Hong Kong, argues that it “is no autobiography, but it has the undeniable feel of authenticity.”¹⁷ Through its use of first-person narrative, Memoirs creates a powerful story, which focuses on Sayuri's mind, and confuses the fact that it is a work of fiction. In addition, the Japanese cultural and historical information Golden provided was praised by numerous book reviewers and readers, who posted their responses in Amazon.com, for showing an appreciation and

¹⁵ Smith, pars. 21.

¹⁶ “A Conversation with Arthur Golden,” Vintage Books Sep. 6, 2003, <<http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/golden.html>> pars. 13.

¹⁷ Rinkoo H. Ramchandani, “Flirting with the Question of Sex: Japan's geisha are more than tea ladies. But how much more?” rev. of Memoirs of a Geisha, by Arthur Golden, Asiaweek 19 Dec. 1997, LexisNexis Academic. U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 30 May 2003 <<http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/97/1219/feat2.html>> pars. 6.

understanding of a geisha's life by its situating Sayuri in the larger social and political picture. Interpreting the information to be facts also reinforces the authenticity of the novel. In her article "Memoirs of the Orient," Anne Allison interviews and examines American readers who read Memoirs. According to Allison and the readers' book reviews at Amazon.com, many readers understood Memoirs to be mostly historically and culturally accurate, conveying the personal story of a "real" geisha; Allison asserts the novel is, "widely perceived to be historically and ethnographically correct."¹⁸ It may be easy to become lost in the vast amounts of information on Japanese people and culture provided in Memoirs—information that might often be foreign to Westerners— and believe its legitimacy. Allison also finds that many American readers of Memoirs, predominantly white, middle-class women, had never been particularly interested in or exposed to stories about Japan in general, much less geisha.¹⁹ For many, therefore, Memoirs provided the most detailed and extensive ideas about not only geisha life but of Japanese culture, society, and history. Westerners read about the foreign, exotic life without a critical eye with which to decipher fact from fiction. For those who have some knowledge of Japan, Memoirs became a pleasant addition to further enhance their familiarity with Japanese culture.²⁰ In fact, many readers who posted responses on the

¹⁸ Anne Allison, "Memoirs of the Orient," Journal of Japanese Studies 27:2 (2001): 383.

¹⁹ Allison, 387. "[W]hite Euro-American women between the ages of 25 and mid-70s (are) the primary reading audience for Memoirs" (Allison 384).

²⁰ For example, many European and American classic and contemporary books are available for both children and adults (though I hardly read non-Western literature when I grew up). Even before I learned and understood about lives and cultures outside my home and country, I enjoyed reading the Adventure of Tom Sawyer and the Adventure of Huck Finn and so on. This is not the case in America. They read American and European literature, not Japanese.

Memoirs website at Amazon.com expressed their intention to read other books about geisha and Japan after reading Memoirs.²¹ Because of the readers' limited exposure to and unfamiliarity with Japanese culture, the interplay between fictitious autobiography and historical and cultural information worked to legitimize Golden's imaginary story as an authentic, factual, and comprehensive account. Memoirs has thus become an influential text for the dominant, middle-class, white, American audience's understanding of the geisha and Japanese culture.

Memoirs' use of first-person narrative calls attention to the geisha's life and mind from her perspective, and further reinforces the authenticity of the geisha's voice in many readers' minds. As many readers at Amazon.com note, the narrative style makes it easier for the readers to enter her mind. Yet, first-person narrative, in fact, confuses the image of a geisha by minimizing the fictionalization of the story which is largely influenced by American perspectives. The readers believe that it is "her" voice, and Memoirs' entire story, which is supposedly a translation of an interview, becomes "real." Moreover, Sayuri's conversational style creates an intimate and immediate atmosphere that makes it easy for American readers to become engrossed in "her" story. For example, when Sayuri tries to correct a popular misconception about a geisha's relationship with a male patron, she says that "[s]o, you see, a geisha of the first or second tier in Gion can't be bought for a single night, not by anyone."²² By writing as if Sayuri were talking to the readers

²¹ They especially name Liza Dalby's Geisha as the next text, because Golden refers to it in his acknowledgement.

²² Arthur Golden, Memoirs of a Geisha: A Novel (New York: Vintage Books, 1999) 147.

directly, she becomes an authorized speaker representing the geisha culture for an American audience. In addition, because Sayuri has been residing in New York for three decades, she seems to know the information about geishas that many Americans have. Her supposed Americanization further legitimizes Sayuri's voice because readers can comfortably trust Sayuri since she has attained an "American" perspective—she is speaking to them from a position aligned with their own.

In addition to the creation of Sayuri as a speaker, in the "Translator's Note," Golden introduces the character Jacob Haarhuis, the translator. This helps to conceal the fact that the novel is constructed by an American author with American ideas and perspectives, and emphasizes that the source of the novel is Sayuri, who is Japanese. In the note, Haarhuis, a historian of Japan, explains how he came to know Sayuri in the late 1980s in New York and obtained permission to record her life story. By creating a translator who befriends Sayuri, Golden emphasizes that the only role an American plays in this story is as a mediator and translator. Moreover, his credibility as a scholar ensures accurate interpretations of Japanese history and culture as well as language, making his character, and by extension the story, more real. This literary move de-emphasizes Golden as the author of the fictitious story, and stresses Sayuri's alleged control over the story.

Through these techniques, Golden successfully introduces a powerful image: a realistic and convincing geisha, who intimately speaks to the American audience. However, images in Memoirs, like those in National Geographic are problematic—they

construct an American ideal of the “Other” and present it as factual. By presenting images as both authentic and legitimate, Memoirs has influenced, and reinforced constructed images of Japanese culture in many Americans’ minds.

Breaking Stereotypes of an American Image of a Geisha?

Memoirs traces the change of Sayuri’s life from being poor in the countryside to becoming a powerful successful geisha in Kyoto. The novel begins in New York, with a customer in Sayuri’s club telling her that he cannot possibly believe Sayuri grew up “in a dump like Yoroido.” This scene implies that Sayuri has successfully erased her lower-class background completely.²³ Then Memoirs focuses on her childhood in Yoroido when Sayuri is still Chiyo, a powerless child from a poor family in the small town. Carefully showing the contrast between her childhood and her geisha life, the text seems to demystify the one-dimensional, fixed image of a geisha; she is not born to be one, but the extensive training and experience she undergoes creates the refined geisha she becomes. By depicting her childhood as well as her transformation, Memoirs tells a story about geisha that has never been told before.

Memoirs begins with an account of Sayuri's childhood. During her childhood, her father is very patriarchal; he doesn't speak to her much and orders her to do things with gestures. One day, when she is around seven, her mother grows seriously ill, and a local doctor comes to see her. Sayuri remembers that when Dr. Miura knocked on the door, her

father, a fisherman, was working with a fishnet, and she says, he “took a moment to point his eyes at me and raise one of his fingers. This meant he wanted me to answer the door.”²⁴ As a dictator in the house, he neither made an effort to ask her nor allowed her to say something back to him. Sayuri also describes how Dr. Miura, an intellectual and “important” man in her village, also treats her as if she were not worth his attention; she tells Haarhuis, he “was far too proud to notice a creature like me. When I opened the door for him, he slipped out of his shoes and stepped right past me into the house.”²⁵ She is indeed invisible in the traditional hierarchical world of that time.

After being sold to an okiya, Chiyo works as a maid and stays at the bottom of the hierarchy in her okiya and geisha society for a while. After one of the most popular young geisha, Mameha, agrees to become Chiyo’s big sister and train her as a geisha, Chiyo (who takes the geisha name Sayuri) gradually acquires the power to attract wealthy male clients due to Mameha's influence and Sayuri’s beauty, and intelligence. She eventually obtains the okiya’s Mother’s approval to become the successor of the okiya. When the geisha society is forced to close down during WWII, Sayuri explains that some of her colleagues were killed by the war and others become prostitutes. Sayuri, on the other hand, finds her long-time client and he introduces her to an old kimono maker who is now making parachutes. The kimono maker gives her a job, and she finds that it is easier work than what other geisha or Japanese do. Using her professional conversational

²³ Golden, 8.

²⁴ Golden, 11.

²⁵ Golden, 11.

skills, she associates with powerful male clients who help her to survive during the social turmoil caused by the war.

Eventually, Sayuri unites with the Chairman and strives to create sense of home with him—something she has come so far to find. The romance story not only emphasizes Sayuri's strength but also her determination to have life her own way. Sayuri gradually transforms herself from being invisible to visible. The text stresses that the geisha profession gave her opportunities her life in Yoroido would never have afforded her. In her life as a refined, popular geisha, who develops relationships with wealthy male clients, she experiences more power over her life and within her okiya and the geisha society than many other geisha.

Memoirs not only brings attention to Sayuri's power and strength, it also calls into question the old, Western, stereotypical idea that geisha were born into their profession. Without any information about the training geisha receive from their mentors behind the scene, those unfamiliar with Japanese culture could easily misunderstand that geisha naturally have submissive and demure characters—they see the kimono and the ornaments, and witness their accommodating behavior and assume they simply serve men physically. By showing the transformation Chiyo goes through in order to become a geisha, the novel humanizes the image, and shows a geisha as a woman. The novel details Sayuri's childhood before she goes to live in an okiya in Gion and begins her training. It exposes the "tricks" younger, apprentice geisha learn, such as how to arouse men as well as perform traditional rituals. For example, Sayuri's "older sister," Mameha, patiently

teaches Sayuri how to pour a cup of tea seductively. By showing a glimpse of her forearm, she “can keep him [a male customer] happy by letting him think he’s permitted to see parts of your body no one else can see.”²⁶ Mameha also shows Sayuri how to drink tea and bow while walking in order for Chiyo to get rid of her “peasant” behaviors.²⁷ Explaining to Chiyo that “a geisha must be very careful about the image she presents to the world,” Mameha emphasizes how the geisha construct and control their own image.²⁸ The standards of professionalism for a geisha are gradually embedded into Chiyo and she transforms from a peasant into a cultured geisha—at least on the surface. Chiyo's transformation demonstrates that a geisha's passive yet mesmerizing character is the result of deliberate and calculated intentions.

Memoirs also discloses the complexity and depth of Sayuri, which she keeps hidden; she not only learns how to act favorably for male clients, but is also trained to mask her true self and emotions —any semblance of “Chiyo.” The mask Sayuri wears to keep Chiyo hidden, in fact, according to John Schwartz, whose work includes Bicycle Days, a novel set in Japan, makes “the reader feel the ever-present weight of Sayuri’s mask while never allowing us to forget, even for a moment, the girl Chiyo who bears it.”²⁹ Thus, though Chiyo's behavior and appearance implies that she has changed into the geisha Sayuri, it is this training that teaches Sayuri to keep “Chiyo” buried deep within.

²⁶ Golden, 168.

²⁷ Golden, 140.

²⁸ Golden, 140.

²⁹ John Burnham Schwartz, “Masked Memoir: Bringing a Famous Geisha Back to Life,” rev. of Memoirs of a Geisha, by Arthur Golden, New Yorker 29 Sept. 1997: 82.

However, Chiyo remains at the core of her consciousness. The transformations that occur inside her are both deliberate and conscious. When Chiyo goes through the initiation ceremony to become an apprentice geisha, she clearly sees that her geisha identity is going to be different from “Chiyo;” she says:

when I heard her call me “Sayuri,” I realized what was bothering me. It was as if the little girl named Chiyo, running barefoot from the pond to her tipsy house, no longer existed. I felt that this new girl, Sayuri, with her gleaming white face and her red lips, had destroyed her.³⁰

Sayuri recognizes that “Chiyo” is buried under a mask when she wears a geisha’s make-up and kimono. Examining how she transforms herself into a geisha in a mirror, her mind is detached from her being, and she observes the masquerade objectively. When she begins to be called “Sayuri,” she feels that Chiyo has disappeared from the surface and nobody could see who she really is anymore. This scene shows how the geisha profession dominates over her true identity.

Sayuri gradually gets used to her look and professional character. She gradually seems to be able to identify as a geisha comfortably. Yet, the novel reveals that she keeps her identity as “Chiyo” at her core. Especially whenever she dreams about the Chairman—when she thinks of him, she is not Sayuri, but Chiyo. It is then that she reveals that “Chiyo’s” consciousness is not affected by her geisha training and work. She neither has chances to see, entertain, or talk to the Chairman in ozashiki, nor has the

opportunity to pursue her own desires because of her profession. Yet, she is always conscious of her true identity, which she believes only the Chairman understands. Sayuri explains, the Chairman “was the only man I’d ever entertained as Sayuri the geisha who had also known me as Chiyo.”³¹ Therefore, Memoirs juxtaposes the human side of “Chiyo” with the professional geisha Sayuri. By focusing on the geisha’s world from a geisha’s perspective, the story exposes the techniques geisha use to control and manipulate their images so they can acquire what they want: a wealthy patron, financial stability, and independence. Concurrently, the presence of “Chiyo” in Sayuri’s consciousness demonstrates the impossibility of erasing her childhood identity even after several decades of successfully disguising herself as a geisha.

As in the earlier Western images, Memoirs demonstrates the centrality of men in Sayuri’s life, but not always in the way an Orientalist image might; Memoirs exposes Sayuri’s power and control over her relationships with male clients to some degree. Sayuri’s relationships with male clients are spaces where she is able to use her skill to manipulate men’s social power for her own empowerment. For example, Memoirs details her relationship with Nobu Toshikazu (the president of Iwamura Electric Company). Though she doesn’t love him, Sayuri gives intimate attention to him because of his social position as a president of a large company. Sayuri’s behavior in this relationship shows how she plays a game with Nobu in order to obtain power in the geisha community. At the same time, Sayuri carefully avoids being chosen as Nobu’s mistress. Even though

³⁰ Golden, 167.

Nobu becomes attracted to her and plans to take her as a mistress, Sayuri finds ways to distract him because of her true affection towards the Chairman. By paying close attention to the "behind-the-scenes" mentality of a geisha, Memoirs shows Sayuri's control over male clients, and how she uses this control in order to get what she wants: success as a geisha and the Chairman Iwamura. Although Sayuri must use her body to attain professional and personal success, the text shows how her professionalism allows her to detach herself from any romantic involvements. Ultimately, Memoirs, through Sayuri's experiences, shows how intelligent geisha can manipulate their power to control their fates in private spheres (ozashiki); although their behavior implies that they are accommodating their male clients, in actuality they are acting out of their own interest. In this way, Memoirs, demonstrates the dynamics of a human relationship between a female and a male that go beyond the surface of a geisha/patron relationship.

Bound by Her Childhood "Chiyo's" Consciousness: Victimization and Disempowerment of Sayuri

Sayuri Goes Back to "Chiyo," Her Childhood-Self, as a Man's Mistress

Through "Chiyo's" emotional attachment to Chairman Iwamura, a savior in her fantasy, Memoirs ultimately cages Sayuri in her childhood despite her survival and success as a geisha. After living several decades in Kyoto and becoming a matured geisha, Sayuri still believes that "Kyoto wasn't [her] home" and Sayuri is not her true identity.³²

³¹ Golden, 394.

³² Golden, 398.

