

**MAIKO BOOM:  
THE REVIVAL OF KYOTO'S NOVICE GEISHA**

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Famous as a symbol of old Kyoto, the apprentice geisha known as *maiko* are enjoying remarkable popularity in Japan in the first decade of the new millennium. One can see this “boom,” to use the Japanese term for a spike in public interest, in the proliferation of all kinds of media and products related to maiko.<sup>1</sup> Maiko blogs, autobiographies, and dance performances, maiko-related goods and services, and even maiko movies and television dramas have all been part of the mix. The vogue for maiko has also led to a notable increase in the number of young women who wish to join the profession. By the spring of 2008, Kyoto could boast of being home to one hundred maiko, the most the city had seen since the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Intriguingly, the attraction of maiko has accompanied a surge of tourism to Kyoto as the site of native tradition, but also comes at a time when girl culture claims much attention in Japan and in Japanese Studies.<sup>3</sup> Novels by award-winning writers and pundits’ essays in Japan demonstrate a curiosity

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<sup>1</sup> In this case, however, I am the one calling this proliferation of interest in maiko a “boom.”

<sup>2</sup> Shigeyuki Murase, “‘Maiko’ Fever Strikes Kyoto,” *The Asahi Shimbun*, April 18, 2008 (accessed March 23, 2009, <http://www.asahi.com/english/Herald-asahi/TKY200804180064.html>). Murase reported that although there had been over one hundred maiko in the ancient capital in 1955, their numbers had decreased in later decades. Seventy-six young women worked as maiko in 1965, but only twenty-eight in 1975, and since 1985, there had generally been between fifty and eighty until the recent increase. According to photographer Aihara Kyoko, there were 164 tea houses in operation in Kyoto’s five hanamachi and 198 women actively working as geiko (geisha) and 82 as maiko in 2007. Aihara Kyoko, *Maiko-san no dōgu-chō* [Guide to Maiko Accessories] (Tokyo: Sankaido, 2007), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Nishio Kumiko, *Kyōto hanamachi no keieigaku* [Business Administration of Kyoto Geisha Districts] (Tokyo: Toyo keizai, 2007), p. 1. Over 48,000,000 tourists visited Kyoto in 2006.

about what drives girls' self-expression and their enthusiastic consumerism.<sup>4</sup> Fears have emerged, too, over the "moral decay" of girls, inciting criticism of such "bad girl" habits as applying make-up on trains and the phenomenon of *enjo kōsai* (compensated dating). In light of this fascination with girl culture, what vision of girlhood does today's maiko represent? What has piqued such interest in this old-fashioned image of Japanese maidenhood, especially when the free-flying, in-your-face teenage girl has provoked such curiosity?

This article explores these questions by surveying highlights from a range of texts produced in the last few years in Japan, including two by maiko themselves, as well as maiko-related products and services. Although most venerate the maiko, kitschy representations and parody have a role here, too. The cultural texts that comprise the maiko boom and the rising number of maiko put forward a vibrant image of Japanese girlhood that offers feminine pleasures, but one that is held in check by the rigors of tradition and the uniformity of the image itself. The various texts show that much of the maiko's attraction lies in her distance from ordinary life – her freedom from school, the pressures of dating, and the boredom of most jobs. Instead, she has an enviable involvement in parties, sumptuous dress, feminine codes of etiquette, and the arts. In fact, her extraordinary life and costume give the impression of a charming character who has stepped right out of the world of a *shōjo manga* magazine (comic magazines for teenage girls) set in a fairyland of a bygone time.

As a young woman sheltered within a world of classic arts and old customs while being supervised by numerous female mentors, the maiko experiences a significantly extended girlhood. In contrast to the popular image of girls who engage in risky behaviors, do whatever they like, and show little interest in adult responsibility, the maiko is imagined as one who finds freedom and maturity within the constraints of her profession. One cannot ignore, however, the cultural texts' depiction of the maiko's work as including nightly parties with mostly older male clients. This aspect of the maiko life prompts comparison and contrast with teens' engagement in

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<sup>4</sup> For discussion of moral panic over girl behavior past and present in Japan, see Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, eds., *Bad Girls of Japan* (New York: Palgrave, 2005); and David Leheny, *Think Global, Fear Local: Sex, Violence, and Anxiety in Contemporary Japan* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006).

compensated dating. The teen experimenting with *enjo kōsai* is courting danger, but the maiko operates within a safely supervised environment. Following Miriam Silverberg's discussion of the 1920s café girl (*jokyū*) as the poor man's geisha, one can make some connection between the *enjo kōsai* teen and the maiko as figures in the Japanese cultural landscape that provide girlish appeal to older men of different wealth and social circles. Yet, we must also consider the powerful fantasy of an ultra-feminine life that maiko present to girls and women as a key element of the maiko boom.<sup>5</sup>

Celebrations of the maiko as a symbol of Japanese tradition exclude the harsher aspects of her history. Maiko representations in 2009 could not be more different from those popularized in 19<sup>th</sup> century postcards favored in the West that depicted pretty little girls ensconced in layers of silk, for example, or in the early postwar Japanese media. In the 1950s, just when the maiko population began declining in Kyoto and as the number of young women graduating from high school and going on to college was on the rise, the geisha profession was portrayed as the residue of feudal Japan in a newly democratic era. Mizoguchi Kenji's film *A Geisha* (*Gion Matsuri*, 1953) and Naruse Mikio's *Flowing* (*Nagareru*, 1956), an adaptation of Koda Aya's novel based on her experiences as a maid in a Tokyo *okiya* (geisha house), depict the maiko and geisha as victims of patriarchy and prostitution.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Masuda Sayo's autobiography, published initially in the magazine *Housewife's Companion* (*Shufu no tomo*) in 1957, describes her life as a hot spring resort geisha as one of long, hard suffering and her days in the *okiya* as nothing less than child abuse. When she takes up work later in a factory, she finds that others look down on her when they find out about her geisha past.<sup>7</sup> Such representations are closer to the view popularized by Arthur Golden's internationally best-selling novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) that is largely set in the 1930s than to the lives of maiko

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Laura Miller for this reference. See Miriam Silverberg, "The Café Waitress Sang the Blues," in *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 73–107.

