

Moustaches and Hairpins: A Look at How America Sexualized the Japanese Geisha

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After Japan opened to the rest of the world in 1883, we saw that there was evidence of cultural exchange. Japan was quick to accept modernization, with the spread of the Japanese aesthetic evident in the popularization of Japonisme in art in the mid to late 1800s. In 1939 New York, Japan had its own pavilion at the World's Fair. The building was fashioned after a traditional Shinto shrine, with tours led by young Japanese women wearing traditional dress (kimono and yukata).¹ Yet even with all this cultural exposure, we can see a tendency in American media and art that hypersexualizes Japanese women. Previous arguments discuss how Post-World War II, American soldiers that were stationed in Japan during the time of occupation, could not tell the difference between the kimono styles of Geisha (trained entertainers revered for their music and dancing) and Oiran (prostitutes that were also revered for their serves and knowledge of the arts). Although there were additional sex workers working during this time, I will primarily focus on the perception of Geisha in America. As well as the ways that American culture interpreted Japanese sexual art. This paper will also argue that America intentionally hyper-sexualized Japanese women in an effort to "other"² the Japanese and justify neocolonial intentions.

The Japanese also had different ideals about sex and sexuality. Homosexual relations, along with polygamous marriages were common up until the Meiji era when monogamous and heterosexual relationships were popularized by Western influences.³ America, traditionally prescribed to the Judaeo-Christian idea of sex and sexuality, valuing purity in women, monogamy, not participating in sexual "deviance" like homosexuality and prostitutes. Right away we notice a difference between the two cultures. Although America did undoubtedly have a sex industry, it was not as well received by the public. In Japan, there was an art genre called ukiyo-e, which was essentially woodcut prints. Geisha and Oiran were both popular subjects for these prints. A subgenre of ukiyo-e emerged, focusing on sex, and was characterized by large female and male

¹ Van Dort, "Japan: The Government Zone."

² The term "othering" is referring to the colonial phenomenon where the colonized culture is considered less than by the colonial power. Creating a sense of superiority and reinforcing ethnocentric ideologies.

³ Kumagai, "History of Courtship," 39-64

anatomy called Shunga. Shunga art fell out of favor in the Edo period (1603 to 1867) but was still practiced. These woodcut prints were popular amongst European (French) artists. There was a sudden surge of Japonisme after 1876, following the first official World's Fair held in Philadelphia. According to Yoko Chiba,

Their intent was to create and project the image of a far-away country, a "never-never-land" of porcelain and geisha, and to locate it in a Western context. In attempting to create the fictional "Japanese" image through stage illusion, the theater was an excellent outlet for the melodramatic expression of Japonisme that would appeal to the extravagant taste of the Victorian audience⁴

For instance, Pablo Picasso was inspired by Katsushika Hokusai's *Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*, which depicts an octopus and a woman engaging in sexual acts.⁵ Picasso's *Woman and Octopus* (*Femme nue couchée*) is strikingly similar with a woman's upturned face and an octopus engulfing her (both seen below). The Surrealist style was also popular in America. There was a sudden surge of Japonisme after 1876, following the first official World's Fair held in Philadelphia. According to Yoko Chiba,

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In which we already see a functional alteration of Japanese art and culture to cater to a Western influence. However, after the Russo-Japanese War (1904 to 1905), Japan changed its image from a country of beauty to one of military might.⁷

⁴ Chiba, "Japonisme," 12-13.

⁵ Kang, "The Ukiyoe Boom," 39.

⁶ Chiba, "Japonisme," 12-13.

⁷ Chiba, "Japonisme," 3.



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Shunga as an art was changing and transforming with modernization. While Japanese troops were in contact with other soldiers, they would often share Shunga postcards with each other. These postcards initially seemed like a normal landscape or a beautiful woman but once it was held up to the light, the image revealed was an erotic scene. These postcards were often sold to Westerners stationed in Yokohama.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the spread of these postcards only aided in the hyper-sexualization narrative of Japanese women.

Geisha were entertainers and Oirans, also labelled courtesans, appeared in different areas of cities.



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During this time, however, with the spread of new technology such as photography, the situation for artists began to change, and this brought new developments for the form and content of Shunga.¹³ Geisha and Oiran were popular subjects of photographers.

⁸ "Katsushika Hokusai."