Her professional self is all an act, and her childhood-self, “Chiyo,” is waiting for her prince, the Chairman, to rediscover and rescue her from being somebody else’s mistress. Thus, when the Chairman finally decides to take her as a mistress and confesses his secret support for her for years, Sayuri’s, or actually “Chiyo’s,” dream comes true; she finally finds a home with a man who understands and loves her for what she really is. They have a peaceful, happy life together for a few years, spending nights at a house that the Chairman purchased for her. Her life “softened into something much more pleasant” and she “began to feel like a tree whose roots had at last broken into the rich, wet soil deep beneath the surface.”³³ Yet, their patron-mistress relationship soon ends when she finds out that the Chairman’s legitimate daughter’s marriage is jeopardized because of the presence of his mistress, Sayuri. Seeing him upset, she offers to leave his side and Japan for his sake and the sake of his family.

Thus, Sayuri moves to New York in 1956 and sets up a small teahouse for Japanese men living in or visiting New York. She stresses the happiness, comfort, and stability she eventually acquired after becoming the Chairman’s mistress; she describes her relationship with him, saying she “fell toward the Chairman just as a stone must fall toward the earth.”³⁴ Even though she has to move away from him and Japan because of her status as a mistress, she doesn’t see this is a misfortune—she only sees the benefits her relationship with the Chairman brought her. Sayuri says, she “never before had occasion to think of [herself] as more fortunate than others, and yet now [she] was”—in

³³ Golden, 419.

New York, forty years after she left Japan, living a happy life with financial security.³⁵

Memoirs' ending manifests a typical geisha story at the turn of the 20th century. She seems to be a strong woman who is able to decide to give up both the Chairman and her geisha life in Japan. At the same time, using American values of freedom and equality as the departure point, Sayuri's life in New York until her death, as well as her response to it, emphasizes the limited happiness she attained from being a former geisha.

After being a professional geisha for a decade, all she needed, as Memoirs shows, is not independence as a woman, but the Chairman who provides the sense of home and security. Because of her consciousness as "Chiyo," she looks for what she needed when she was child. Her obsession with her childhood illustrates that she is mentally stuck, and her transformation and empowerment as a geisha are not important. She remains a child who needs protection, a financial provider, and emotional support. Memoirs thus portrays her as an innocent child in her heart, who is only a matured and successful woman on the outside.

Thus, while narrating Sayuri's personal and professional success story, Memoirs keeps the image of geisha within the framework of the inferior "other." Being called "the Cinderella story of the Orient," it demonstrates the limited power, independence, and happiness that Sayuri has and is content with, which differentiates her from the Western Cinderella story—whose story doesn't end until she has married her Prince Charming. It

³⁴ Golden, 428.

³⁵ Golden, 419.

constructs an all too common American story of the "Other," who is grateful for their limited rights, compared to an American counterpart, who wants it all.

Allowing the Commodification of Her Body through "Chiyo's" Mentality

Geishas are popularly believed to be high-class prostitutes (courtesans or concubines); Golden tells in his interview with Random House that that was always the first question people asked him.³⁶ In Memoirs, Sayuri is not technically depicted as a prostitute; she does not sell her body to a variety of men randomly. Rather, her physical contact and relationships with others are highly restricted and controlled; both mizuage and geisha-patron relationships need official approval from the proprietress of a geisha's okiya. Unlike one of the stereotypical images of the geisha, the novel does not eroticize Sayuri's character, either; she is not interested in sex at all. The text, therefore, seems to challenge the geisha image as prostitutes.

Nonetheless, Sayuri's sexuality is exploited when people abuse her body. Although her virginity is not taken until she goes through the mizuage, her virginity is examined twice and there are other occasions her body is mistreated. The thoroughness of the coverage of these events emphasizes the significance of her virginity and the centrality of her sexual experience to her profession. In these scenarios, Memoirs, through "Chiyo," describes extensively what is done and how she looks at and feels about it at that time. Chiyo's narration provides a mesmerizing account of the way people have

violated her body. Thus, Memoirs, like old, American stereotypes, still describes a geisha's body as a commodity for powerful and wealthy men and women.³⁷ Focusing on the violation of Sayuri's innocent body and mind, and her inability to prevent the abuses, it stresses the exotic, erotic, and underprivileged circumstances of a geisha.

Memoirs meticulously depicts the first violation to her body in Yoroido —what is done to Chiyo's body and how she feels and thinks about it; she is scared, but determined to behave, in order to leave a good impression on Mr. Tanaka. Being an innocent, passive girl, Chiyo does not understand why and what people are doing to her body. Since she is little, however, she knows that she needs to be submissive because she acknowledges her powerlessness, and believes that she needs to obey in order to get support from people who have power. At the age of nine, before being sold to an okiya, Mr. Tanaka takes Chiyo and her big sister to his office and leaves them with an old woman, Mrs. Fidget, who is assigned to check their virginities. She describes what is done to her big sister, though she "could no longer bring [herself] to watch" after Mrs. Fidget forcefully splits the sister's legs apart.³⁸ Mrs. Fidget does the same thing to Chiyo, which makes her feel "as a dam must feel when it's holding back an entire river."³⁹ Believing that it is part of the adoption process that Mr. Tanaka plans for Chiyo, however, she tries to tolerate Mrs.

³⁶ "A Conversation with Arthur Golden," pars. 17.

³⁷ In Memoirs, two women are involved in the brutalization of Sayuri's body; Mrs. Fidget and a proprietress of Sayuri's okiya (Mother). Mother uses a young male doctor to examine Sayuri's virginity before the bidding for mizuage. She is present in the room with the doctor, and orders Sayuri to lie down. After finding that Sayuri's virginity is not lost, Mother exclaims with joy and tells Sayuri, "You're a very expensive commodity, little girl" (Golden 273).

³⁸ Golden, 25.

³⁹ Golden, 26.

Fidget's examination of her body. She holds back her tears, because "[she] was afraid if Satsu or [she] began to sob like little children, [they] might look bad in Mr. Tanaka's eyes."⁴⁰ Memoirs shows how she surrenders, painfully acknowledging her powerless position as a girl from the lower class.

Sayuri's next sexual experience is also documented. This incident is a more serious sexual assault than the earlier one, in the sense that a man takes off her kimono and masturbates. The scene shows her bewilderment, embarrassment, and vain protest; however, in the end Sayuri is powerless and eventually surrenders to the situation. After she attends a party held by the Baron Matsunaga (Mameha's patron) outside Kyoto, she realizes that she is the only one left in his summer house. So, when he summons her to a back room, she becomes nervous and tries to refuse his request, but she eventually yields to his power: "he was a man with so much authority that even Mameha couldn't disobey him."⁴¹ (Unlike Mameha, who is his mistress, Sayuri might not have as much obligation to give in to him completely, although she might not realize this.) The Baron does not take her virginity, however. Understanding the geisha culture, that a virgin can only be purchased, he instead masturbates while loosening her kimono. Being embarrassed and scared, she tries to stop him from untying her kimono: she says, "I kept trying to stop him with my hands, but he pushed them away...."⁴² Describing her fear, her helpless protest,

⁴⁰ Golden, 26.

⁴¹ Golden, 260.

⁴² Golden, 261.

and her tears at the end, Memoirs depicts Sayuri as a mere doll for the powerful man to play with as he will—who has no say in her sexual experiences.

As I mentioned earlier, her mizuage is not only the climax of her life but also of the novel. Through her several experiences (including on two other occasions), Memoirs explicitly informs how Sayuri's virginity is examined, confirmed, and protected, without her understanding what the sexual assault she experiences is all about.⁴³ The story also explains how her mizuage influences her future. Because of the high price Dr. Crab paid for Sayuri's mizuage, Mother of her okiya names Sayuri as her successor of the okiya. Sayuri, thus, secures her status as a legitimate daughter of the okiya, and the debt she owed to Mother for her purchase from her parents is completely erased. Thus, by the time the mizuage ceremony takes place, Sayuri is aware of the significance of the mizuage in her life. Yet, despite understanding the importance, it is not pleasant for her to have a sexual relationship with Dr. Crab whom she does not love. Memoirs shows Sayuri as a submissive, yet responsible professional geisha—it voices her disgust and distance from the sexual experience, feelings she hides from Dr. Crab and everyone else around her.

Memoirs spends five pages describing her mizuage ceremony, which begins by drinking sake to officially bind Sayuri and Dr. Crab together. Sayuri deals with the mizuage passively, like the times people abused her body without her understanding of

⁴³ One time Sayuri has to let a cook slightly cut part of her thigh. Because a famous mizuage patron, Dr. Crab, is fascinated with a virgin geisha's blood, Sayuri sacrifices her body to impress and titillate him. On Another occasion just before the bidding for her mizuage takes place, her virginity is examined by a young man in front of Mother of her okiya. In both occasions, Sayuri elaborately explains what is going on and how she feels about it.

the act. Still, she does not feel comfortable with the idea of mizuage and is a little scared. She thus reminds herself of her responsibility to conduct the ritual smoothly, particularly because of the high price Dr. Crab paid for her virginity. When she talks about how her mizuage was conducted with Dr. Crab, she explains it as if she was observing the ritual from a distance: Sayuri says:

When the Doctor untied the sash of his sleeping robe, I closed my eyes and brought a hand up to cover my mouth, but I thought better of it at the last moment in case I should make a bad impression, and I let my hand settle near my head instead...Soon there was a great deal of activity going on above me, and I could feel all sorts of movement inside me as well.⁴⁴

In order not to “make a bad impression,” Sayuri calmly observes what and how Dr. Crab does things. She even thinks about ways to make him feel comfortable, while she feels fearful and disgusted. At some point, she even hopes that “he was enjoying himself more than I was.”⁴⁵ Memoirs’ depiction of Sayuri during the mizuage shows how she takes her client's satisfaction seriously and sees this as necessary in order to improve her life as a geisha. Even though she is a victim of the ritual and the geisha society, she is oblivious to her victimized position because of her belief that she is powerless and needs the experience to elevate her status. In one sense, the novel describes her strength and professionalism to show her commitment to her professional success since she sees it as

⁴⁴ Golden, 283.

⁴⁵ Golden, 283.

the only way to advance herself. However, Memoirs also reinforces the image of a geisha who is exploited and victimized.

Interestingly, Memoirs does not depict any of her sexual experiences after her mizuage, and does not mention any sexual experiences with the Chairman. It is as if nobody is interested in her sexual experiences after her virginity is gone and she starts her official patronage relationship. Maybe because Sayuri is not a virgin anymore, it seems that her sexual relationship with men is not a violation to her body and mind anymore. By focusing on the violation to her childlike body and innocent mind, Memoirs shows Sayuri to be an innocent victim. Despite Memoirs' alleged focus on Sayuri's personal and professional success story, in the end it is another typical, voyeuristic story of the "Other."

The Disempowered Friendly Japanese Man Is an Ideal

Japanese male characters in Memoirs also mirror an American perspective of Japanese men in the late 1990s. By the time Memoirs was published in 1997, the "image of an unstoppable Japan, the stuff of scaremongering books, articles, and movies like "Rising Sun" in the 1970s and the 1980s" had diminished⁴⁶ As the Newsweek article "Japan: Dimming the Sun" reports, after Japan's economic demise, Japanese men did not disappear from the world, but instead became "a different kind of beast—more savvy, less frightening," and were most likely collaborating in business with an American

counterpart. Japanese businessmen, who learned from the burst of the bubble economy, now “would rather sit down with some guys in the U.S. [than follow the Japanese government] and see what [Americans are] up to.”⁴⁷ The images of Japanese men in Memoirs reflect the mainstream media's portrayals of Japanese men at the time. There are three main male characters in the book, Dr. Crab, Nobu Toshikazu, and Chairman Iwamura. Through Sayuri, the novel rejects Dr. Crab who is an elderly, obsessed man, and Nobu who is an aggressive, emotional, and blunt businessman. On the other hand, Sayuri's prince, the Chairman, is depicted as an ideal male character; he is a capable businessman who is also generous, reserved, and understanding. Asserting the Chairman's mature, father-figure as favorable and acceptable for Sayuri, the text creates an ideal Japanese male, which is actually archetypal from the American perspective, and matches the media's portrayal of Japanese businessmen at the time.

In contrast to Iwamura, Dr. Crab, Sayuri's mizuage patron, represents a disempowered Japanese man in the powerful mizuage ritual.⁴⁸ The mizuage appears to be a site for wealthy Japanese men to exploit geisha and exercise power over Japanese

⁴⁶ Bartholet, 38.

⁴⁷ Bartholet, 39.

⁴⁸ It seems to be very interesting to imagine having a different character as a mizuage patron, which would develop a very different story and impression of Sayuri's mizuage. For example, if the Chairman, who takes good care of Sayuri, were her mizuage patron, they could have an intimate, emotional sexual experience. The mizuage could then be a site to confirm their love, so that the story would not show Sayuri as a victim of the man and ritual. On the other hand, if the Baron Matsunaga would be the one, Sayuri's mizuage experience would have been very fearful, aggressive, and intimidating for her, because the Baron's fascination with her virginity. (The Baron, in fact, competes with Dr. Crab for Sayuri's virginity, but loses at the end.) The image of mizuage, thus, could have been a place for an erotic, powerful man to exercise his power and interest in her virginity. In this way, it is apparent how each character can completely alter the image of mizuage.

women and Japanese society. Memoirs, however, creates a strange, obsessive, and aged doctor, Dr. Crab, and gives an impression of a mizuage patron as almost comical; it seems that mizuage is not for ordinary people, but for an obsessive few who are wealthy enough to satisfy their obsession. Dr. Crab is a “methodical and orderly man” whose “shoulders hunched up and...[with] elbows sticking out so much [that] he couldn’t have done a better imitation of a crab if he’d made a study of it.”⁴⁹ Not only is his appearance absurd, but he collects samples of the geishas’ blood. From the beginning of the mizuage, it is clear that he paid enormous amount of money for Sayuri’s virginity, not because he was interested in having sex with a virgin, but because he is obsessed with gathering blood samples from virgins. So, before they begin sexual intercourse, he lines up his collection of specimens of geisha's blood in “glass vials, perhaps as many as forty or fifty of them” in front of Sayuri, which makes her disgusted.⁵⁰ After preparing to collect her blood, he begins sexual intercourse. Once he finished, he “was businesslike again,” collected her blood sample and “gave a formal bow and said, ‘Thank you very much.’”⁵¹ Dr. Crab’s figure contradicts the erotic image of mizuage, in that he almost transforms the ritual into a science lab by thoroughly organizing and controlling it for his own interest which seems relatively unrelated to the sexual act. He does have a sexual relationship with her, so he is depicted neither as impotent nor emasculate. Yet, his character is more bizarre, and comical than threatening. Sayuri’s depiction of the mizuage

⁴⁹ Golden, 215.

⁵⁰ Golden, 282.

⁵¹ Golden, 283.

reinforces Dr. Crab's non-threatening, old man figure; it does not suggest that his presence threatens or overpowers her.⁵² Thus, his character undermines the power that a mizuage patron and the mizuage ritual are supposed to have. By depicting an obsessed old man in this most dramatic and powerful site, Memoirs disempowers and feminizes Japanese wealthy men. It also discredits the mizuage which goes against the principals of Christianity and modernity as experienced in the West, since it allows a sexual relationship out of the wedlock and involves a man openly buying a virgin.

On the other hand, Nobu Toshikazu, the president of Iwamura Electric, reflects the American image of strong, aggressive Japanese businessmen at the peak of the Japanese economy. Through Sayuri's interaction with him, Memoirs disapproves and gets rid of Nobu's character at the end. Memoirs first introduces Nobu's distinctive features—he has a deformed face, ear, and neck, and only one limb; he is the WWI war hero. Nobu's character is in many ways unconventional compared to traditional Japanese men; he is practical and blunt. For example, he does not believe in superstitions and the Chairman calls him “the most modern man in the nation.”⁵³ He is straight-forward and does not always keep his opinions and emotions in his mind, which is opposite from what many Americans perceive about Japanese.⁵⁴ Nobu's relationship with Sayuri is also different from the ones she has with other males in Memoirs; their relationship is more

⁵² Memoirs even makes me believe that Dr. Crab has the role, simply because the ritual—a man's violation to Sayuri's virginity—has to be recorded.