<sup>6</sup> *A Geisha*, dir. Mizoguchi Kenji (1953); and *Flowing* [*Nagareru*], dir. Naruse Mikio (1956).

<sup>7</sup> Masuda Sayo, *Autobiography of a Geisha*, trans. G.G. Rowley (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

and geisha today.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the contemporary image of the maiko and her actual life and work retain the attraction of traditional costume and arts practice, but not at all the connotation or the fact of a girl trapped in slavery. Maiko in the 21<sup>st</sup> century choose the profession. Moreover, the emphasis on the maiko's arts training and extraordinary costumes, her position, as one geisha puts it, "as a walking exhibit of Kyoto traditional craft," mute the associations with prostitution in the past and comparisons with *enjo kōsai* today.<sup>9</sup>

Representative of romanticized Japanese past staged in the present, the maiko has become a dreamy figure of escape. She is the idol of costume play (cos-play; *kosupure*) for girls and sentimental TV drama for women of all ages. We can even say that, as she's been transformed from postwar victim to millennial princess, the maiko has become the Good Girl of Japanese Tradition, a maiden apart from the individualistic, hedonistic desires ascribed to contemporary teens. The magic of historical cos-play obscures her role in the service sector and the rigors of the school system she has left. Cos-play also magnifies her nostalgic quality as the quintessential Japanese girl of lost Japan, the time traveler who seems beyond the markers of class, academic degree, and the ordinary life of the 21<sup>st</sup> century altogether.<sup>10</sup> Of course, this tribute to maidenly virtue, cuteness, and Kyoto tradition – all rolled into one sugary ideal – can be too much for some to take, a factor that turns serious maiko appreciation into the irreverent maiko parody on display in a recent Kyoto manga exhibit and the 2007 slapstick film *Maiko Haaaan!!!* (Miiiss Maiko) discussed below. *Maiko Haaaan!!!* pokes fun at Kyoto mystique and ridicules the exclusivity

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<sup>8</sup> Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (New York: Knopf, 1997). Western fascination with geisha is a rich topic for discussion. For references to scholarship on this topic, see Jan Bardsley, "Liza Dalby's *Geisha*: The View Twenty-five Years Later," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 31 (2009): 309–323.

<sup>9</sup> Yamaguchi Kimijo, *Suppin geiko: Kyōto Gion no ukkari nikki* [Bare-faced Geisha: A Careless Diary of Kyoto and Gion] (Tokyo: Locus, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xv. According to Boym, "...nostalgia...actually is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress."

of the geisha world as well as obsession with the maiko. Read together, all these maiko images raise questions of how girl and nation entwine in these representations, the topic to which we return in the conclusion.

### **Maiko 101: Training and Traditions**

Our discussion best begins with the basic facts about who a maiko is and what she does at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Those aspiring to become maiko today take on a challenging training program that requires learning the arts, business, and etiquette codes of the geisha profession. Unlike in the early postwar when most maiko hailed from Kyoto or were the daughters of geisha, contemporary maiko may come from anywhere in Japan and are likely to apply to an okiya by email. They may have a desire to learn the Japanese arts or are simply entranced with the maiko's life and costume. Prospective maiko do not need to have arts training and preferences for height and weight are not strictly maintained, although those with imperfect eyesight must wear contact lenses, not eyeglasses.<sup>11</sup> Many choose to enter the profession after completing compulsory education, generally at age fifteen, in lieu of going to high school. Young women can become maiko, however, until about age twenty, the official age of adulthood in Japan.<sup>12</sup> Those under twenty need their parent or guardian's permission. Given the old connotations of geisha quarters as red light districts and more importantly, the significance of having academic degrees in Japan, parents may be wary of their daughter's choice to enter an okiya, as the memoirs and NHK-TV program discussed in the next sections illustrate.

As novices, the maiko progress through three stages of apprenticeship: as a *shikomi* (trainee) for several months; as a *minarai* (apprentice) for a party-laden few weeks; and finally, as a *maiko*, a position that may last a few years until a woman either quits or decides to become a geisha. Maiko spend most of their days in arts lessons and their evenings in parties (*ozashiki*) at which, accompanied by geisha, they perform songs and/or dances for clients. They also practice for lavish public dance performances. Training to become a maiko requires commitment to a new lifestyle, a new household and community, and even a new language, a

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<sup>11</sup> Nishio, *Kyōto hanamachi no keieigaku*, pp. 40–41; Liza Dalby, *Geisha* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. xxi–xxii.

