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The World of the Geisha

By Tom Takihi

Yasunari Kawabata's crystalline novel Snow Country relates a love affair between an aloof dilettante

and what is known as an onsen, or "hot-spring", geisha; and much of the novel's relentless melancholy arises from the onsen geisha's low place on the geisha totem pole. The dilettante is slumming, in other words, and his girl, though adept at the typical and treasured art of shamisen-playing, drinks and talks too boldly for a woman of her station.

The phenomenal success of Arthur Golden's novel Memoirs of a Geisha and now the recent movie release- has rekindled the public's interest in these secretive and seductive creatures, just as their species seem destined to receive the coup de grace suffered by so many things traditionally Japanese. No ear is so trained as that hoping to hear dying words.

For their part, some Japanese are not so keen on being identified with their wobbly, porcelain quasi-prostitutes. They would prefer to stand for artistic virtuosity or technical mastery. Yet there is no reason for Japan to be ashamed of this unique contribution to international culture. Where would the world be without The Mikado or Madame Butterfly?

Like many Asian countries, Japan has imported two extraordinarily unsuccessful ideas from the West. First, that marriage should be based on romantic love. Second, that marital infidelity is grounds for divorce if not damnation. Marriage, when it was not purely an economic contract between families, was based upon the necessity of producing and supporting children. The husband won the bread that the wife then distributed; and the husband was expected and even encouraged to seek amour and more elsewhere. According to the system's logic, no one woman can be an angel with the children, a maid in the kitchen, a whore in the bedroom, and a wit in the salon.

No doubt the system has its faults as a solution to the problem of the sexes. It scoffs at gender equality and tends to fester with ugly jealousies. But it also has its virtues. It accounts for the fact that men and women, for the time being anyway, are endowed with markedly different equipment and instructions for its proper use. And Asia has a far lower rate of divorce than the West.

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The function of the geisha is to provide men with learned but carefree conversation, song and dance, and cup after cup of sake. Unlike the common lot of prostitutes, they are expected to receive rigorous training in their *gei*, or "art". Their dress is elaborate and expensive, and thus their services do not come cheap. And sex is not a service, or at any rate not the foremost service, that they offer. Though Western civilization has occasionally seen figures similar to the geisha – the Greek *hetaerae* and the French *femmes savantes* — there is no modern Western equivalent.

It would be easy to see the geisha as a potent symbol of the patriarchal or depraved nature of Asian societies. But two Western women, Liza Dalby and Lesley Downer, both authors of books titled *Geisha*, succeed in transcending such a simple condemnation. Both women take pains to anticipate the objections of feminists as well as puritans. Downer, a Briton with an unfortunate surname, often admits that Anglo–Saxon sensibilities are an austere deviation from the groovy global norm, while the American Dalby uses her own straitlaced homeland for contrast. Still, Downer bristles a little. One of her favorite words is "louche", a rather pretentious synonym for disreputable or indecent; she is frequently "aghast." When a plucky band of geisha torture her with their second–hand cigarette smoke,

she worries as every good immortal should. Dalby smokes, or smoked (her book was originally published in 1983, and was apparently reissued to meet the demand created by Golden's novel); and she has the added advantage of having been the only non–Japanese geisha, ever. Her work is part anthropology, part autobiography; Downer's is a mix of history and journalism.

The Japanese have earned a reputation as sober, hard–working people. But they play equally hard, and some of them are far from sober. Geisha are expected to hold their drink with the fortitude of Hemingway while their clients drink themselves under prohibitively low tables — and the quicker, the better. Dalby describes a drinking game involving rounds of rock–scissors–paper, in which the loser must gulp a cup of sake (which is usually about 30 proof.) But don't call your travel agent yet! There are proprieties to be observed. Solitary drinkers are aberrant. So are the abstemious among the already drunk. And a drunk geisha is just as *gauche* as a sober one: witness Kawabata's lush in *Snow Country*.

Japanese sexual attitudes are, or were, marked by a similar mixture of abandon and restraint. Before the advent of stodgy God–fearing foreigners, the Japanese condoned prostitution, naked communal bathing, and, at least as Downer has it, homosexuality. Nor did they regard one's sexual habits as a matter for public scrutiny. Downer cites the saying "There's no personality below the navel": what a person does with his nether parts should not decide whether he is a person of parts.