⁵³ Golden, 200.

mutual and becomes a close friendship, because Nobu does not treat her as a commodity or a display doll. Instead, he respects her as “a resourceful girl” (he first meets her when she is fourteen years old).⁵⁵ Even though an ozashiki is a place for men to flirt with many geisha, he makes a commitment to Sayuri, and does not show any interest in other geisha. He is very emotional, too, which eventually makes his character uncontrollable and evil. Although Nobu explicitly shows his serious affection towards Sayuri over the years, Sayuri pretends to be unaware of it and avoids his unofficial offer to be her patron. Eventually, Sayuri plans to and succeeds in infuriating Nobu so much that he walks away from her forever. Portraying Nobu as emotional, aggressive, as well as untraditional, Memoirs discredits the war hero figure that seems threatening to Americans. Moreover, by Sayuri pushing him away, Memoirs suggests that the aggressive Japanese businessman is also on his way out.

Chairman Iwamura, the chairman of Iwamura Electronic, on the other hand, represents the ideal, friendly, non-threatening, gentleman-like Japanese male image popular in America at the turn of the 21st century. At the beginning of the novel, the Chairman leaves a dramatic impression on Sayuri and the readers by kindly paying attention to Chiyo, who is still a maid, sobbing on the side of a street. Although, after this initial encounter, the Chairman rarely appears until close to the end of the novel, Sayuri always reminds readers of his presence in her mind; her desire to be his mistress helps her

⁵⁴ In an recent article in New York Times “Japan Finds a Forum to Vent Most-Secret Feelings,” Norimitsu Onishi introduces Japanese society as culture where “subtlety is prized above all, face-to-face confrontation is avoided, insults can be leveled with verbal nuances and hidden meanings are found everywhere” (pars. 1)

endure her harsh experiences and motivates her to strive for success. At the end of the novel, the Chairman finally comes forward to take Sayuri as his mistress, and the readers see his reserved, considerate, and generous personality. The Chairman reveals that he is “the one who asked Mameha to take [Sayuri] under her care.”⁵⁶ Considering the fact that Sayuri might not have become a geisha without having Mameha as a big sister, the Chairman’s support is fundamental to Sayuri’s geisha career. Though influencing Sayuri’s future, the Chairman never explicitly expresses his feelings towards Sayuri. Only at the end of Memoirs does the Chairman confess to Sayuri the reason he did not approach Sayuri:

I made up my mind, the moment I became aware of [Nobu’s] affection for you, that I would keep my interest in you hidden so that Nobu could have you.⁵⁷

The Chairman explains that he owes Nobu much for the success of his company. Also the Chairman sympathizes for Nobu whose “life has been cruel to him,” and thus decides to yield to Nobu.⁵⁸ The Chairman is depicted as a calm, mature man, unlike Nobu, who is emotional and impulsive. When Sayuri pretends to have a sexual relationship with a man in order to make Nobu angry, Nobu reacts the way she has predicted. On the other hand, seeing despair in her eyes, the Chairman tries to understand why, instead of what, she has done. Finally, the Chairman realizes his responsibility for Sayuri: “when [Nobu] reacted

⁵⁵ Golden, 314.

⁵⁶ Golden, 412.

⁵⁷ Golden, 415.

so angrily . . . well, if he couldn't forgive you [Sayuri] for what you'd done, it was clear to me [the Chairman] he was never truly your destiny."⁵⁹ After the Chairman and Sayuri officially unite as patron and mistress, Sayuri retires from the geisha profession, and the Chairman provides a vacation home for them to live in. However, when his family's problem comes up, he is not able to make a decision; he is probably too kind to break up with Sayuri. His confession at the end of Memoirs emphasizes how he has influenced her life all along. Yet, he does not explicitly exercise his power to control Sayuri. His mature, generous, and understanding character, therefore, reflects the American image of Japanese businessmen at the given time.

Though fiction, through first-person narrative, Memoirs of a Geisha powerfully constructs a humanized, realistic geisha's life story and their society. It circulates a more complicated, strong geisha figure than previous Orientalist images. It also establishes an intimate connection with a predominantly white, American, female audience through its portrayal of Sayuri's strength, hardships, and success —experiences and emotions all women share. Concurrently, however, the concept of Orientalism still strongly influences and undermines the image of geisha, their life and society as it is presented in the book. Because Sayuri keeps her childhood identity "Chiyo" throughout her life, despite her success as a geisha, she remains an innocent, powerless girl. "Chiyo's" mentality disempowers Sayuri by making her feel insecure so that she identifies success with

⁵⁸ Golden, 415.

material things and by associating with powerful men. Through “Chiyo”, Memoirs also creates titillating experiences that define Sayuri as a commodity. In addition, Memoirs portrays disempowered and friendly Japanese wealthy men whose images reflect those perpetuated in the American media during the late 1990s. Thus, despite showing both stereotypical and non-stereotypical images of a geisha, Memoirs depicts Sayuri's mind and the world of geisha the way the mainstream America wants to see it. Thus the novel is more about American values and beliefs at the given time than it is about the actual life and story of a geisha.

⁵⁹ Golden, 417.

Chapter 3

Mineko Iwasaki's Geisha, A Life: Can a Former Geisha Challenge American and Orientalist Images of Geishas?

Mineko Iwasaki, a geisha (*geiko*) in Gion, Kyoto during the 1960s and 1970s, published her autobiography Geisha, A Life in the U.S in 2002.¹ Though she had neither lived in the U.S. nor ever published a book before, her name was familiar to some Americans; Arthur Golden mentions her in the acknowledgements of his best-selling novel, Memoirs of a Geisha. Iwasaki also filed a lawsuit against Golden in 2001, claiming that he violated their agreement by revealing her identity.² This lawsuit helped make Iwasaki known and increased interest in both Memoirs and Geisha, A Life. Although Golden claims that Memoirs is a novel based on fictitious characters, Iwasaki believes that “more than 90% of it is [her] story.”³ Reading “like a confession” of a former geisha, Memoirs further troubled Iwasaki, because, for her, “the book is all about a prostitute.”⁴ Golden also openly talked about the alleged price paid for Iwasaki’s virginity in a public interview, which infuriated Iwasaki who claims Golden lied.⁵ The popularity of Memoirs and the resulting perpetuation of the image of geisha throughout

¹ It is translated by Rande Brown.

² Partially because of the lawsuit, making a film out of Memoirs was delayed. However, the two parties reached an agreement in December, 2002, “though the terms are a secret” (“The Secret Life of Geisha; Former geisha reveals intimate rites and rituals of daily geisha life,” narr. Stone Phillips, Dateline NBC NBC, New York, 29 Dec. 1998, transcripts, pars. 69). The film is due in fall 2005.

³ “The Secret Life of Geisha,” pars. 45. Golden in fact discarded two previous drafts after he interviewed Iwasaki because he realized that nothing was accurate.

⁴ “The Secret Life of Geisha,” pars. 42.

⁵ “The Secret Life of Geisha.”

the world became problematic not only for Iwasaki but also for the geisha society in Japan in general. Many members of the geisha society accused Iwasaki of contributing to the reinforcement of an Orientalist image of geishas: “[t]hey even suggested,” Iwasaki claims, that she go “to the Ichiriki Teahouse and commit suicide there.”⁶ By writing her own autobiography, Iwasaki broke the geisha tradition of keeping events that occur within geisha society secret. Yet, through Geisha, A Life, she attempts to disclose her true story and correct the Orientalist misrepresentation of geisha perpetuated by Memoirs. According to Iwasaki, she wants to assert that geisha do not sell their bodies and that they are professional dancers and entertainers.⁷

Iwasaki was born the youngest of 11 children in a suburb of Kyoto in 1949. Her father came from a family of pre-Meiji Restoration aristocrats who abandoned their title, property, and financial stability. Her mother came from a family of “pirates turned physicians who were very rich.”⁸ Since her father had a hard time supporting his family and parents, her parents gave up their first three daughters to a prominent geisha house (*okiya*) before Iwasaki was born. Iwasaki, a quiet, solitary girl, was not thrown out from her home into an *okiya*, however. As the youngest one, her parents adored her so much that her father did not want to let her go. Yet, Iwasaki became attracted to the geisha culture and their fancy kimonos. She also recognized her family’s financial difficulty.

⁶ “The Secret Life of Geisha,” pars. 61.

⁷ Mineko Iwasaki in Lan N. Nguyen, “Hired Companion,” Daily News 10 October 2002, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu Sept. 2003 <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document/_m=. . .> 62.

⁸ Mineko Iwasaki with Rande Brown, Geisha, A Life (New York: Atria Books, 2002) 8.

Therefore, she decided to leave her parents home and move to an okiya in Gion, one of the best geisha communities in Kyoto. Iwasaki stresses that, of her own free will, she left her childhood behind when she was only five years old. There, she is treated as a future successor (*atotori*) of the Iwasaki okiya from the beginning of her life in her okiya. Traditional dancing and her financial responsibility to support her okiya soon became the very reason she pursued the profession. She became the most popular geisha—earning more than any other geisha did during her four years as an apprentice geisha (*maiko*) and her first year as a geisha.⁹ She worked relentlessly—to the point that she is even hospitalized twice. While she thinks of her work as an entertainer in teahouses as business, she enjoys friendships with intellectual and professional male clients who become her “tickets to the outside world.”¹⁰ She also finds romance with a famous actor, though she eventually breaks up with him because he does not divorce his wife as he promised her. Though she loves dancing, the limitations and restrictions of the geisha society made her decide to leave there at the age of twenty-nine. (She is not able to perform the geisha’s traditional dance once she retires, because of a regulation.) While still active in the geisha community, she tried, but was unable to change the arcane system of the society that controls every aspect of a geisha's life and does not fully support an individual geisha’s financial and professional independence. After retirement,

⁹ Japanese words, *maiko* for an apprentice geisha and *geiko* for a geisha are particularly influenced by Kyoto dialect, and used only for geisha in Kyoto. However, to be consistent, I use “geisha” in this chapter.

¹⁰ Iwasaki, 166.

she married a painter Jinichiro Sato whose work caught her attention. She lives with him and their daughter in a suburb of Kyoto today.

Geisha, A Life is an important addition to books on geisha in America. It is a rare autobiography by a former geisha, who speaks to a Western audience directly. The autobiography illustrates a geisha's personal experience, an insider's knowledge of the geisha culture, and geisha practitioner's viewpoints towards the profession. Contrary to the myth of a poor, powerless, and underprivileged geisha, Iwasaki stresses that geisha's experience a high-class, powerful, and privileged life within the geisha society. Iwasaki's attempts to correct misconceptions about the geisha make this novel more than just the life story of a geisha. By talking about her geisha life in Gion in the 1960s and 1970s, the autobiography provides a rare glimpse of geisha and geisha society in the post-WWII era. It differs from works by American authors who tend to focus more on "traditional," "authentic" geishas from before WWII.¹¹ The geisha community was shut down during WWII, and the end of the war marked the dramatic Americanization and internationalization of Japanese society. Thus, Americans who have written on geisha generally portray geisha before the war, as this image differs drastically from the image of modernized America, and as such is more exotic. In her work, Iwasaki emphasizes that geisha are not courtesans.

¹¹ It is not her purpose, however, to illustrate the modern geisha society; Iwasaki is not arguing that her story is different, because it focuses on the contemporary geisha society. To the contrary, she is actually oblivious to the time period and the transformation of the geisha society, too. For example, she says that geisha have never sold their virginites, which is probably not true for geisha before the Anti-prostitution law passed in 1958.

Challenging other Orientalist portrayals of geisha, Iwasaki empowers geisha by positioning them in a privileged class; she openly talks about the advantages and privileges she and other geisha have compared to other Japanese women. Separated from Japanese society, geisha are free from traditional Japanese gender restrictions and marriage, an institution which reinforces Japanese women's powerlessness. Unlike Japanese women, Iwasaki says that geisha can have both financial independence and romantic relationships with men. In addition to stating her love of traditional dancing and its centrality in her profession, her portrayal of herself also defies the image of geisha as males' servants; throughout the book, she emphasizes her professionalism in her dance performances and entertainment work. On the other hand, Iwasaki conveys a growing frustration toward her geisha society because it does not fully allow geisha agency in their personal and professional lives. She eventually gives up her geisha career, because she wants "her own life."¹² By revealing her personal stories and perspective on geisha, Iwasaki seems to challenge the fantasized, eroticized, and exoticized picture of the geisha. Iwasaki's is neither the Cinderella nor the submissive beauty in a cage. Presenting her devotion to what she loves, her ability to support her family financially and commitment to take control of her own life, Geisha, A Life is a powerful portrayal of a woman.

Though it is an autobiography, Geisha, A Life, however, shows an image of a geisha and the society the way Iwasaki wants to demonstrate it to America and the world. She focuses on defying American and Orientalist perceptions of geisha by applying

¹² From the back cover of Washington Square Press trade paperback edition of 2003

American values of freedom, equality, individualism, and independence to geisha life. She positions geisha in a high class within Japanese society by showing their connections with royalty. By manipulating the privileged image of the royalty in order to create a cultured and sophisticated image of the geisha, she attempts to empower geisha. She also emphasizes her devotion to the geisha traditional dance and the professionalism required in order to master this demanding art. Through detailed depictions of her hard work, she presents herself as a committed professional dancer. Moreover, she defies the erotic image of geisha and their work in ozashiki, arguing that the ozashiki provided her financial independence and opportunities to forge friendships with refined and intellectual male clients. Iwasaki also challenges perceptions about the geisha-patron relationship as it exists in the American imagination. She gives a lengthy depiction of her romantic relationship with a patron in order to demonstrate her ability to pursue romantic love and control the relationship. She, however, gradually exposes her frustration and critiques geisha society, because she is not able to enjoy freedom, equality, and independence thoroughly. Even though her position as a geisha is higher and more flexible than those of most other Japanese women, she retires from the profession in order to acquire rights she has been denied as a geisha. Therefore, through the depictions of her life and geisha society in Geisha, A Life, Iwasaki tries to prove that geisha's lives are grounded in modern, Western ideas, and thus superior to most Japanese women. She tries to demonstrate that she possesses status and power similar, if not equivalent, to that experience by mainstream white Americans. Though the geisha society controls her

profession to some degree, she argues that the geisha are still less restrained than Japanese women. By giving up her career because of its unfair control over her life, Iwasaki further demonstrates her desire to live within the American value system. As a way to counter Golden's Memoirs and other Orientalist portrayal of geisha, Iwasaki attempts to create an image completely opposite to the Orientalist construction. Though Geisha, A Life seemingly gives a diverse, empowered, liberated portrayal of geisha from a former geisha's perspective, ironically it does so using American values as the standard. It is only by adopting Western notions of superiority to things Japanese can Iwasaki be empowered.