<sup>12</sup> Nishio, *Kyōto hanamachi no keieigaku*, p. 92.

liling Kyoto dialect. Signing on as a shikomi means moving into an okiya in one of the five geisha or flower districts (*hanamachi*) in Kyoto: Gion, Gion-Kobu, Kamishichiken, Miyagawa-chō, or Ponto-chō. The apprentice lives in the okiya until either quitting or achieving the rank of geisha. Becoming a geisha requires taking more control of one's career, living independently and assuming responsibility for one's income and expenses. Kiriki Chizu, a well-known former geisha, laments that many maiko prefer to use their training to obtain positions in posh inns and restaurants or opt for marriage rather than becoming geisha and carrying on the profession.<sup>13</sup>

Strict hierarchy obtains in the hanamachi. Aspiring geisha should spend much time in learning the names of teahouse owners, their clients, okiya mothers, geisha, and other maiko, and building relations with their many arts instructors. Maiko are not the only Japanese, however, who learn their craft in a communal setting. Sumo wrestlers train and live together. Girls in the Takarazuka Music School who train for the Takarazuka Revue also live communally in a strictly hierarchical environment.<sup>14</sup>

#### Maiko in Their Own Words

Two young members of the *karyūkai* (flower and willow world) have recently published books that give readers an insider's view of their world. Ichimame,<sup>15</sup> a maiko in the Kamishichiken hanamachi, wrote

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<sup>13</sup> Kiriki Chizu, *Aisareru jōzu ni naru Gion-ryū: Onna migaki* [The Gion Style: Polishing Femininity to Be Adept at Being Loved] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2007), pp. 38–39.

<sup>14</sup> Leonie R. Stickland, *Gender Gymnastics: Performing and Consuming Japan's Takarazuka Revue* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2008), p. 87. Although Takarazuka Music School long accepted students who had only finished compulsory education, in 1980 the School barred entrants who were not also enrolled in formal high school. Stickland believes that concern for the girls' moral training may have been part of the reason behind the 1980 policy change; "...for girls might lead an 'irregular' life if not attending day-school, learn too much about the adult world, and thus lose the disciplined, sheltered innocence that Takarazuka seems to value in its recruits."

<sup>15</sup> She has taken the name Kamishichiken Ichimame. "Kamishichiken" is her new last name and also the name of her hanamachi. The "Ichi" of her new given name "Ichimame" places her in a long line of geisha extending

*Etiquette for a Maiko* (*Maiko no osahō*, 2007) and young Miyagawa-chō geisha Komomo collaborated with a photographer in creating the beautiful pictorial book, *A Geisha's Journey: My Life as a Kyoto Apprentice* (2008).<sup>16</sup> Both authors refer deferentially to their seniors in the karyūkai and speak modestly of their own accomplishments, but this unassuming stance does not hide the obvious evidence of their own ambition and initiative. They are hardly naïve girls. Ichimame and Komomo have taken an entrepreneurial approach to their positions in the karyūkai, marketing the maiko at home and abroad. Ichimame has her own line of maiko cosmetics and for some time maintained a blog both in English and Japanese. Her book advertises the Kamishichiken summer beer garden, inviting readers to meet her there. Komomo's book appeared in Japanese and English, and she made trips overseas to promote it.



**Figure 1. “Welcome to the Beer Garden.” Kamishichiken Ichimame, *Etiquette for a Maiko* (2007), p. 99. Courtesy of Daiwa shobō.**

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from her elder geisha sisters to a host of Kamishichiken predecessors who also have “Ichi” in their names.

<sup>16</sup> Kamishichiken Ichimame, *Maiko no osahō* [Etiquette for a Maiko] (Tokyo: Daiwa shobō, 2007); and Naoyuki Ogino, *A Geisha's Journey: My Life as a Kyoto Apprentice*, trans. Gearoid Reidy and Philip Price (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2008).

Ichimame and Komomo speak of their lives as dominated by the demands of hanamachi customs, where minute flaws in performance become major cause for concern. They have little time off and no real break from being maiko. Despite this emphasis on discipline, the maiko life that emerges in these books is one of a long, protected girlhood and a form of girlhood, in fact, which extends far beyond that of an ordinary Japanese teen. Both authors portray their maiko training as a gradual coming into adulthood. Moreover, they paint adulthood as a maturity that comes through a mastery of feminine deportment and the geisha's artistic sensibility. It is not associated with sexual experience nor intellectual achievement or social critique. Consequently, it is an exceedingly aestheticized coming of age and one that values becoming adept at managing human relations. While the maiko's mentors on this path to adulthood are stern, they are respected as enforcers of a tough hanamachi love. Their insistence on adherence to custom gives the maiko a sense of being part of stable community, one absolutely convinced of its own worth and assured of its identity. Thus, the maiko reaches adulthood when she fully assimilates to the hanamachi and is able to become one of its gatekeepers.

Ichimame's *Etiquette for a Maiko* is one among several guides to feminine demeanor and beauty authored by geisha. As ethnomusicologist Kelly Foreman has explained, although many in Japan may regard the geisha as less respectable than a wife and mother, she is admired as an expert in Japanese etiquette.<sup>17</sup> Lacing her guide with colorful drawings and photographs and organizing her narrative into short chapters, Kamishichiken Ichimame gives the reader a view of a world where the classic arts mesh with contemporary cuteness. She is a teenager born in Kyoto who fulfilled a secret childhood dream of training to be a maiko after graduating from middle school (the end of compulsory education in Japan). Her friends were surprised, but accepting, and "her parents supported their daughter's choice even though those around them disapproved." As noted above, this disapproval may have had as much to do with Ichimame's decision to quit formal education at such a young age as to enter the somewhat suspect profession of the geisha. Even though she was born in

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<sup>17</sup> Kelly M. Foreman, "The Perfect Woman: Geisha, Etiquette, and the World of Japanese Traditional Arts," in Jan Bardsley and Laura Miller, eds., *Manners and Mischief: Gender and Power in Japanese Conduct Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 67–79.



the city, Ichimame finds speaking in the hanamachi dialect, as required of all Kyoto maiko, to be a chore indeed, and experiences constant correction from those around her.<sup>18</sup> Encountering this dialect in Ichimame's text gives the reader a sense of immediate encounter with the "exotic" world of the geisha community. To a certain extent, like Ichimame, the reader used to standard Japanese must also accommodate herself to the dialect.