⁹ Picasso, *Femme nue couchée*.

¹⁰ Ishigami and Buckland, "The Reception of 'Shunga,'" 47-48.

¹¹ Ishigami and Buckland, 48.

¹² Ishigami and Buckland, 48.

¹³ Ishigami and Buckland, 46.



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Looking at these two pre-WWII photographs, it is very easy to see the difference in dress between the Oiran (left) and the Geisha (right). The Oiran is much more elaborately dressed; she has several large hair pins, multiple layers of kimonos, and she has a manaita obi (fabric around the waist keeping the kimono closed) facing forward. In contrast, the Geisha has a much simpler, more elegant style. Their hair has fewer decorations, only a few layers of clothing, and the obi is tied in the back. These are physically noticeable differences that even people who are not versed in Japanese sex culture can easily identify. So, to argue that American soldiers could not tell the difference between two different types of kimonos is a flimsy argument, as it is simple to not only see the difference in clothing but also the past cultural interactions between Japan and America.

After America defeated Japan in 1945, America placed troops in Japan and began the period of occupation. The defeat was devastating for the Japanese and many people were left impoverished. Out of desperation, Japanese women, and teens (male and female) started resorting to prostitution. Furthermore, the Japanese public assumed that the incoming American troops would behave the same as their own troops when it came to women.^{16 17} The American

¹⁴ Bain News Service, "Japanese Prostitutes."

¹⁵ Oliver, "Inside the World of the Geisha."

¹⁶ McLelland, "Sex and Censorship," 2.

¹⁷ Japanese troops were notorious for raping and collecting "comfort women" as they travelled across the continent. These women were treated as less than human and often kept in terrible conditions. Please refer to Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015).

administration, however, did not view their troops as sexual predators rather, they felt it was the immoral Japanese women that were corrupting the men.¹⁸ This difference in views created a rift between the ideologies of the East and West. Additionally, there was an imbalance of power because the American Allies remained stationed in the country after the war had ended; in other words, the American narrative was favoured over the Japanese voice. The narrative in Japan was controlled by two different parties: the Civil Censorship Detachment (CCD), and the Civil Information and Education Section (CIE). The first was to ensure that all publications fit within a strict guideline, the second was meant to enforce the democratic ideology.¹⁹ These censorship restrictions alone are incriminating enough when it comes to neocolonialism in Japan, however, we can really see the trickle-down effect when it comes to how American soldiers viewed Japanese women in Japan and in America.

Neocolonialism is a new view of colonialist rule, although a colonial power may not have direct control over a country or nation, they use propaganda to push a democratic agenda. In Japan, this agenda was a strategic ploy by America to solidify capitalism and democracy in the East. This strategy became most evident during the Cold War (1947-1991) and the Korean War (1950-1953.) These proxy wars were a direct result of America's colonialist intentions and macro examples of America's neocolonial intent. We will be focusing on a micro example of prostitution and the perception of Japanese women by Americans and how those views were strategic in "othering" the Japanese and enforcing ethnocentric views.

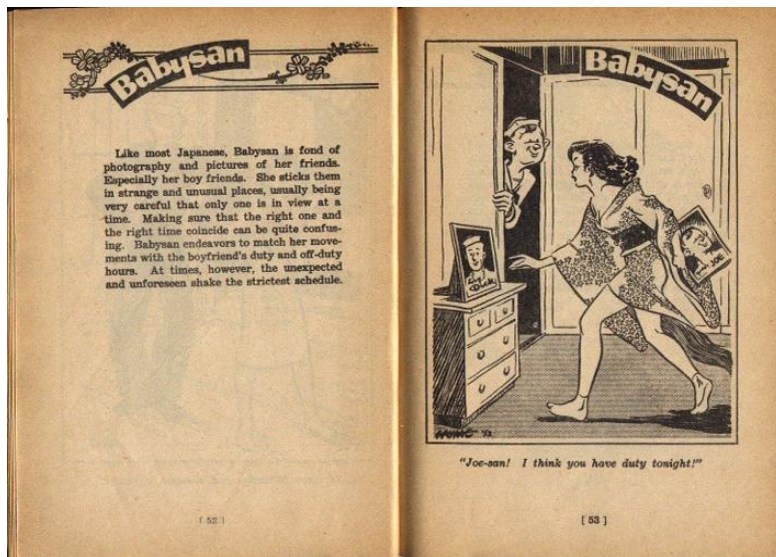
As mentioned above, the American narrative was that Japanese women were corrupting men and were unclean, which caused the spread of venereal diseases. As a result, Douglas MacArthur (American Commander in charge of Occupation of Japan) began segregating the Japanese and American people and furthermore, women were banned from Army billets and mess halls.²⁰ However, this did little to prevent fraternization from occurring. During this time, the sex industry in Japan started to evolve with the introduction of the art of strip tease and with the banning of prostitution, the Oiran found themselves without a place to work. Here we see the emergence of the Panpan girl. Sarah Kovner defines Panpan girls as "[...] any woman who sold sex on the street, and the new occupying American servicemen were simply their most conspicuous