Constructing the Image of Herself and Geishas

Because geisha are traditionally sold to okiya, images in books and the media in America commonly depict geisha as coming from poor backgrounds in Japanese society. Impoverished family backgrounds and the perception that they have no home to go back to suggest their powerlessness in both Japanese and the geisha societies. As Cobb's, Golden's, and other Orientalist images of geisha have, Iwasaki also acknowledges that it was not unusual for a geisha's real families to send (sell) their daughters to okiya; the families were short of money and tended to have too many children to support. Yet, Iwasaki also gives a different perspective on geisha's backgrounds by conveying the specific details of her family's history and situating them in a Japanese historical context. The American image of geisha does not include an explanation of why geisha families

were so poor that they needed to sell their children—it simply depicts them as part of the lower class. Iwasaki, on the other hand, points out the complexity surrounding individual geisha's family lives by illustrating that their families were not always the victims of a caste bound society. In fact, her family is not originally from the lower class. On the contrary, her grandfather was a noble aristocrat who owned vast land in Kyoto, and whose ancestors had “served the imperial order for over a thousand years... [until] the middle of the nineteenth century” when Meiji Restoration demolished the feudal system.¹³ Going back fifty-two generations, she details how her ancestors closely associated with the royalty. After the Meiji Restoration, her grandfather lost his title, only because “he proudly declared that he was a man of the people...[when] the emperor pressed him to remain in the peerage.”¹⁴ Although he chose to abandon his privilege, he and his family never learned to “work,” so, Iwasaki’s father had to support his extended family. Therefore, by the time Iwasaki was born in 1949, her two older sisters had been working in two different okiya in order to help support the family. Thus, even though Iwasaki’s family was struggling to survive when she was born, she emphasizes her ancestor’s high class origin. Because of the family’s privileged past, she defends her relatively advantaged family background, which is an apparent departure from the picture American images of geisha commonly paint.

¹³ Iwasaki, 7. According to Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia Standard 2003, Meiji Restoration of 1868 is a political revolution in Japan. It transformed Japanese society from the feudal to modern, classless society and from the military government to a new imperial government. Because the rigid class system was abolished, the upper-class of the society had to give up their wealth, land, and privileged life.

¹⁴ Iwasaki, 7.

Iwasaki stresses that her childhood was also a happy one, unlike Cobb and Golden's accounts which focus on geisha's unfortunate upbringings; contrary to the popular image of geisha being neglected as children, Iwasaki, the youngest of eleven children, says that her childhood with her parents was the only time she "was ever truly happy."¹⁵ Moreover, she explains that she was not sold to an okiya as the Western stereotype depicts, but decides to become a geisha on her own (although this is hard for anyone to believe of a five-year-old).

When she was three years old, an old woman in a kimono visited her home; this meeting became her first encounter with Madame Oima, the proprietress of the Iwasaki okiya in Gion Kobu, Kyoto. Immediately fascinated by Oima's gracious voice and her Kyoto accent, Iwasaki came out from a closet where she was hiding. Madame Oima was immediately taken by Iwasaki's beauty. Madame Oima even says to Iwasaki's father: "I have been looking for an atotori ['one who comes after' or successor] for a long time and I have the oddest sensation that I may have just found her."¹⁶ After a few visits to the Iwasaki okiya, Iwasaki decides to move there despite her parents' reluctance. She chooses to do this, partially because she had a childlike attraction to kimono and was curious about geisha life. She also recognized her parents' hardship taking care of all their children. Iwasaki tells her American audience that living in the okiya was like "going to full-time boarding school."¹⁷ She thus paints a picture of herself at the age of

¹⁵ Iwasaki, 6.

¹⁶ Iwasaki, 18.

¹⁷ Iwasaki, 19.

five that was already smart and mature enough to understand what was best for her family and her future. By doing this, she attempts to counter the negative and powerless image perpetuated about geisha's backgrounds. Golden and other writers emphasize a geisha's underprivileged background to explain the root of the powerlessness and submissiveness they exhibit later in their lives. By portraying herself as having agency in decisions from the time she is a child, Iwasaki contradicts the myth and empowers herself.

Iwasaki also explains that her family's experience was not exceptional: "many noble families became impoverished after the Meiji Restoration and found livelihood for their girls in the karyukai (the geisha society)."¹⁸ She asserts that the society offers almost exactly what their high-class families were used to:

Here was a place where they could practice the dance and tea ceremony they had learned at home, wear the higher quality kimono they were used to, become financially independent, and have a chance at making a decent marriage.¹⁹

In this way, Iwasaki shows that the society provided the daughters of former noble families with avenues to attain privileges they had in their pasts. Since their okiya provide all living and training expenses, which geisha repay after starting to work, she explains that the daughters are free from financial problems. Thus, the daughters can focus on training in Japanese traditional arts and understanding of the culture, which in a

¹⁸ Iwasaki, 55-56.

¹⁹ Iwasaki, 56.

traditional sense creates the most desirable wife.²⁰ The society also becomes a refuge for those who lost parents and were working as prostitutes.²¹ Describing her life as protected by the geisha society from the perspective of the wealthy, Iwasaki stresses the privileged circumstance this lifestyle provides. Geisha, A Life does not suggest that all geisha are descendants of the upper class, however. Rather, it challenges the notion that all geisha come from poor and unfortunate upbringings and as such are indentured to the geisha society.

Iwasaki emphasizes that she also positioned herself at the top of the hierarchy in her okiya. She was not a maid or slave as a geisha, a frequent misperception generated by the Orientalist image. To the contrary, Mother of the okiya treated her as one of the nobility, explaining that she was named atotori even before she decided to become a geisha. Although Golden also attempts to explain the hierarchy in an okiya to some extent (i.e., by correlating the size of the room each geisha is assigned to their rank), Iwasaki extensively illustrates the privilege and power she had. Iwasaki explains the hierarchy of Gion Kobu applying an analogy to royalty:

The okiya owner is the queen of the realm, the atotori is the heir apparent, and the other members of the okiya are like the royal court, bound to

²⁰ Iwasaki, 10.

²¹ Iwasaki occasionally talks about someone who came out from a prostitution house, or who ends up going there after quitting the geisha profession. Iwasaki tries to clarify the difference and emphasizes how much better the life in the karyukai is.

accept the dictates of the reigning queen without argument or question.

The future queen is treated with the same degree of deference.²²

Explaining the hierarchy in the okiya in the context of a royal court, Iwasaki emphasizes the absolute and unquestionable power and position she held. By doing so, she manipulates the power, history, and noble image of the royalty in order to elevate her status in the eyes of her American readers. By identifying with nobility, she is also able to explain and justify the okiya's class hierarchy in a simplified manner.

Interestingly, at the same time, Iwasaki articulates her problems with the hierarchical system of the okiya. Her confusion over the hierarchical system begins when one of her older sisters, Kuniko, is not treated the same way Iwasaki is; the hierarchy separated Iwasaki who was an atotori geisha from Kuniko who was a maid, a distinction which defined what, where, and when one was to eat. Remembering that her whole family sat together around the table in her parents' home, Iwasaki demands that everybody eat the same food together. Because of her dissatisfaction with the situation, the members of the okiya begin to eat the same food together from then on. Iwasaki not only stresses her high position as an atotori geisha here, she also shows her belief in equality. She seems to display a shared value with mainstream white, American readers who generally profess to disdain class systems and deferential treatment.

Iwasaki occasionally talks about her eldest sister, Yaeko, whose life as a geisha is very different from her own. Yaeko's life story seems unpleasant and chaotic, possibly

²² Iwasaki, 39.

because of her personality and upbringing or because we only get Iwasaki's perspective, which is influenced by her animosity towards Yaeko. According to Iwasaki, Yaeko was sold to the Iwasaki okiya when she was ten years old without her knowledge. Yaeko felt "betrayed by (her) parents and hated having to work."²³ She did not even understand who her real parents were. Maybe because her life started with betrayal, she did not mind bringing chaos and shame to the okiya. Although she is appointed as a successor of the okiya, she decides to get married and leaves the okiya without repaying all the debt she owed. Yet the okiya graciously let her go. About a decade later, Yaeko divorces and tries to come back to the okiya with her two sons. Since boys are not allowed to live in the okiya, Yaeko sends them to her parents who feel guilty for letting her leave home and go to the okiya in the first place. Yaeko was, however, eventually kicked out from the okiya, because one of her sons attempted to rape Iwasaki. Even then, the Mother of the Iwasaki okiya helped Yaeko start a new life outside geisha society because she was the biological sister of Iwasaki, the okiya's atotori.

Iwasaki did not like Yaeko for many reasons. When Iwasaki was living at home, she did not even know about the existence of Yaeko; Yaeko was already sold to an okiya before Iwasaki was born. Iwasaki describes her first encounter with a woman who, "like some kind of demon," came and upset her parents.²⁴ After Iwasaki moved into the Iwasaki okiya, Yaeko was selected to become Iwasaki's "older sister," or mentor, the geisha who officially supports and guides a young geisha's training. Instead of

²³ Iwasaki, 55.

encouraging and helping, however, Yaeko embarrassed Iwasaki and talked bad about her in front of clients at teahouses. Since Iwasaki had no relationship with Yaeko by the time she wrote her autobiography and had only bitter feelings towards Yaeko, Iwasaki's story about Yaeko is likely biased; it is impossible to know Yaeko's viewpoint. Nonetheless, Iwasaki's account of Yaeko not only demonstrates the diversity and complexity of different geisha's experiences, even for those from the same family, it also exposes chaos in a geisha's life, which the geisha society cannot always control. Her story also shows that a geisha might not passively adhere to the rules of the profession. Iwasaki also uses Yaeko's story as a contrast to her own to emphasize how much more stable and successful her life was, thus, demonstrating her privileged life at home and in the okiya even compared to her own sister.

Her Passion, Devotion, and Commitment to Geisha Traditional Dance

Iwasaki also challenges the idea that the primary focus of a geisha is to entertain men in an ozashiki and find a patron to rely on and support her financially. Cobb and Golden both articulate the centrality of men in the geisha profession and minimize geisha's roles as successors of their traditions. Although Cobb includes photographs of geisha dancing on the stage in her collection, she does not explain their feelings about it at all. In Cobb's essay, she posits that geisha are required to copy their master's dance and eradicate any originality and individuality in their performances—the geisha on public

²⁴ Iwasaki, 23.

stage in Cobb's photographs look unhappy. On the other hand, Golden hardly provides any explanation about geisha's dance lessons every morning or their public performances at all. Both American authors either minimize descriptions of geisha's practices of the arts or exoticize the performances by interpreting them from Western and Orientalist perspectives.²⁵ Contradicting this pervasive neglect of geisha's investment in artistic performance, Iwasaki explains the essential and significant role of dancing in a geisha's life, as the word "geisha" literally means "an art performer." Iwasaki constructs her geisha image as a dancer; she says she would not have been a geisha in the first place if she had not been attracted to the dance of the Inoue School. Her love and commitment to the geisha dance also represents a seriousness and professionalism that counters the perception of geisha as dolls or display toys. Instead of the image of geisha in *ozashiki* as entertainers collectively, she stresses her individual identity as a professional dancer.

In addition to some geisha's noble backgrounds, Iwasaki illustrates the importance of the geisha dance and its connection with royalty. By emphasizing this relationship, she constructs the image of the geisha culture as noble, sophisticated, and historically important. She says that the connection between the geisha dance and the royal court goes back to around 1800. She illustrates the difference between *odori* (the commoner's dance) and *mai* ("sanctified movement" that is authorized for selected people).²⁶ She says

²⁵ As I point out in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Jodi Cobb explains that Japanese traditional dancing requires total eradication of the dancer's identity in order to copy and dance the way a teacher does. This explanation is based on observations from the outsider's perspective, instead of explaining the significance of learning the tradition from Japanese perspective.

²⁶ Iwasaki, 101.

that the Inoue School, the only dance school for geisha in Gion, “is specifically associated with *Noh* mai and is stylistically similar.”²⁷ Although Inoue-style dance is not authorized as “mai,” she claims it has traditional roots which signify the dance's close connection with nobility. She also explains that the white makeup geisha wear on their face and neck also has an association with the emperor. This kind of white makeup was first applied by male aristocrats who performed in front of the emperor—the emperor had to watch dancers from behind a screen because he was considered “a sacred presence.”²⁸ The white makeup was supposed to help the emperor identify the dancers, because it stood out in the light. In this way, Iwasaki stresses her and the geisha culture's link to royalty, which connotes high class. She challenges and disproves the myth that geisha society is merely a haven for girls from low class backgrounds who have no recourse but to sell their bodies.²⁹

²⁷ Iwasaki, 102.

²⁸ Iwasaki, 141. It seems there are several stories about where the idea of this white makeup came from. Though Iwasaki identifies with male dancers for the emperor, Jodi Cobb in Geisha explains that the whiteness is associated with the white skin of Europeans. As Iwasaki's version elevates geisha because it stresses the geisha historic association with the emperor, Cobb's shows the superiority of the European's white skin.

²⁹ As I have discussed, Iwasaki emphasizes geisha's family and cultural connections with the royalty in order to elevate the image of geisha. Although having a connection with the royalty does not naturally mean that geisha are part of the upper-class, Iwasaki simply presents it so. Iwasaki seems to assume that the connection with the royalty symbolizes the higher personal, cultural, and traditional values of geisha. She does not explain the royalty in Japan. Rather, she assumes that the readers would understand the geisha's close association with the top of the social hierarchy. In fact, in a recent American TV program, an anchorwoman said that some daughters of celebrities in America, such as Paris Hilton, are like royals, because they are free from financial limitations and get a spotlight. Without acknowledging the culture and tradition the royalty have, it is too simplistic and reductive to parallel celebrities' lives with one of the royal. Yet, like Iwasaki, the comment uses the connection with the royalty only to signify the celebrities' wealth and privileges.

Iwasaki also attempts to correct the Western interpretation of the dance instruction geisha receive which has frequently described it as a simply copying, thus inferior to modern ways of learning which focus on originality and creativity. Cobb, for example, explains that there is no room for originality and individuality if a geisha wishes to perfectly master the dance.³⁰ Iwasaki asserts that the Inoue School is prestigious in the community and many people take classes to learn the Inoue-style dance. Iwasaki writes, the “Inoue School is, without question, the most important institution in Gion Kobu and the iemoto [the master of the dance style and school], therefore, the most powerful person.”³¹ She also explains the traditional Japanese style of learning arts is by first mastering “patterns of movements” and observing senior dancers. She expounds the Japanese traditional value of learning and copying the way an iemoto performs, which “is more a process of total identification than one of simply copying. We repeat the movements of our teachers until we can duplicate them exactly, until, in a sense, we have absorbed the teacher’s mastery into ourselves... [which] takes many years of practice.”³² In her case, twenty four years after she began her dance lessons at the age of five, she received a *natori*, a title that recognized her as a master dancer; in other words, Iwasaki had mastered everything a teacher could teach—“the transmission was done. I was free. The dance was mine.”³³ In this way, Iwasaki describes a way of mastering and

³⁰ Cobb, 11.

³¹ Iwasaki, 85.

³² Iwasaki, 84. (The iemoto is the head family of the Inoue School for the traditional dance.)

³³ Iwasaki 261. It seems that learning Hula dance embodies similar ideas and expectation as the Inoue-style, in the sense that in the following story, kumu hula Ching expresses his pride in his student Miss Akau

interpreting dance different from ways of learning in the West. Emphasizing the difficulty, complexity, and prestige of learning the geisha dance, she implicitly criticizes the West's practice of interpreting another culture from their own perspective.