What does the reader learn of the maiko's life from Ichimame? Ichimame gives the impression that she tries to be an exceptionally good daughter to her new family, thanking all in Kamishichiken for their kindness and promising to be a responsible representative of their community. Describing the intricacies of her training, Ichimame explains how she needs to learn the ropes "not so much through memorization, but rather through internalization," that is, by repetition of all geisha speech and movement until it becomes natural to her.<sup>19</sup> She devotes much of her guide to the minute details of her cosmetics, the changing and seasonal patterns of her kimono for day and evening, the complexities of dressing as a maiko, and even tells what she carries in her bag. Such descriptions are replete with Japanese words, as if this is not a world for the loanwords from English and French that one finds in most contemporary Japanese publications. Ichimame gives equal attention to her almost daily study of music and dance, detailing each kind of instrument and ballad style that she must learn. She describes very little of the *ozashiki* except to speak of the kindness of the clients and the helpfulness of the older geisha, and how she observes geisha studying current newspapers, magazines, and anything of interest to a particular client in order to be proficient as conversational partners.<sup>20</sup>

On the lighter side, one chapter describes a typical day off when Ichimame, dressed in jeans and a parka and wearing casual make-up, likes to shop, get coffee at Starbucks, go to the movies, and meet friends – all the while keeping her eye on the clock so she returns home well before her 9:00pm curfew.<sup>21</sup> In fact, she usually gets home by 7:00pm just to make

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<sup>18</sup> Mineko Iwasaki and Randee Brown, *Geisha, A Life* (New York: Washington Square, 2003). Even former geisha Iwasaki Mineko, who grew up in Kyoto, found mastering the hanamachi dialect difficult.

<sup>19</sup> Kamishichiken, *Maiko no osahō*, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Kamishichiken, *Maiko no osahō*, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> Kamishichiken, *Maiko no osahō*, pp. 88–89. The short narrative of Ichimame's dress and activities on her days off includes many loanwords

sure that she is on time. She does not take days off if clients wish to see her, realizing that her true pleasure comes from her life as a maiko. Even with the care she must exercise to make sure her deportment is *maiko rashii* (conforming to the maiko ideal), Ichimame still gets a thrill when tourists to Kyoto greet and photograph her.<sup>22</sup> For her, this ever-present need to stay in character, to be aware that she is the target of attention is a source of pride and concern, as she writes:

...it is necessary to keep in mind that one is constantly being seen. Forgetting this even for a moment could mean slumping or standing or walking awkwardly. Knowing that others are favoring me with their attention has given me the sense of always wanting to act properly. That's the secret to behaving correctly.<sup>23</sup>

In many ways, Ichimame's is a charmed life, more reminiscent of a sheltered *ojōsan* (young lady) than a member of the *mizu shōbai* (water trade), the old Japanese term for the world of entertainment and commodified sexuality. In creating this effect, Ichimame seems to turn class status upside down, yet, viewed against the broad landscape of Japanese culture, it is hard to imagine that many would view the maiko as being in the same rarified strata as the upper-class *ojōsan*. Nonetheless, Ichimame describes her life with delight. *Etiquette for a Maiko* takes the reader to daily music lessons, interactions in the hanamachi, the nightly preparation for *ozashiki*, and the occasional trip with a client and other maiko. Other than to describe her own struggles to measure up to the requirements of life in the Kamishichiken, Ichimame makes no complaints. Nevertheless, one can imagine that not all *ozashiki* clients are scintillating and attending parties as one's occupation as well as the continual need to project charm must be tedious at times. But there is no rule of etiquette for how a maiko may complain, and certainly not in a book designed to welcome Japanese into the world of the *karyūkai*.

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from English; this contrasts with descriptions of kimono, music, and *ozashiki* that largely make use solely of words in kanji and the Japanese hiragana syllabary.

<sup>22</sup> Kamishichiken, *Maiko no osahō*, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Kamishichiken, *Maiko no osahō*, p. 72.

*A Geisha's Journey: My Life as a Kyoto Apprentice* emphasizes the hardships of maiko training, even though the author ultimately takes pride in meeting the challenge. *A Geisha's Journey* offers a lively account by fifteen-year-old Komomo ("Little Peach") as she progresses through the stages of her maiko apprenticeship to her debut as a full-fledged geisha. The focus of the book is the photographs. The narrative is printed in a light ink and in type too small to read easily. Komomo's journey from trainee to geisha, which took seven years, was recorded by photographer Ogino Naoyuki, who reportedly had unparalleled access to her life in the Miyagawa-chō hanamachi. The book is introduced by Koito, Komomo's okiya mother (*okaasan*) and the geisha who became famous for using the internet and introducing a blog.