¹⁸ McLelland, "Sex and Censorship," 2.

¹⁹ McLelland, 5.

²⁰ Kovner, *Sex Workers and Servicemen*, 30.

customers.”²¹ Which reflects the unregulated practice of prostitution that Americans are familiar with. These Panpan women would play into the Geisha girl fantasies of the American client. Geishas would perform in entertainment districts and the Panpan girls (some were also traditionally trained Geisha) would emulate Geishas which also influenced the American narrative of Geisha being sex workers as well as entertainers, despite a long historic interaction dictating otherwise.²² Artists in America were also influencing the American public by creating caricatures of Japanese women. Bill Hume published a character called Babysan who was depicted wearing a yukata/kimono and she was a sly woman taking advantage of her American boyfriend.



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This unflattering description of Japanese women was an attempt to continue the othering of Japanese women and Japan in general.

In America, as the popularity of film pornography increased, we see further misrepresentation of the Geisha. With American pornographic films like *Geisha Sluts*,²⁴ *Geisha Princess*,²⁵ and *Geisha Service*²⁶ we can see the ignorance of Japanese culture that permeates American society, despite having firsthand interactions and a historic repour. Geisha were not part of the sex industry of Japan, but due to occupation misconceptions of Japanese women the Geisha became a sex icon. This American construct of the Japanese Geisha was propaganda meant to

²¹ Kovner, 76.

²² Dumont and Manigot. "A History of Japanese Striptease."

²³ Hume and Annarino, *Babysan*, 52-53.

²⁴ Alpha Blue Archives. "Geisha Sluts."

²⁵ Yukisawangati. "Geisha Princess."

²⁶ Fdharvey13. "Geisha Service."

break down the relevance of traditional Japanese culture and to build up a new Americanized democratic nation. Furthermore, Japanese women were seen as victims of feudal Japanese patriarchy in need of rescuing through democratic reform.²⁷ Ironical considering the cultural environment of the United States. Nevertheless, this idea is steeped in ethnocentrism.

The dualistic nature of Japanese women perpetuating the notion of perpetrator and victim ensures that they are seen in the narrative as “lesser than”. America could pick and choose which commentary suited their ambitions best. Despite being exposed to Japan and the Japanese culture through the arts (Japonisme), America still confused the professional entertainer with the professional courtesan. The argument that the American soldiers had just seen a kimono and assumed that the women were prostitutes is flimsy. Especially, since it is easy to see the difference in attire as well as being found in a different part of the city. Although, post WWII economic stress did cause an increase in women turning to sex work to survive, it was translated as impure Japanese women corrupting American men and spreading venereal disease. As the occupation moved into the 50s and 60s, new forms of sex work arose. The birth of the Panpan girl reflected the American idea of prostitution. These girls would play out Geisha fantasies to appeal to their American clientele, which played into the misconception of Japanese culture. To cement the misconception of the Japanese Geisha cartoonists like Bill Hume would publish ethnocentric caricatures making Japanese women seem morally corrupt. We can see the lasting effects of this fallacy in the American pornography industry. However, there was a secondary narrative where Japanese women needed saving from their poor feudalistic status, and democracy was the key to their freedom. The propagandist nature of the presentation of Geisha, Oiran, Panpan girls, and Japanese women folk, in general, is indicative of neocolonial intentions. The micro view of the female narrative reflects the macro happenings and the spread of democracy.

²⁷ McLelland, “*Sex and Censorship*,” 17.

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