In contrast to the American image of a geisha, she stresses the centrality of and her commitment to dance in her geisha career. In fact, in one-third of the chapters in Geisha, A Life, Iwasaki either mentions or elaborately depicts her dance practices. Iwasaki begins taking dance lessons at the Inoue School in Gion at 6-years-old, saying, “[d]ance class was the high point of my day.”³⁴ Because she was an atotori, she was introduced to the head of the Inoue School (the *Kyomai Inoue-ryu iemoto*,) Yachiyo Inoue IV. She explains that learning directly from the iemoto is prestigious, since teachers of the Inoue-style dance come from all over Japan to take lessons from the iemoto. Iwasaki devotes her time and mind to dancing from the beginning. She goes to the dance school as early as possible in order to be the first student of the day. She “sat in the studio for hours at a time and watched intently as other dancers had their lessons... And then [she] practiced for hours in the living room” at home.³⁵ Again and again, she

because of her ability to transform everything Ching taught into her dancing. In an article on April 18, 2004 of the Honolulu Advertiser, an editor Wanda A. Adams reports on Natasha Mahealani Akau who won the prestigious Miss Aloha Hula 2004 at the 41st Merrie Monarch Hula Festival. After Akau was announced as a winner of the Miss Aloha Hula 2004, her kumu hula Sonny Ching (a teacher of Hula dance group Halau Na Mamo ‘O Pu‘uanahulu) confessed to a reporter that “[o]n competition day Thursday, after their last rehearsal together, he began to cry, telling her, ‘Tasha, you’re ready.’.. (After her stage), Ching met her with a kiss and embrace of pure pride. ‘She did everything we asked her to do. I felt she was already a winner.’” (Wanda A. Adams, “Miss Aloha Hula 2004 ‘was already a winner.’” Honolulu Advertiser 18 April 2004, D1+).

³⁴ Iwasaki, 83. The Japanese word iemoto literally means “the origin of the house” and is used to indicate the head of the dance school and the successor of the particular style of dance (Iwasaki 71).

³⁵ Iwasaki, 85.

tells the readers that “dancing was an apt vehicle for my determination and my pride.”³⁶ She credits her hard work and a “good deal of natural ability” for making quick progress in her dance lessons.³⁷ Even on her only day-off, Sunday, she would get up early and go to a dance classroom to observe how teachers dance and teach. Thus, it was dancing that occupied her mind and life until she passed the exam to be a *maiko*. After becoming a *maiko*, she was required to take on the responsibility of entertaining clients in the *ozashiki* every night. Yet, she continued to consider dancing the center of her life and geisha career. Underlining her self-identification as a dancer, lies her subtle attempt to defy the idea that the only reward geisha can attain in their careers is a father figure who will provide financial stability.

An Ozashiki is a “High-Class ‘Family Restaurant’”³⁸

In the American imagination, geisha's careers typically focus on the nightly entertaining of men. Geisha and their relationships with male clients in the *ozashiki* of the secluded teahouses have frequently been fantasized about. Iwasaki, however, illustrates an *ozashiki*'s variety of functions and her different roles in the *ozashiki*. Although Iwasaki admits that the majority of her clients were men, she challenges the common belief that geisha exclusively cater to men: “[w]omen host *ozashiki* too, and often attend

³⁶ Iwasaki, 88.

³⁷ Iwasaki, 88.

³⁸ Iwasaki, 170.

them as guests.”³⁹ Even the male clients use teahouses for events such as family reunions, especially around the New Year, and for birthdays and anniversaries: Iwasaki writes, “the ochaya were [sometimes] like high-class ‘family restaurants.’”⁴⁰ Furthermore, she emphasizes her close friendships with her male clients’ families: “it is not uncommon for parents to bring their young adult children to banquets as part of their education. So, a family may have a relationship with a certain ochaya that stretches back generations.”⁴¹ It is in these teahouses, according to Iwasaki, that the children are exposed to the social world (as opposed to private and school spheres) and learn manners and proper etiquette. Including the client’s family among her customers and stressing the educational aspects of the teahouse, Iwasaki confuses the image of an ozashiki as a sensual environment exclusive only to male clients. In addition, Iwasaki tells that an ozashiki is not only a place for entertainment, but also for providing a secluded environment “for sensitive business and political discussions.”⁴² Iwasaki even states that although geisha might look demure, they might actually use hair ornaments, which ends are pointed, in order to “defend our customers from attack.”⁴³ The coral ornament “can be used to test the safety of the sake, [since] coral breaks apart in the presence of poison.”⁴⁴ Through this depiction, Iwasaki brings to light the significant role geisha play in important business and political transactions, as well as their being trusted by their clients to sit in on confidential and

³⁹ Iwasaki, 169.

⁴⁰ Iwasaki, 170.

⁴¹ Iwasaki, 136.

⁴² Iwasaki, 195.

⁴³ Iwasaki, 195.

extremely sensitive discussions. In these ways, Iwasaki's portrayal de-eroticizes geisha and portrays them as business savvy women fulfilling a complexity of roles within an ozashiki.

Iwasaki also minimizes the significance of her work as an entertainer and portrays her work at the ozashiki as business. She again attempts to challenge the Orientalist myth that an ozashiki is where geisha submissively serve men and that these interactions are considered the center of their lives. She "saw the ozashiki as a venue for [her] dancing, and didn't think very much about taking care of the customers."⁴⁵ Her income came mostly from working at ozashiki, so she needed to attend them as much as possible. Income for a geisha is directly correlated to her popularity. Thus, although her mind was supposedly focused on dancing, she worked very hard from the time she was in her teens in order to support her family and be a popular geisha. She says that her busy schedule only allowed her to sleep a couple of hours each day. She worked "7 days a week, 365 days a year, from the time I was fifteen until I was twenty-one. I never took a day off... At least it was better than not working."⁴⁶ Her night work usually lasted until well past midnight. She conducted her work at the ozashiki in addition to going to Nyokoba to take art lessons every morning and practicing for public dance performances during any spare time. It is no surprise that she was eventually hospitalized twice. Using her hard work as a testimony to her devotion to work and her family, Iwasaki portrays herself as a serious

⁴⁴ Iwasaki, 195.

⁴⁵ Iwasaki, 188.

⁴⁶ Iwasaki, 193.

and responsible businesswoman. Iwasaki teaches her readers that underneath a geisha's smile lies an aggressive, powerful character with far more going on in her mind than what is apparent—another rebuttal to the Orientalist images of geisha.

Because of her hard work at *ozashiki*, Iwasaki made a lot of money—something she tells the American audience to stress how silly it is for them to believe that geisha need to rely on wealthy male clients. As discussed earlier, the *mizuage*, a geisha's first sexual experience with the highest bidder, perfectly symbolizes an American perspective of the geisha existence—her powerlessness and commodified body. Cobb and Golden explicitly describe the significance of *mizuage* to a geisha's career. The geisha are also depicted as almost desperately searching for wealthy men for patronage in order for them to be financially independent from their *okiya*. In contrast to this, Iwasaki insists that she had made enough money to support herself, her family, and buy expensive *kimonos* without the help of any man. She even refuses to admit that the mesmerizing *mizuage* ritual, popular in American portrayals of geisha, ever existed in the geisha society. She discredits the notion of a sexual *mizuage* ceremony by arguing that the ritual is practiced, but does not require a sexual experience at all. Rather, she explains, the *mizuage* ceremony marks a transitional stage from *maiko* to *geiko* (geisha) with a *sakazuki* ceremony (exchanging cups of sake) and changing hairstyles.⁴⁷ Referring to her conversation with Mama Masako, Mother of her Iwasaki *okiya*, Iwasaki illustrates how ridiculous it is to believe the notion of sexual *mizuage*. Mama Masako tells Iwasaki that

although the mizuage ceremony requires quite a lot of money, to have special kimono made and so on, the okiya does not need financial support from male customers: Mama Masako says "I have raised you to be an independent, professional woman. We don't need men to help with this. The okiya can take care of it just fine."⁴⁸ Conveying how Mama Masako discussed the mizuage with her, Iwasaki educates readers about geisha's financial and psychological independence. Mama Masako's voice seems to strengthen Iwasaki's position on mizuage because in this story, Mama Masako, who has been in geisha society longer than Iwasaki, is a teacher of the geisha culture, and therefore a voice of authority.

While Iwasaki exposes her emotional detachment from her work at the ozashiki, she emphasizes the opportunities she's had to meet celebrities and other people considered "cultured" and "sophisticated," and develops important friendships with some of her long-time clients. Iwasaki's portrayal of her relationships with male clients shifts the focus away from sexual and erotic images. Iwasaki asserts that her relationships with male clients were exclusively based on cultural and artistic interests and that they were friendly, "civilized, and, most importantly," not sexual at all.⁴⁹ She explains that the standards for customers allowed to come to an ozashiki are high to ensure that the men are mostly sophisticated, mature adults. These standards are enforced by the practice of only allowing "new" customers that have been introduced by clients who are generally

⁴⁷ *Sakazuki* ceremony is to drink sake in a traditional manner, which symbolizes bonding. Geisha practice it to bond sisters. General Japanese also exercise it for marriage and so on.

⁴⁸ Iwasaki, 205.

considered to be “trustworthy, learned, and well-cultured.”⁵⁰ Because she was neither able to get a high school education nor did she have the chance to explore society outside the geisha community by herself, her “customers were [her] tickets to the outside world.”⁵¹

Iwasaki particularly mentions several male clients whom she developed long-term, non-sexual friendships with. She enjoyed keeping company with professionals who “were expert in some field of knowledge.”⁵² She talks extensively about one of her most favorite customers a philosopher, Dr. Tetsuzo Tanigawa, whom she forged a strong friendship with and met with both in and outside the *ozashiki*. Though he was over seventy years old and had established a career when she first met him in an *ozashiki* in her teens, he became her confidant and enjoyed answering any questions she asked. He also showed no partiality toward the president of a large company over her, then a fifteen-year-old girl—he placed equal importance on what both had to say, which impressed her. So, whenever he came to an *ozashiki*, she “refused all other engagements so that [she] could devote [her]self fully to being in his company.”⁵³ In later years, she spent time with him at a coffee shop in a summer resort and visited his home in Tokyo whenever she could.⁵⁴ By emphasizing the education she received in the *ozashiki*, its sophisticated atmosphere, and her relationships with her clients, Iwasaki disrupts the

⁴⁹ Iwasaki, 226.

⁵⁰ Iwasaki, 136.

⁵¹ Iwasaki, 166.

⁵² Iwasaki, 136.

⁵³ Iwasaki, 172.

common assumption of the geisha-client relationship, which is primarily sexual. She also emphasizes her ability to engage in an equal relationship with prominent men, which, she says, is not an opportunity other Japanese women have.

Patronage: Like a Man's Favorite Diva in the Opera World

The patronage in the geisha world is a significant reason why geisha are viewed as a commodity for men. The Orientalist image depicts geisha as having no choice or power but to accept a patron and his sexual interest in her in order to attain financial security. Contrary to the myth, Iwasaki argues that throughout the history of geisha, no sexual relationships with male clients occur unless a romantic liaison develops between the two.⁵⁵ She repeatedly expresses her annoyance at the Orientalist myth that geisha are prostitutes and their patrons pay for their livelihoods in return for sex. She explains that patrons pay a stipend for a geisha so that she will be available for entertaining them and their guests. Drawing an analogy to Western culture, she explains that the geisha's practice of having sponsors is "somewhat similar to the patronage of, say, the opera, but instead of being on the board of the opera house, a man would choose to support his favorite diva."⁵⁶ Being a patron to a geisha also demonstrates the status of the client: Iwasaki states, "[h]aving a principal geiko at your beck and call is a major status symbol

⁵⁴ Iwasaki, 262.

⁵⁵ I do not believe that this is true, though. So many geisha have talked frankly about how they were used to having partially forceful relationships with patrons in order to stabilize their lives financially.

⁵⁶ Iwasaki, 51.

in Japanese society.”⁵⁷ Like a patron of the opera, therefore, the sponsors for geishas do not demand sexual favors, but support their artistic and material endeavors. By drawing this connection between an opera patron and a geisha sponsor, Iwasaki positions the geisha-patron liaison as a cultured and high-class relationship.

In addition to explicitly conveying that the core of the geisha-patron liaison is art, Iwasaki justifies the extramarital relationships between them by accentuating that traditional Japanese marriage customs require men to marry women simply to fulfill their familial responsibility and duty. In traditional Japanese society, it was common that parents chose who their children would marry and, particularly the women, has no say in the matter. Iwasaki writes, “[m]arriages were arranged for the purpose of continuing bloodlines, not for pleasure.”⁵⁸ Therefore, “men of means often had mistresses.”⁵⁹ In describing the system in this way, Iwasaki paints a picture of an *ozashiki* as a refuge for both male clients and geisha from Japanese traditional culture and its regulations. It also becomes a place to find geisha with whom a man can truly relax and have fun with. Even though geisha might pursue extramarital relationships, Iwasaki explains, it is because they fall in love inside the geisha world, which is the only place men can search for love. Understanding love as an essential aspect in contemporary American marriages, Geisha, A Life argues that having romance with a patron is more valuable than having a marriage

⁵⁷ Iwasaki, 51.

⁵⁸ Iwasaki, 52.

⁵⁹ Iwasaki, 52.

simply based on bloodline. By defining traditional Japanese marriage as a contract rather than an emotional commitment, she minimizes the immorality of the patronage.

Thus, countering the negative Western image of geisha's relationships with patrons as necessary and loveless, she argues that she in fact could pursue a romantic relationship with a man precisely because she was a geisha. Many geisha might become mistresses instead of marrying their patrons. Yet, she says that geisha are free from the traditional Japanese relationship most women have with men, and that geisha have more freedom and are able to control their relationships with men—by being a mistress in Japan, she says, geisha can at least pursue romantic love.

Iwasaki's personal romantic story further defies the Orientalist myth of a geisha's relationship with a patron. Revealing her romance with the actor Shintaro Katsu (Toshio) who had a family, she portrays a relationship based on music and dance, not sex, and expresses her control in their relationship.⁶⁰ She also explicitly states that she lost her virginity to someone she loved, an ideal story from the American perspective.⁶¹ When she was fifteen years old, Toshio was attracted to her and started asking her to entertain his party nightly. Iwasaki did not have a good impression of him at first because "he was dressed like a slob;" she only wanted to associate with cultured clients.⁶² He also

⁶⁰ Shintaro Katsu was a famous film actor. Iwasaki called him Toshio, his regular name. Because of his public image as childish, emotional, and uncontrollable, Iwasaki's depiction of a tamed Katsu seems to emphasize Iwasaki's power.

⁶¹ In *Geisha*, published in 1983, Liza Dalby, after learning the old custom of mizuage, geisha's first sexual experience with a highest bidder, tells readers that the practice of mizuage may not be so strange in America: "[a] lot of American girls have their mizuage in the back seats of their boyfriends' car— often neither one knows what they're doing" (117).

⁶² Iwasaki, 221.

approached her a little too aggressively, by trying to kiss her. This scared her so much that she started avoiding him in the ozashiki. Her overreaction to his kissing her on the lips seems to demonstrate her innocence. However, when she discovered Toshio's artistic talent (he plays *shamisen* well), she gradually became attracted to his music—then his personality.⁶³ She finally promised that, if he would come to her ozashiki every night for three years she would think seriously about their relationship—which he really did. Iwasaki says that during the three years, “we developed a very civilized friendship. I danced. He played the shamisen. We talked mostly about art.”⁶⁴ Here, she emphasizes that her devotion to dancing and art is at the core of her relationship with a male. She eventually decided to officially “tie-the-knot” with him. After the official engagement (according to geisha custom) with him, she confessed that they had a sexual relationship; it was the first one for her. She writes:

I opened myself to him hungrily, feeling no shyness or shame... When I looked down and saw the blood on the sheets my heart leapt with joy. I had given Toshio (Katsu) my most precious possession, and had done so in love.⁶⁵

Here, Iwasaki overtly stresses her satisfaction and joy at giving her virginity to a loved one after an official bonding. Because Toshio did not pay for the sexual intercourse and treated her with affection, Iwasaki conveniently separates this experience from the

⁶³ shamisen: three-string instrument

⁶⁴ Iwasaki, 226.