Like Ichimame, Komomo aspired to become a geisha in order to immerse herself in dance. Her years of living abroad in Mexico and China also influenced her decision, making her yearn to experience Japanese culture. Having a strong sense of national identity is important to her. She believes that Japanese teens should be more like the Korean youth that she met in China who knew so much of their country's history and culture. Like Ichimame, Komomo finds the life of the maiko difficult, and seriously considers quitting at one point. She, too, describes how the luxury of the world in which she attends parties, dances, and wears rich robes is disciplined by strict adherence to social hierarchy, speech, etiquette, and a constant awareness that one's comportment is always seen as a reflection on the geisha community. She describes her time as a maiko as just trying to "get through one difficult day after another" as, unfamiliar with the manners of the hanamachi, she made constant mistakes and needed to learn how to treat her superiors correctly. When she takes the exam to pass to the maiko ranks, she realizes that even "perfect dancing wasn't nearly enough to pass. Everything from my manners to my way of walking was under scrutiny."<sup>24</sup> Such scrutiny makes going outside a stressful chore because "sometimes it seemed as if the streets of Miyagawa-cho were peppered with land mines just waiting to explode in my face. It was like being at school twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."<sup>25</sup> The minutest flaws become cause for concern. For example, Komomo recounts how a handkerchief once fell from her kimono sleeve during a dance. Her mentor was furious

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<sup>24</sup> Ogino, *A Geisha's Journey*, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> Ogino, *A Geisha's Journey*, p. 32.

and made Komomo apologize to all involved for this breach of etiquette. Adding to this demand for perfection is the stress of a demanding work schedule that keeps her busy with arts lessons all day and into the early hours of the morning at parties. Komomo writes that becoming a maiko “meant losing all the freedoms I’d taken for granted in my old life. I never knew when I could see my family, or even when I’d be allowed a day off.”<sup>26</sup>

Komomo’s book ends on a positive note. Having become more comfortable with attention and the rituals of the hanamachi as time progressed, she enjoyed her debut as a geisha. She has many regular clients whom she knows well. Komomo especially appreciates those knowledgeable about the music and dance she practices. As an independent business woman now, Komomo has her own apartment and manages her own income and expenses. She says that she cannot imagine trading this life for a more typical job. She feels that her progress from maiko to geisha, or *geiko*, as they are called in Kyoto, mirrors her own maturity:

“Maiko are often just seen as stereotypes; nobody bothers to look beyond the make-up to the real person beneath. A geiko, on the other hand, is seen as an individual with a name and a unique personality...After all my worry about becoming a geiko, I finally felt liberated.”<sup>27</sup> Komomo’s description of the geisha further defines the maiko as a type. Little is required of the maiko except the projection of naïveté, obedience, and cuteness. In this respect at least, the requirements of the position may be easy for many to fulfill, whether or not they are clever. By the same token, the limits of the maiko persona must be stifling, but not much different from the cheerful disposition required in other service jobs. Once attaining the rank of geisha, the individual is expected to stand out as a personality. Recalling that the new fascination is for maiko, not geisha, however, returns us to the question of why it is the innocent figure and not the more sophisticated, mature one that is attracting attention now. Analysis of a television melodrama that depicts the maiko as a girl-on-the-cusp of possibility living in a world of high romantic drama may help explain this.

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<sup>26</sup> Ogino, *A Geisha’s Journey*, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Ogino, *A Geisha’s Journey*, p. 107.

**Maiko Melodrama: The Morning Drama “Dan Dan”**

NHK-TV’s serialized morning drama (*asadora*) “Dan Dan,” which broadcast from September 2008 through April 2009, played cuteness to the hilt, mixing serious maiko appreciation with lightheartedness, and featured the Gion hanamachi in many scenes.<sup>28</sup> The drama and all the surrounding publicity suggest that NHK treats the karyūkai as a Japanese institution that audiences need to understand and appreciate, and assumes that most do not know much about it at all. Thus, the series attempted to educate audiences about the Gion through scenes in the drama and an accompanying website, its yearly public dance, customs, language, and maiko fashion.<sup>29</sup> The upbeat, good girl tone of the drama, its respect for the karyūkai, and its depiction of the strictness of dance training resonate with Ichimame’s and Komomo’s stories. With the exception of a few scenes of clients laughing and drinking at ozashiki, NHK’s geisha world is in many ways a prim one where maiko are largely featured at the okiya or in dance practice and not entertaining. The only character who disapproves of the karyūkai altogether is a rural grandmother who nearly refuses to step into an okiya, yet comes to realize the beauty of the geisha’s dance, and more importantly for her, a geisha mother’s love for her daughter.

“Dan Dan,” which means thank you in the Izumo dialect, revolves around twin sisters Tajima Megumi and Ichijō Nozomi (played by actresses and real twins Mikura Mana and Mikura Kana respectively) who were separated at birth when their parents divorced. The sisters discover each other at eighteen when both happen to visit The Grand Shrine of Izumo, the shrine famous for reuniting people who have some karmic connection. At first the two ignore the possibility that they are twins, but eventually their resemblance pushes them to investigate the circumstances of their birth, which leads to the unraveling of their birth parents’ story of love, marriage, and divorce. The sisters realize that their bond as twins overcomes the differences of their background and they become fast friends.

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<sup>28</sup> Moriwaki Kyōko and Aoki Kuniko, *Dan Dan* (Tokyo: Nippon hōsō shuppan kyōkai, 2008). “Dan Dan” scriptwriter Moriwaki Kyōko has also published a two-volume novelized version of the television drama with NHK.

<sup>29</sup> “Dan Dan,” NHK Online (accessed September 6, 2009, <http://www3.nhk.or.jp/asadora/cast/cast.html>).