A great deal of this liberality has been eroded by Japan's misguided efforts to appear civilized to the "hairy barbarians" of the West. Modern obscenity laws, for example, require that pubic hair appearing in pornographic magazines be blacked out. And more than one recent politician has been toppled by the disclosure of his sexual indiscretions. But in some ways the Japanese were more prudish to begin with. Kissing, for instance, was seen as an intimate, strictly private act.

Legal prostitution was officially abolished in 1957, although of course it continues to be practiced. Recently *Time Asia* dedicated an article to Japan's seeming rise in schoolgirl prostitution, although the schoolgirls in question were rather complacent about it. According to Dalby, from 1600 to 1867

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"prostitution was legal, but only if properly licensed and controlled." Ironically some European countries are now reverting to this policy in the interest of public health.

The first geisha were men and appeared as early as the 1600s. When the first female geisha appeared in 1750, they constituted a threat to the established purveyors of men's entertainment, like the yujo, or "women of pleasure." For this reason the geisha were banned from having sexual relations with their customers. But the ban was bent, as Dalby here explains:

"shiro (white) geisha were purely entertainers, as opposed to korobi geisha, who 'tumbled' for guests; kido (gate) geisha stood at the entrances to carnivals, playing their shamisens to attract business, whereas joro (whore) geisha were probably not hired for their musical skills. Around 1770, the former dancing girls (odoriko) of the feudal towns began to be called machi geisha...[who] in turn had other nicknames, such as neko, 'cat,' a word that could be written with characters implying the possibility of pussy...."

The status quo was abolished well before prostitution. In 1947, the United States drafted Japan's new constitution. To a degree that may surprise exhausted American advocates of ERA, the Japanese constitution stressed equality of the sexes. Japanese women were given the vote and arranged marriages were given the boot. Of course, women had always exercised indirect political power by whispering into the ears of their sake-soaked samurai. "The essence of the feminine ideal," Downer

writes mischievously, "is to make a man think that he is the one who has the brilliant ideas." The red-light districts were the clandestine headquarters of many of Japan's revolutionary movements, and geisha, renowned for their secrecy, often served as their guardians and confidantes. "The notion of a geisha as simpering slave to male whim," writes Dalby, "is an absurd stereotype found outside Japan."

Despite legal equality, the Japanese genders maintain widely disparate roles. The geisha perseveres, and for good reason: the lifestyle has its charms. For one, being a geisha seems to be more fun than being a wife. "I'd rather be here than be an old lady whose children have gone off and married," declares a geisha in Dalby's book, "and be stuck at home now with a crotchety old husband." Many women choose the lifestyle because they can thereby pursue an interest in a traditional art. "They are among the few Japanese women," writes Dalby, "who have managed to attain economic self-sufficiency and positions of authority and influence on their own merits."

Dalby stops short of calling them feminists, but if a feminist is simply a woman who, rather than attempting to imitate men, derives a certain power from her essential femininity, then the label may be an apt one. (Forget for the moment that certain academics have said femininity is not essential but "constructed"; and that were it not for our machinations, little girls everywhere would lift weights and fly fighter planes, and little boys would replenish empty ice trays and learn how to listen.)

Feminists or not, the geisha aim at a cultivation of harmony and pleasure. They are social lubricants made flesh. And central to their ethic is the notion of ukiyo, originally a Buddhist term connoting the transitory nature of existence. But ukiyo evolved into the idea that, as Dalby writes, "life may be disagreeable and impermanent, but as we have to live it anyway, we might as well enjoy it and indulge in what worldly pleasures there are." It is a sophisticated hedonism born of pessimism, but with a very

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Eastern metaphysical basis: ukiyo may be translated as "floating world."

Both geisha books are comprehensive accounts of a world that Downer thinks is vanishing and that Dalby thinks is merely at ebb. Both books also offer a picture of Japanese culture as a whole. From Dalby we learn that sake is an essential part of the Japanese marriage ceremony; that 'boyfriend' in Japanese is boifurendo; that Japanese humor relies greatly on punning; and that the Japanese may have multiple names, one for each of their social roles. As a woman, Dalby is known as Kikuko; but as a geisha she goes by Ichigiku.