⁶⁵ Iwasaki, 247.

mizuage ritual. She also associates her having control over their relationship with his following her rule of visiting the ozashiki nightly for three years before having a sexual relationship with her. His willingness to maintain a friendship with her for three years seems to demonstrate his commitment to and respect for her.

She eventually breaks up with Toshio, because she found that he had never tried to divorce his wife whom he told Iwasaki he was not in love with. Although she believed his promise to get a divorce and waited patiently, she learned that he was lying to her. While supporting a geisha's romantic relationship with a patron as a mistress, she clarifies that she would not have had an official bond with him in her society had he not promised to break up with his wife. For her, being mistress was not enough.

Iwasaki's Critique of the Geisha Society

While thus painting various non-conventional pictures of geisha life and their community, Iwasaki also exposes her critiques of geisha society. She eventually gave up her career and left geisha society at the age of twenty-nine because of her frustration with the arcane system that had exploited her rights. Her critique of the society focuses on four points: the strict regulations on geisha's lives, lack of financial support for individual geisha, lack of fairness in the treatment of geisha by management, and lack of formal education and recognition of accomplishments (i.e., certificate of arts) that are valid outside the community. Particularly because she was raised to be an independent businesswoman, she says that she could not make sense of a society that kept depriving

geisha of agency. Although it cannot sustain itself without geisha, the society, she criticizes, never listened to Iwasaki's complaints and appeals to deal with the problems she articulates. She eventually decided to give up dancing and her life as a geisha because the geisha community would not accommodate a modern Japanese society. Since WWII, Japanese society has been steadily modernizing, and this included an increasing acceptance of ideals such as freedom and individuality which has had a positive affect on Japanese women. The geisha society, however, not only maintains Japanese traditions but also traditional lifestyles, regulations, and perspectives. This is the reason, she argues, that the geisha community is shrinking and the number of geisha is dramatically decreasing—not because Japanese pay less attention to Japanese tradition. Iwasaki writes, “the organization of the Gion Kobu was dangerously out of step with the times and...if they didn't institute reforms, the Gion Kobu would have no future.”⁶⁶ Especially because contemporary women make the choice to become a geisha rather than being sold into the profession, the old system, with its confining customs, simply discourage some would-be geisha from pursuing a career as a traditional dancer and entertainer.

One of the geisha society's regulations that had annoyed Iwasaki since she was a child was being restricted by her okiya to participate in "regular" activities. For example, she could not play sports because Mother of her okiya worried about Iwasaki getting injured and damaging her future career as a geisha. She was not also allowed to go outside the geisha community without an escort until she reached the age of eighteen.

⁶⁶ Iwasaki, 182.

Though she secretly joined the basketball team and nobody found out about it, she felt she was limited from learning and understanding the society, culture, and people outside the geisha community. By explaining her frustration about the restrictions she endured, she succeeds in portraying herself as being rebellious and a non-conformist since she was a child. Curious about the bigger world, she did not want to be confined in the geisha society.

Iwasaki also became frustrated that society in general did not consider geisha professionals. Though she practiced dance very hard for her public performances, she did not get paid for them. For example, although she spent months practicing for the popular annual *Miyako Odori*, and committed herself to the stage for a month every year, she didn't receive any compensation.⁶⁷ In addition, the geisha society seemed to use geisha for publicity, but it neither asked her how she felt about that nor paid her. When she found her picture on a large flyer publicizing a geisha dance performance posted all over a Kyoto train station, she went to talk to the management of the society, and demanded some compensation. The man responded to her as if she were “about four,” and told her not to “worry [her] pretty little head about such grown-up matters. Think of it as the price of fame.”⁶⁸ She felt exploited, like a commodity of the geisha society—as if she had no control over her work at all. Lack of education also restricted her from acquiring the skills necessary to really succeed as a geisha; for example, learning foreign languages

⁶⁷ Miyako Odori literally means “Dance in a capital” or “the Capital’s dance.” Because Kyoto was the capital of Japan until the end of 19th century, the dance is probably named so.

⁶⁸ Iwasaki, 182.

would have helped her be able to converse with foreign guests. Iwasaki argues, “[w]e are being prepared to entertain world leaders but not being given the tools to communicate with them”—which in turn undermined and limited a geisha's future.⁶⁹ Because the society required geisha to enter the special art school for geisha (the *Nyokoba*) after finishing junior high school, she had received no formal academic schooling after middle school. Since a junior high school diploma is not a powerful ticket in Japanese society, former geisha found it enormously difficult trying to make ends meet; Iwasaki expresses the sentiment of many former geisha when she says, “[n]o matter how hard you apply yourself, you will end up where you started: with a junior high school education.”⁷⁰ She shows the control the society had over geisha's lives and how they limit the geisha's opportunities to leave there.

In addition to the geisha community, she says that the Inoue School also controlled and limited the geisha's dance career. The certificates geisha receive after years of training are not valid for dancing and teaching outside the geisha society. If a geisha wants to dance at a public venue, they need the consent of the school. If the school's representative decides the geisha can make a public appearance, they then decide everything from what a geisha can perform to what kind of kimono she wears. Therefore, although Iwasaki was accepted as a *natori*, a master dancer after more than twenty years of dancing, she was neither able to dance nor teach the Inoue-style dance—she was prevented from doing what she loved and using it to support herself financially. The

⁶⁹ Iwasaki, 165.

certificate, Iwasaki states, “did not contribute any way to a state of professional or financial independence.”⁷¹

Although in some ways the society provided a secure place and profession for women to focus on studying traditional arts and provided ways for them to become financially independent, Iwasaki found that the society did not fully support her financial and professional independence. Though she protested to the geisha society over the years, it never responded; she “had been tr[ying] to initiate changes in the system since [she] was fifteen.”⁷² She started appearing in the media, speaking out about both her love for and frustrations with the arcane system. Finally, she decided to quit her profession, hoping it would be a strong statement to the society, reflecting her dissatisfaction and disappointment. Nothing changed, she says, except that seventy other geiko also retired from the profession after her retirement.⁷³

Although Iwasaki explicitly points out problems in the geisha society, she does not explain how it works or who manages it. It may be because the society holds so much political and cultural power that it is difficult to speak against it; Iwasaki notes, “[c]omplaining or resisting is taboo.”⁷⁴ Whatever the reason is, readers can only speculate about the problems in reference to the information she provides; we are not sure how the geisha can voice complaints or resolve issues. Still, her partial exposé calls attention not

⁷⁰ Iwasaki, 277.

⁷¹ Iwasaki, 261.

⁷² Iwasaki, 276.

⁷³ Iwasaki, 286.

⁷⁴ Iwasaki, 276.

only to the problems of the traditional community, but also to the control it exerts over geisha, limiting their ability to have a say in the regulations of the society.

By speaking out, Iwasaki went outside the community and called attention to geisha's struggles which had not often been discussed publicly before. Her actions also work in another way—her aggression towards the society explicitly defies the passive, victimized image of a geisha, emotionally confined by the society. To the contrary, none of the American authors included the voice of a (former) geisha saying anything against the society. Instead, for example, the two geishas Cobb interviewed for Geisha express gratitude for being geisha because of the financial independence and their relatively stable lives. Geisha, A Life demonstrates that Iwasaki is not simply subservient to either the geisha authority or men. Rather her pride in herself and her professionalism dictates that she have high standards in terms of clients, the geisha society, and her own work. Iwasaki clearly transcends the American image of passive geisha, and elucidates that a geisha can be a rebel.

Having had the professional experience of being a geisha and knowing what she wanted, Iwasaki seems to be more powerful and independent than Japanese women and more compatible with middle-class, white American women. In Women on the Verge: Japanese Women, Western Dreams, Karen Kelsky analyzes Japanese women who come to America with an image of the “‘mythological’ West” in their minds; they believe they will find freedom, gender equality, individualism, and independence in America. Thus, they position traditional Japanese society in opposition to the West and distance

themselves from it.⁷⁵ As Iwasaki identifies, both in the geisha world and in Japanese society in general, women see the West as an “expansive, liberating international space of free and unfettered self-expression, personal discovery, and romantic freedom.”⁷⁶ Iwasaki is part of these “internationalist” women, in the sense that she endorses American values and dreams to empower herself, and embraces these ideals when she decides to leave the confined and restrained society.

After her retirement, Iwasaki wanted to erect a building where her okiya stands. The building will house a beauty spa, her family's living quarters, and rental rooms for additional income. When she saw a painting of Jinichiro Sato one day, however, she suddenly realized that she was “*destined to introduce this artist to the world.*”⁷⁷ She eventually married him and has a daughter with him. She has a new house in the suburbs of Kyoto. She is still close with Mother of the okiya and her older sister, Kuniko, who, until she passed away, frequently took care of Iwasaki's daughter. In the meantime, she became fascinated with art restoration, something Jinichiro is an expert at. Eventually, she learned enough from him to become certified in his art. She says that her “days are unrestrained and unfettered. I am no longer ruled by the dictates of the Inoue School. I dance when I want. I dance how I want.”⁷⁸ In this ending of Geisha, A Life, Iwasaki

⁷⁵ Karen Kelsky, Women on the Verge: Japanese Women, Western Dreams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) 7.

⁷⁶ Kelsky, 87.

⁷⁷ Iwasaki, 290.

⁷⁸ Iwasaki, 295.

overtly displays the freedom and independence as well as happiness she acquired as a result of her retirement from the geisha profession. Being strong, smart, and modern, her story does not have a stereotypical, tragic ending; she is neither confined in the geisha society as Cobb's geisha are, nor is she satisfied with unfulfilled romantic relationships the way Golden's Sayuri is.

At the same time, as a former geisha, she is determined to correct misconceptions about geisha in America. During her promotional tours for her book in America, she wore a kimono and danced in order to show the beauty and graciousness of the tradition. Although she criticizes geisha society, she identifies herself with the profession. She is proud of having been a successful geisha, and is forthcoming to her American audience.

Through Geisha, A Life, Iwasaki attempts to challenge the misconceptions about geisha life and culture perpetuated in Western society because of Orientalist influence. Through her personal stories, she is attempting to perpetuate an image of geisha that is professional—a woman who is both a traditional Japanese dancer and an independent businesswoman. Concurrently, relying heavily on American values, she criticizes the limitations placed on the rights geisha have within geisha society. By giving up her profession in order to gain empowerment over her life, she posits that she is in a better position than both the geisha who stay in the arcane society and Japanese women who are indentured to their husbands and home. Yet, as any autobiography has the potential to do, Geisha, A Life is not simply a story about her life. The book became a political as well as cultural statement against the images propagated by Golden's Memoirs of a Geisha and

other Americans projects. Ironically, however, consumed with defying the old feminized, eroticized, and exoticized images, Iwasaki constructs an image of a geisha that is acceptable in the West by conforming to American values.

Afterward

Newsweek's "Perspectives '95" features a cartoon juxtaposing the wrongdoings of American servicemen with the image of the Iwo Jima monument, a symbol of patriotic conduct associated with American servicemen (Fig. 13). The cartoon is a response to an infamous incident, the rape of a 12 year-old girl, which occurred in Okinawa, Japan, in the fall of 1995. Like the original monument, the cartoon shows several American soldiers on the ground, but tells quite a different story. The cartoon indicates that the base where the soldiers stand is Okinawa, not Iwo Jima, and there is no American flag soaring skyward. Instead of struggling to reach upwards and raise the flag, the soldiers in the cartoon are trying to grab a Japanese girl, who is apparently lying down on the ground. In place of "Uncommon Valor was a Common Virtue," the caption of the cartoon reads "HOLD HER DOWN!"

The cartoon critiques the conduct of the three American servicemen who raped the Okinawan girl on September 4, 1995.¹ On her way home from a store, the girl was abducted, "bundled... into the back of [the men's] rental car, [they] taped her mouth, eyes, hands, and feet with duck tape, and [took her] to a deserted place. They beat, raped,

¹ The southwestern island of Japan, Okinawa, has been historically known for the Japanese annexation of 1879, the battle of Okinawa during WWII, and American occupation between 1945 and 1972. Most recently, Okinawa has been the site of the largest American military base in Japan, which occupies a significant part of the island.

and abandoned her.”² The incident quickly galvanized Okinawan residents to protest against the Japanese government and the American military, which had imposed a long and massive occupation of Okinawa Island.³ The events following the brutalization of the Japanese girl eventually led to a Japan-U.S. agreement to reduce the size of the base in Okinawa with President Bill Clinton apologizing for the conduct of the American Servicemen at the Japan’s Diet.

This incident was not simply a rape; nor was it an isolated incident of misconduct as then President Bill Clinton explained to Japan’s Diet. It was not merely about the burdens and frustrations of Okinawans resulting from having to live in the proximity of the American military base either. This incident is about the American men who abused the Japanese girl, treating this child as a sexual object, and the ideology that might have provoked the rape. It calls attention to the physical colonization and exploitation of not only native women around the military bases, but of Japanese women in general.⁴ In fact, the commander of the United States forces in the Pacific, Adm. Richard C. Macke, was forced to step down, because of this comment: “the recent rape of [the Okinawan] girl could have been avoided if the American servicemen involved had simply paid for a

² Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, “De-Militarizing Security: Women Oppose U.S. Militarism In East Asia,” Iris-A Journal About Women Fall 1999, LexisNexis Academic. U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu. 26 June 2004 <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/printdoc>> pars. 1.

³ Okinawans also have bitter feelings toward the Japanese government, because Okinawans feel the government has imposed a heavy burden on Okinawans by allowing the American military base to exist in Okinawa.

⁴ The historical and contemporary relationship between American military bases and prostitution has been studied. For example, Beth L. Bailey and David Farber's The First Strange Place: the alchemy and race and sex in World War II Hawaii (New York: Free Press, 1992) discusses the situation in Hawaii during WWII.

prostitute.”⁵ The comment begs the question, what ideas and images might have influenced those American servicemen, including Adm. Richard Macke, to think that any Japanese woman was available for them to use as a sexual object?

Using the three texts, Jodi Cobb’s Geisha, Arthur Golden’s Memoirs of a Geisha, and Mineko Iwasaki’s Geisha, A Life, I have called attention to the image American’s hold of geisha at the turn of the 21st century. Compared to the 19th- to the early 20th century, or Post-W.W.II picture of geisha in the West, the recent portrayal of geisha in America sheds light on individual geisha experiences and their mindsets, exposing their successful transformation from poor and underprivileged victims into refined women. Concurrently, however, this image also remains within the Orientalist framework and conveys geisha’s limited power to control their own lives in Japan’s hierarchical society in terms of class and gender. Furthermore, by presenting the authors’ access to actual (or former) geisha and the geisha community, and the explicit inclusion of geisha voices to some extent, both American and Iwasaki’s texts stress the authenticity of their depictions of and stories about geisha.

Yet, whether the portrayal displays positive or negative sides of geisha, the image of geisha in American texts reflects dominant, white American’s self-image at the given time; American’s values and beliefs are embedded into the image, and this promotes their ideas of superiority over geisha and, by extension, things Japanese. Specifically, the

⁵ Irvin Molotsky, “Admiral Has to Quit Over His Comments on Okinawa Rape,” New York Times 18 Nov. 1995, LexisNexis Academic U. of Hawaii Hamilton Lib., Honolulu 26 June 2004 <<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/printdoc>>, pars. 1.

image of geisha who strive for beauty and empowerment within the confined geisha society manifests American interests in the empowerment of non-Western women advocated by third wave feminism. Third wave feminism also embraces the co-existence of feminine (being beautiful) and non-feminine (being strong) qualities, which is also embodied in the character of geisha in American texts.