The extraordinary divergence in the two girls' lives encourages viewers to contrast contemporary teenage experience with the formalities governing the maiko's life. Although raised in completely different milieu, Megumi and Nozomi have grown up to be honest, spunky girls with a talent for music and a love of performing. The maiko Nozomi, known also by her professional name as Yumehana, functions as the straight-laced girl whose demeanor, hanamachi dialect, and adherence to an old-world environment make her the foil to her twin and the majority of young viewers. Megumi, who has grown up near the seashore in the town of Matsue in Shimane Prefecture, is similarly obedient to her father, a fisherman, but she races about town in casual clothing, hair flying all about, with her good pals, two boys who are partners in her band. The beautiful graphics that begin each episode use the *shamisen* and the guitar to represent the two sisters and the difference in their worlds.

The drama amplifies the constraints on Nozomi's life, describing her as so sheltered in the Hanamura okiya in the Gion that she has never been allowed to wear blue jeans. There is no trace here of Ichimame's day off at Starbucks. But the exaggerated difference between the sisters, however unrealistic, works well to move the drama ahead. Much of the tension in story hinges on Nozomi's awakening to the ordinary teen life led by her sister. Thus, the drama creates Nozomi as the mirror opposite of Ichimame and Komomo who abandoned further schooling to become maiko. This twin longs for the freedom to date boys, to go to the university, and to consider all kinds of career choices rather than following the geisha path that has been ordained for her since birth. Later in the drama, the audience sees that Nozomi's lack of a high school degree puts her at a disadvantage for seeking a job outside the Gion.<sup>30</sup> Megumi feels almost equal pressure to please her parents and joins her sister in the struggle to discover her own life path. Ultimately, the melodrama guides the reader to appreciating the

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<sup>30</sup> The problem of the maiko's lack of formal education comes up again when a young Matsue girl wants to take after Nozomi and become a Hanamura maiko, too. Her parents are initially opposed to the plan because it means giving up high school, and at that point, Nozomi's father reminds everyone of the difficulties Nozomi encountered because of her lack of a high school degree. There is no suggestion in "Dan Dan," however, of changing the system so that maiko could both go to school and pursue this vocation.

Gion while simultaneously feeling affection for the ordinary life. “Dan Dan” concludes by having both girls mature into married women, who, newly pregnant for the first time, are preparing to raise a family while pursuing demanding careers. Nozomi chooses to forego life as a geisha to take her elder’s place as the manager of the Hanamura okiya and teahouse. Megumi, who had also trained to be a care provider for the elderly, becomes a nurse, assisting her husband as he assumes his deceased father’s place in an island community. Presumably, both young women find their life’s meaning in the care of their families and their respective communities.

“Dan Dan” injects humor into the drama with occasional instances of comic incongruity by placing the maiko twin in unexpected situations outside the Gion. The surprise of seeing a costumed maiko outside the environs of the hanamachi points up the maiko’s unique role as a kind of living museum. In one scene, Nozomi joins her sister onstage in full maiko garb at a Kyoto live house, a kind of hip music club, for spontaneous and perfectly harmonized singing. In another scene, she causes a commotion in Megumi’s college class by showing up with her maiko hairdo and kimono. The most delightful moment of maiko comedy in “Dan Dan,” however, takes place when the twins secretly change places *Parent Trap*-style to meet the other parent. The viewer is in on the entire ruse. Nozomi springs the plan on Megumi, giving her twin a speedy maiko makeover, before slipping into her sister’s jeans and heading off to Shimane. A geisha who is party to the switch tells Megumi to say as little as possible at the evening’s ozashiki. When a client insists that she sing, however, Megumi performs a rollicking pop song. At that moment, her mother, a geisha, appears and instantly knows that this maiko could only be her long-lost daughter Megumi, a realization that leads to much drama as the divorced parents and their families are brought together.

Loyal viewers of “Dan Dan” not only become involved in the family drama and the twins’ coming of age, but also experience the vicarious pleasure of visiting rural Matsue and the Gion hanamachi. Encouraging tourism to these locales is part of NHK’s mission. A magazine-style guide to the TV series carries advertisements for foods to eat and specific places to visit in Matsue and Kyoto.<sup>31</sup> Linking the maiko to tourism is, of course, nothing new, and if anything, the maiko’s celebrity is

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<sup>31</sup> “Dan Dan,” *NHK Dorama gaido* [NHK Drama Guide] (Tokyo: Nippon hōsō shuppan kyōkai, 2008).

training even more attention on Kyoto's hanamachi as the site of this different girlhood. Yet "Dan Dan" spins girlhood in fantastic ways. At one point in the series, the twins become almost overnight pop stars before they follow the path of romantic love and familial responsibility. When Nozomi returns to the Gion after failing to establish a singing career and becomes a geisha, she brings a maturity to her dance performances that she lacked as a maiko. Although the twins' lives go forward with all the speed and surprise of a roller coaster, their world is ultimately a safe one enfolded within melodramatic bonds of sentiment. The program ends when the girls mature into women, and their girlhood, and its fullness of possibility, becomes their past, and their future as mothers, wives, career women, and caregivers blossoms.

### **Nostalgia Shopping: Maiko-related Goods and Services for Fans**

Kyoto's tourist industry has long made use of maiko imagery. One finds maiko on Kyoto tourist maps, posters, and postcards; made into dolls and key chains; and advertising everything from candies to cosmetics. In Kyoto, even Sanrio's Kitty-chan is a maiko. Shops display oil paintings, embroidered panels, photographs, and reproductions of woodblock prints (*ukiyo*) of maiko. Almost everywhere you look in the tourist areas of Kyoto, you'll find a maiko image of some sort.