Downer discusses gaman, the Japanese ideal of enduring present circumstances rather than modifying or complaining about them. And she provides an explanation for why so many of Kawabata's characters are endlessly coughing blood: around his time, tuberculosis "caused 50 percent of deaths from illness in Japan".

"No one forces a geisha to do what she doesn't want to," announces Kawabata's onsen geisha. "It's entirely up to the geisha herself." This would be inspiring if it were true. But one thing that geisha are, or were, forced to do is undergo mizu age, or "ritual deflowering." And stealing their chrysanthemums is not what is meant. In mizu age, a trusted man is enlisted to break the maidenhead of a maiko, or apprentice geisha. Dalby again rushes to defend the practice: after all, she says, is this any worse than losing your virginity to some horny, clumsy adolescent in the back seat of a Chevy? Ladies?

It is an object of infinite wonder that human beings, so very similar in so many ways, have devised so many different ways of making life more than what it is at bottom, which according to T.S. Eliot is "Birth, and copulation, and death. / That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all." When future civilizations dig through the ugly rubble we have left behind, it is to be hoped that they will discover one of the famous

geisha woodcuts. For then they will have to admit that some of us knew briefly what was meant by elegance or – do I dare to utter a double entendre? – class.

Tom Takihi started

<http://www.GeishaBlog.com>

in order to engage Westerners in the discovery of authentic Japanese culture, as it is today.

Top Ten Travel Destinations – Part II

By Dexter Stoakley

National Geographic magazine recently released an updated version of its top travel lists, and the destinations listed all have the advantages of unparalleled scenery, a developed economy geared towards tourists, and the advantages of careful exploitation, tempered by the fact that they are usually

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adjacent to more popular destinations in terms of volume.. Here are the final five in the list of the best places to travel to.

6) Rocky Mountain parks, Canada: There are four National Parks in a row in the Rocky Mountain range of Canada, running through the two provinces of Alberta and British Columbia. Combined, these parks offer some of the best adventure and recreational sport travel opportunities in the world, along with unique scenery and incredible biodiversity. Banff and Jasper are perhaps the best known of the parks, with Banff being a mere hour drive from the city of Calgary. Yoho and Revelstoke also offer great opportunities for skiers and hikers.

7) Scottish Highlands, United Kingdom: This site has it all in terms of cultural appeal and natural beauty. The towering mountains offer all the recreational choices of young fold ranges. For the sightseer, there are various opportunities. Natural attractions include the Corrieshaloch Gorge and the fabled Loch Ness, while heritage also factors high with the area's many castles and ancient cairns. The area offers opportunities at all times of the year, from spring alpine blooms to fall foliage.

8) Kruger National Park, South Africa: Surprisingly, this park located along the border with Mozambique is the only African safari destination in the top ten. This could be due to its historical origins as one of the first protected areas in Africa, and also with its well-developed and natural tourist opportunities. Kruger encompasses two ecosystems, dry savanna in the north and open grassland in the south. There is a huge array of wildlife in the area, including all of the African "Big Five" (rhino, elephant, leopard, lion, and Cape Buffalo), antelope, giraffe, wild dog, and many other species of wildlife. The Park is also located in one of the more politically stable regions of Africa, unaffected by the high crime that embroils the rest of the country.

9) Kyoto historic district, Japan: Anyone who has watched the recently released *Memoirs of a Geisha* can imagine the appeal of this area, ninth on the list. Ancient Buddhist temples, wooden townhouses, and geisha houses bound in a modern day reflection of ancient Japanese glory. The area is abundant with detailed Japanese xeriscape and architecture, from gardens to bridges, nobility houses and public works buildings.

10) Quebec City historic city center, Canada: Quebec City is the French cultural heart of Canada, and the City center is representative of all that the francophone culture includes. This is the only city in North America that has preserved its colonial ramparts and also incorporates all of the old trappings of fortresses, such as bastions and towers. The area is also considered to be a World Heritage Centre.

Dexter Stoakley maintains a website dedicated to travel enthusiasts. Visit his site at:

<http://alltravelexperts.com>



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