Concurrently, American texts emphasize the powerlessness and exoticness of geisha and their society. The texts largely focus on “traditional” geisha in the pre-W.W.II era, an image that reflects Orientalist theory. Geisha are depicted as sacrificing themselves to male clients for professional and career advancement, which reinforces geisha’s powerlessness and the availability of their bodies for men’s enjoyment. Although geisha are described as having more freedom and control in their lives than ordinary Japanese women, they are still confined within geisha society. Stressing the Japanese class system that traps geisha, American texts show the limitations of power geisha have compared to their white American female counterparts. While this negative picture of geisha perpetuates the superiority of the dominant Americans, it also favorably appeals to the American conservatism movement of the 1990s, which expresses a desire for a more controlled society and life.

Cobb and Golden’s stories about geisha also reflect how Japanese businessmen and economy that have been depicted in American mainstream media. Through her photographs, Cobb’s Geisha shows childish Japanese men interacting with geisha in tearooms. Explaining that their behavior is a reaction to the controlled roles they play as

servants in their companies, Geisha undermines the fierce, aggressive, and shrewd Japanese male figure portrayed in the American media between the 1970s and the early 1990s. On the other hand, Golden's Memoirs gives us an intelligent, yet reserved and passive Japanese male character. The image Memoirs creates is similar to the one of Japanese men common in American media from the mid-1990s. By then, recession had slowed the Japanese economy and Japanese companies that had bought buildings and companies in America began to withdraw. Reflecting the idea that Japanese men were America's friendly ally by the late 1990s, Memoirs describes Japanese males as unthreatening, obedient characters who are more likely to use power and intelligence for, not against, America. Thus, the image of Japanese men in American texts might reflect the one portrayed in the American media and the economic relationship American has with Japan at the given time.

On the other hand, Mineko Iwasaki's autobiography Geisha, A Life shows how a former geisha endorses American ideologies in order to legitimize herself and her power, as well as to align herself with her American counterparts. She speaks against the depiction of her geisha experience in Memoirs of a Geisha, which, she claims, portrays a geisha as a prostitute. Through her autobiography, she emphasizes her dedication to traditional geisha dance and her ability to acquire freedom, individualism, and independence. Despite the fact that attaining these ideals cost her career; she demonstrates that she obtains the values, and thus completely separates herself from the limitations on geisha life that American texts accentuate. In order to empower herself, she

eventually constructs a geisha image opposite from the Orientalist image, which results in her becoming an “Americanized” geisha. This portrayal ultimately empowers American readers and culture, not geisha and their society. Thus, her autobiography not only calls attention to a complicated, heterogeneous geisha life and experience, it also exposes the Americanization of Japanese women who feel superior and worthy only by legitimizing their position on American terms.

The American image of geisha at the turn of the 21st century explains American popular culture’s continuous control of the image of Japanese culture, positioning Japan lower than and inferior to the dominant American culture. The rape in Okinawa explicates how some Americans continue to think of Japanese women as sexual objects because of American misconceptions of Japanese women and culture. Ultimately, this Orientalist image of geisha and the manipulation in popular culture of things Japanese in accordance with dominant white American perspectives have the potential to affect the way many Americans think, understand, and behave towards Japanese people and society.

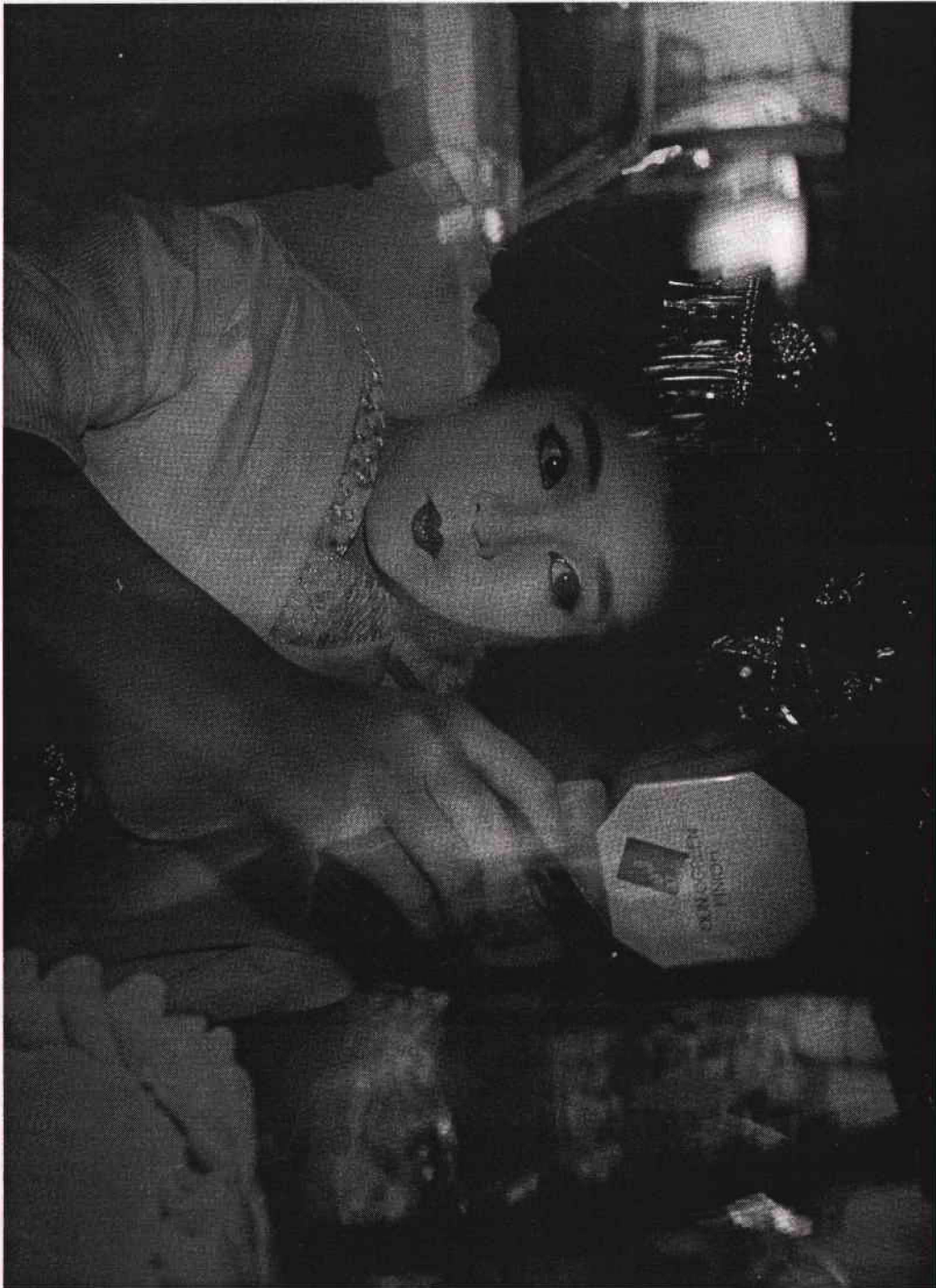


Fig. 1: In the chapter "Introduction." Cobb, 3.

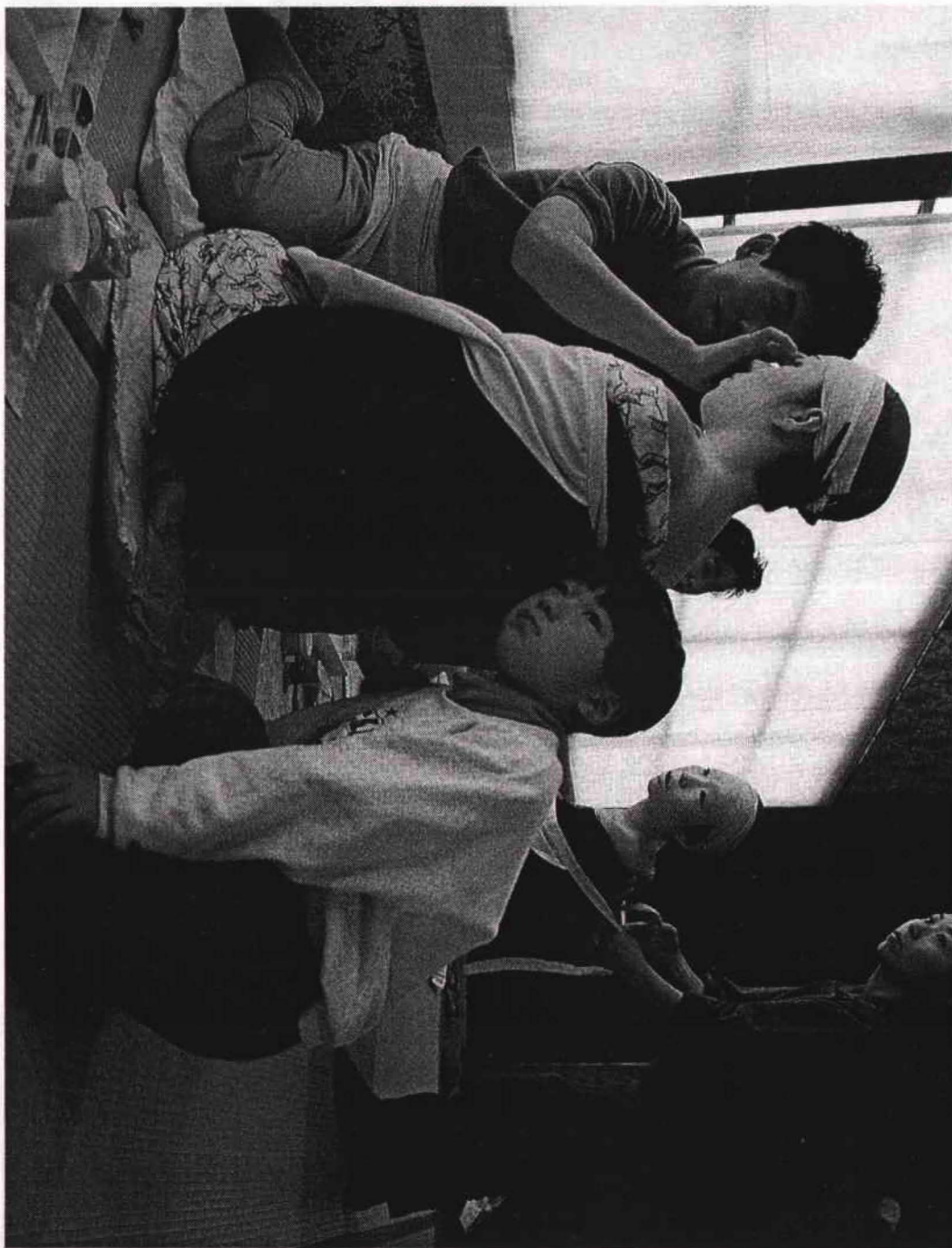


Fig. 2: In the chapter "A World of Art." Cobb 33.

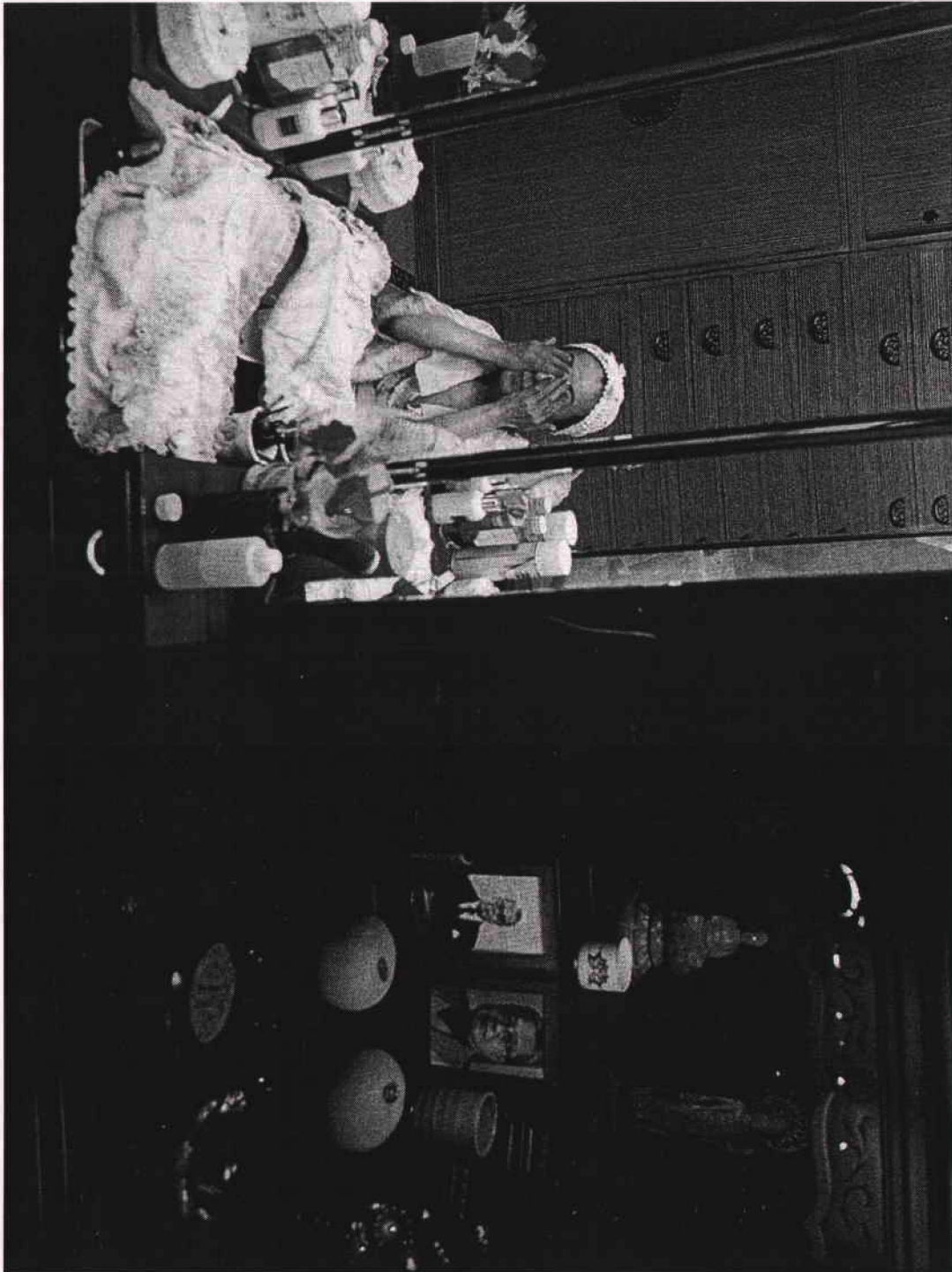


Fig. 3: In the chapter "Inside the 'Pleasure Quarters.'" Cobb, 83.