Many representations of the maiko one finds in Kyoto focus on her teenage prettiness, characterizing her as a delightful symbol of the old capital. Maiko such as Ichimame lend reality to this image, breathing fresh life into the role in ways that keep it from complete anachronism. When walking in Kyoto on Shijo-dori (literally, 4<sup>th</sup> street) between the Kamo River and Yasaka Shrine, one often sees maiko in *yukata*, their faces free of cosmetics, going to their lessons during the day and in all their ornate finery and performance make-up at night on their way to *ozashiki*. It is this captivating glimpse of an extraordinary and highly feminine teenage life steeped in ritual and the arts that has stimulated all kinds of products associated with maiko. Advertising campaigns for local businesses do their best to prompt girls and women to experience hanamachi mystique by buying maiko goods and even by imagining themselves as maiko.

This explains why not all those that one sees strolling down the streets of Kyoto these days in the maiko's distinctive garb are actually maiko. Many may be experiencing a temporary "maiko makeover" (*maiko henshin*) having paid between 8,000 and 10,000 yen (roughly US\$80.00–100.00) to one of the local photography studios for costuming,



commemorative photos, and the thrill of going out in public as a maiko. The studios advertise the maiko makeover as a quick way to experience a Japanese past. The studio Aya put it this way:

What I have been waiting for – one day of unparalleled luxury.  
 In a genuine Kyoto *machiya* house, I can become a maiko.  
 My first experience of Japanese cosmetics, my skin’s silky softness  
 As if in a dream, I walk Gion.  
 I completely forget the “self” of today.<sup>32</sup>

The studios do not limit this fantasy day to young Japanese women. The Studio Aya site offers its services to non-Japanese and also encourages men and women to be costumed together as “couples of old.” Middle-aged women, too, buy these makeover packages, becoming maiko girls for an afternoon. The nostalgic escape into exotic Japaneseness is part of the fun of this makeover. Aimee Major Steinberger’s manga sketchbook about her trip to Japan titled *Japan Ai: A Tall Girl’s Adventures in Japan* describes how a six-foot tall American girl adored becoming a maiko for a few hours.<sup>33</sup> Kiriki Chizu, who became a maiko in the 1960s, speculates that, had such studios existed in her youth, she may have satisfied her curiosity about the maiko life that way rather than joining the *karyūkai*.<sup>34</sup>



Figure 2. “Yes, I am this tall.” *Japan Ai: A Tall Girl’s Adventures in Japan* (2007). Copyright Aimee Major Steinberger. Courtesy of Go! Comi.

<sup>32</sup> “Advertisement for Studio Aya,” AYA (accessed June 9, 2008, <http://kyoto-maiko.com/>).

<sup>33</sup> Aimee Major Steinberger, *Japan Ai: A Tall Girl’s Adventures in Japan* (Agoura Hills, CA: Go!Comi, 2007), pp. 39–50.

<sup>34</sup> Kiriki, *Aisareru jōzu ni naru Gion-ryū*, p. 211.

Shopping for maiko-related goods brings the consumer in touch with another ephemeral maiko experience. Although centuries ago, merchant wives would adopt geisha fashion to bring pleasure quarter edginess to their outfits, today's consumers are buying tradition.<sup>35</sup> Promotional signs in stores near the Gion and Ponto-chō encourage adding a dash of classic maiko panache to one's outfit by buying a hair ornament or a bag. Enticing shoppers to get a taste of ancient Japanese "Yamato culture," photographer Aihara Kyoko's 2007 *Notebook on Maiko Accessories (Maiko-san no odōgu-chō)* explains where in Kyoto to buy everything from a maiko's *tabi* socks to her fan, umbrella, tea ceremony paper, and her favorite sweets. She provides a map showing the store locations, giving short descriptions of them and their contact information.

Aihara's book offers a visual treat in itself, replete with photos of the varied accoutrements of the maiko's costume and of maiko wearing them. She crafts each short chapter around a single item, drawing the reader's interest in the maiko's world by explaining how the product fits in the maiko's wardrobe, how contemporary women are using it, and often, how the item opens on to a view of maiko lore.

As a long-time documentarian of the *karyūkai*, Aihara has a store of anecdotes about these products that she has learned from her conversations with older geisha and Kyoto craftspeople. One learns, for instance, about the pillows used to protect the maiko's elaborate hairstyle and how since some point in the 1960s, geisha have been wearing wigs for performances and sleeping more comfortably, and that in the good old days, *ozashiki* clients, too, wore fresh *tabi*. Aihara fully admits to a nostalgic attraction to the beauty of the maiko's costumes, finding, for example, that the sight of a maiko in an old-fashioned rain coat and carrying a bright waxed paper parasol, looking for all the world as if she had stepped out of an Edo woodblock print, refreshes those "of us who are so used to Western goods in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>36</sup> She finds equally agreeable the sight of foreigners in Kyoto who wear denim while sporting these parasols. Deeply involved and well-versed in the *karyūkai*, Aihara promotes it to her reader

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<sup>35</sup> Dalby, *Geisha*, p. 74. Dalby cites the 1830s novel *Geisha tora no maki* [Geisha: The Tiger Volume] by Ryūtei Tanehiko, who "mentions that if a geisha were seen wearing a honeycomb-patterned kimono, the wives of townsmen would all rush to copy it."