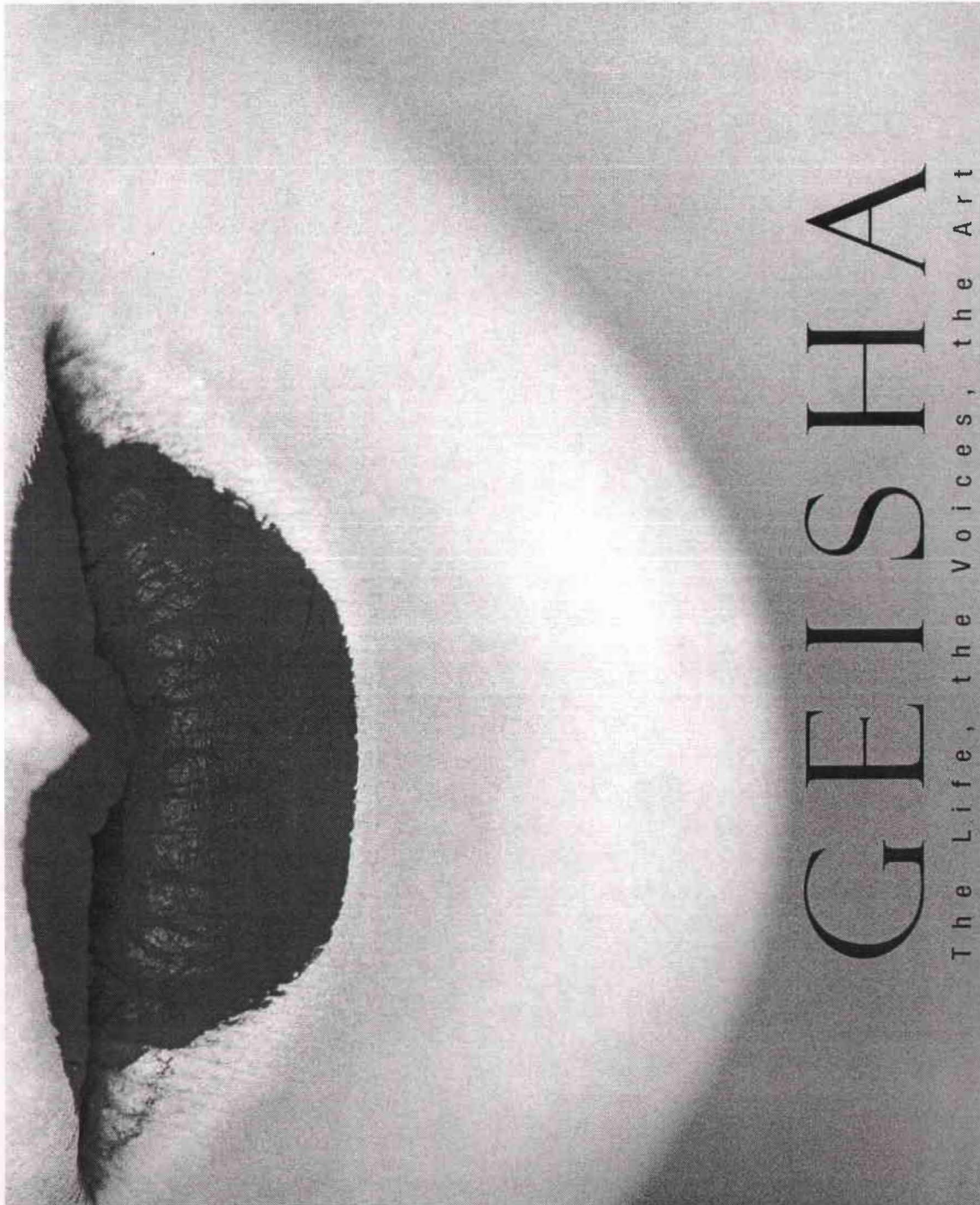


Fig. 4: On the cover of Cobb's Geisha.



Fig. 5: In the chapter "Inside the 'Pleasure Quarters.'" Cobb, 71.



Fig. 6: In the chapter "Introduction." Cobb 13.



Fig. 7: In the chapter "Introduction." Cobb, 19.



Fig. 8: In the chapter "A World of Art." Cobb, 27.

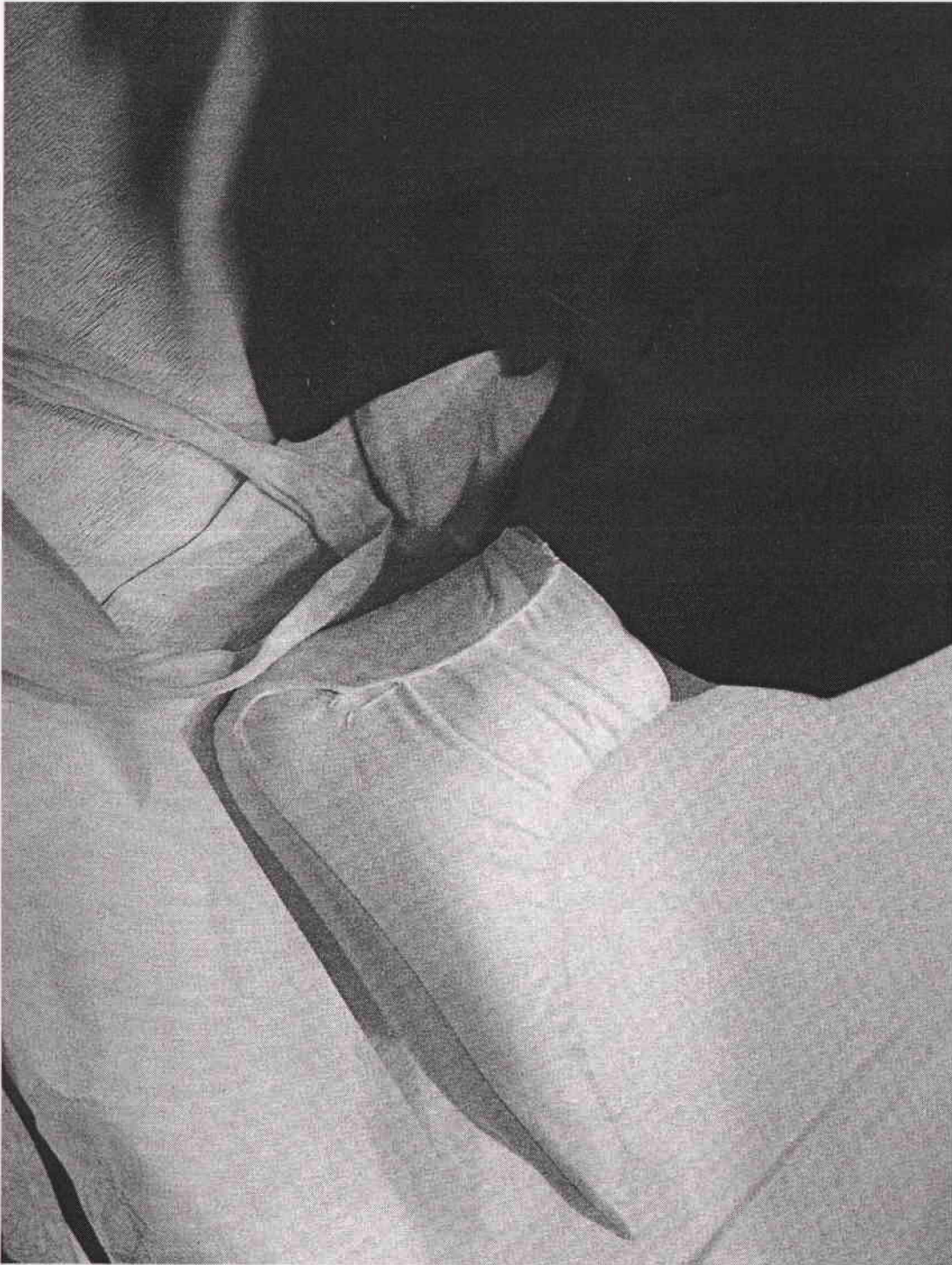


Fig. 9: In the chapter "Inside the 'Pleasure Quarters.'" Cobb, 75.

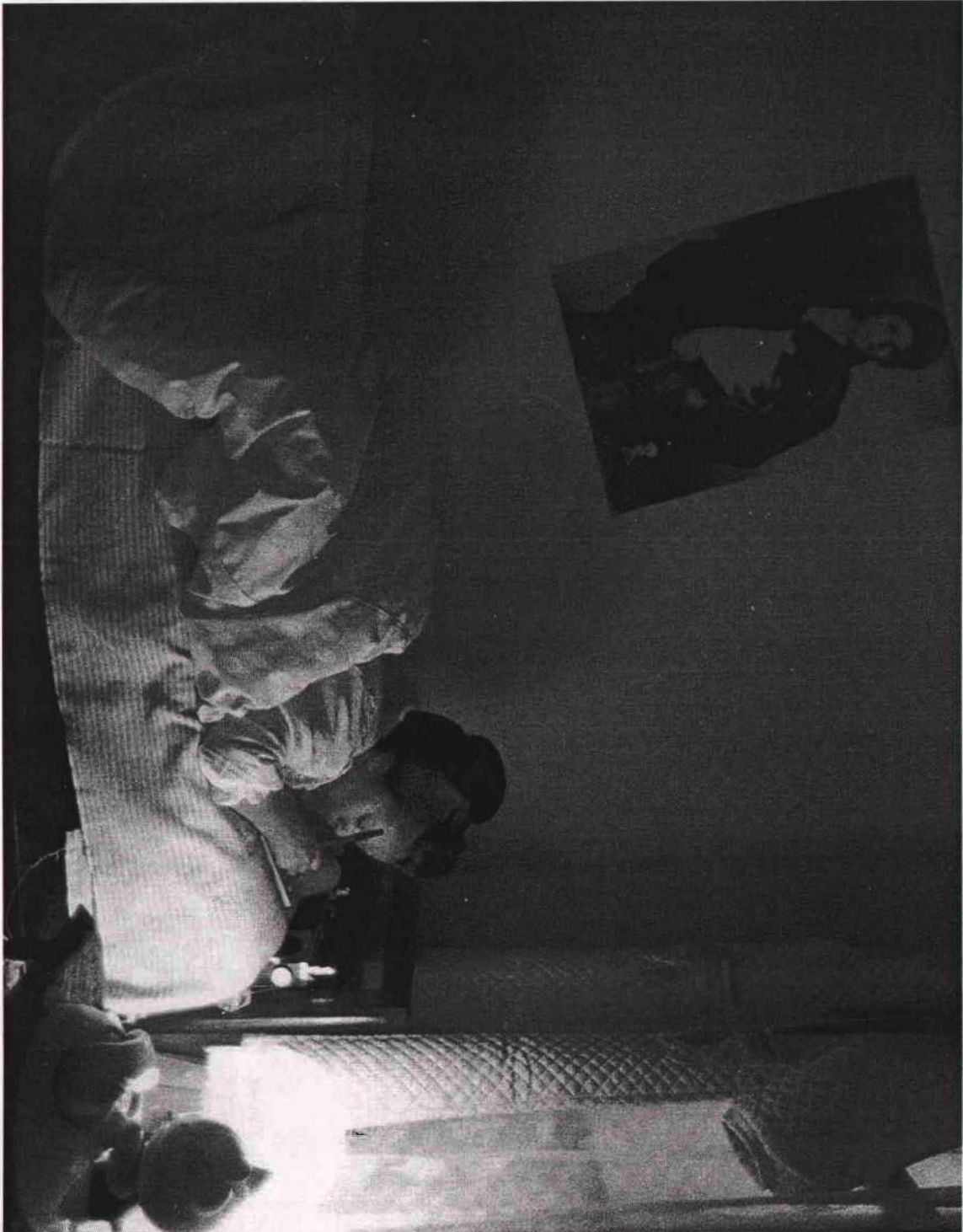


Fig. 10: In the chapter "Selling Dreams." Cobb 107.

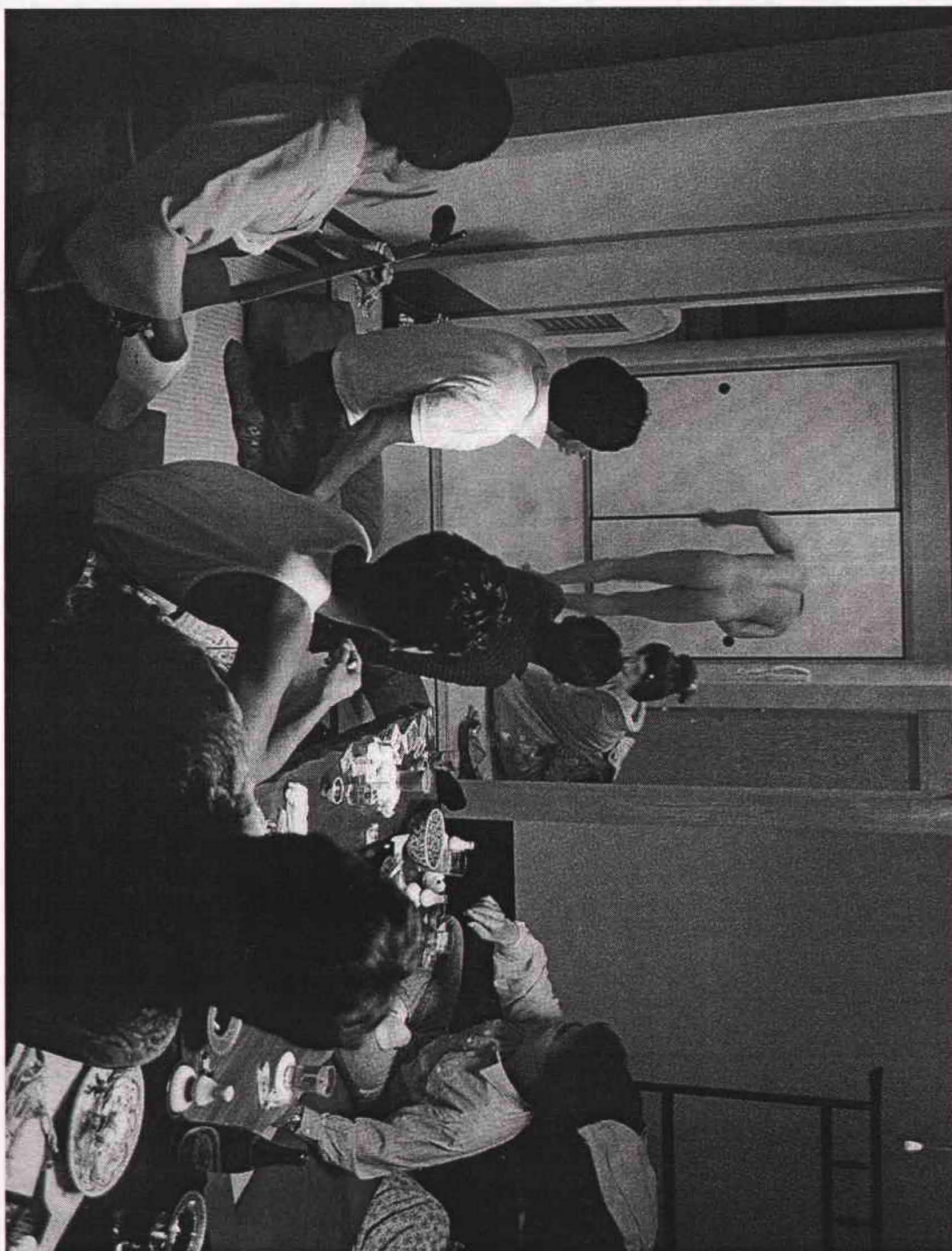


Fig. 11: In the chapter "Selling Dreams." Cobb, 99.



Fig. 12: In the chapter "Selling Dreams." Cobb 101.



N. 1, 1996

ED ROBERTS—PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE (TOP), CHRIS JENNISON—ARIZONA STAR

Fig. 13: Newsweek, Dec. 1995/Jan. 1996.

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