<sup>36</sup> Aihara, *Maiko-san no dōgu-chō*, p. 40.

as an aesthetic consumer experience. Bringing a taste of the old world into one's life through using a maiko's bag or name card satisfies the demands of fashion and the postmodern aesthetic to innovate through a pastiche of old and new.

Aihara aligns fascination with maiko style to the "Kyoto Boom."<sup>37</sup> The idea of Kyoto shopping tourism, complete with the charm of nostalgia and self-exoticism, recalls Millie R. Creighton's research on Japanese department stores and the ways Japanese goods are displayed and marketed as talismans of native tradition. "As material goods and customs associated with the once-exotic West have become a routine part of life, the customs, goods, and habits believed to symbolize the timeless Japanese past have been embraced as the new exotica."<sup>38</sup> The appeal of maiko accessories may lie in their welcoming connection to this imagined past. They do not represent the stringency of the tea ceremony or the high taste of pottery collecting, but promise a *girl's* connection. In this way, purchasing maiko paraphernalia is similar to the other cute charms, clothing, and make-up strongly identified as the signifiers of girls' culture and off-limits to others.<sup>39</sup>

For a time, those who wanted to dip into maiko culture could try the role of a guest at an ozashiki for a much reduced price could try the Maiko Museum and café in the Gion. An actual ozashiki can cost several hundred dollars, but at the Maiko Museum one could taste elegant dishes as well as watch maiko dance for relatively little money (US\$35.00–70.00).<sup>40</sup> After doing so, one was eligible to ask the Maiko Museum for an

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<sup>37</sup> Aihara, *Maiko-san no dōgu-chō*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Millie R. Creighton, "The *Depāto*: Merchandizing the West While Selling Japanese-ness," in Joseph J. Tobin, ed., *Re-Made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 53.

<sup>39</sup> The resistant aspects of girls' culture are discussed in Laura Miller, "Bad Girls: Representations of unsuitable, unfit, and unsatisfactory women in magazines," *U.S.–Japan Women's Journal English Supplement* 15 (1998): 31–51; and Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," in Lise Skov and Brian Moeran, eds., *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995): pp. 220–253.

<sup>40</sup> "Japanese Theme Restaurant in Gion," Maiko Museum & Café (accessed September 9, 2009, [http://www.gion-maiko.com/e\\_toppage/e\\_top.html](http://www.gion-maiko.com/e_toppage/e_top.html)).

introduction to a teahouse, thus getting past the “no first timers” rule discussed in the next section. (Unfortunately, this establishment had apparently closed down by the time of my summer visit to Kyoto in 2010, although the website is still active.)

**Maiko Parody: Hello Kitty to *Maiko Haaaan!!!***

In 2008, the Kyoto International Manga Museum provided a lighter look at this icon. It invited one hundred manga artists to produce a single drawing each for the exhibit *One Hundred Maiko (Hyaku-nin Maiko)*. A pop version of age-old celebrations of “100 beauties (*hyaku-nin bijin*),” the exhibit produced a rare diversity of maiko images.<sup>41</sup> Maiko with enormous, shining eyes were drawn by artists of *shōjo manga* (young girl comics). Some cartoonists depicted the maiko as a funny kitten, invoking the long association of geisha with cats.<sup>42</sup> Others erased cuteness from the scene altogether, drawing maiko simply and with comically homely faces. But the stand-out manga played with the idea of blending pop identities, creating “Maiko Jackson.”<sup>43</sup> In this comic, manga artist Kojirō fuses popular singing star Michael Jackson with the maiko by having ringlets of the pop star’s hair fall down from the maiko hairdo over the face, giving the kimono a bit of stars-and-stripes pattern, and having the star grab his crotch with one hand while holding a fan high above his head with the other. The humor here comes from crossing two icons which at first glance seem to be so different, but this manga also calls to mind Michael Jackson’s persona as the boy who never grew up, the child star who longed for his lost childhood, and the man accused of liking boys too much. Here Jackson is mixed with the Japanese girl figure that will always be juvenile, too. Laughing in surprise at Kojirō’s “Maiko Jackson” also makes one think twice about the hype that creates the global pop star and the Kyoto maiden.

Maiko parody takes a slapstick turn in the 2007 film *Maiko Haaaan!!! (Miiiss Maiko)* directed by Mizuta Nobuo and written by Kudo Kankuro. The farce turns on one man’s fixation with maiko, an obsession

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<sup>41</sup> The idea of having one hundred beauties recalls the work of Edo *ukiyo-e* artist Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1865) and early 20<sup>th</sup> century photograph exhibits of geisha. Thanks to Inger Brodey for this allusion.

<sup>42</sup> Dalby, *Geisha*, p. 57.

<sup>43</sup> Kojirō gives “maiko” in characters (*kanji*) and Jackson in *katakana* as *jakuson*, blending the two icons linguistically.

initiated by his first encounter with them on the ubiquitous student fieldtrip to Kyoto.<sup>44</sup> The title's exclamation marks and drawn out "Miiiss" mirror the character's desperate excitement. Maiko bring astonishing color to the film and over-the-top craziness. They are clothed in their most elaborate formal garb, complete with high *okobo* sandals, *kanzashi* ornaments in their hair, and full performance makeup. A band of maiko spontaneously performs show tunes in one scene and, dressed as warriors for a stage performance, storm the Kyoto mayor's office in another. Gone is the subdued elegance described in books by and about geisha, shopping guides, and in "Dan Dan." *Maiko Haaaan!!!* makes fun of every aspect of the hanamachi from snobby teahouse managers to spooky entryway shoe managers to syrupy maiko.

The viewer experiences this strange trip to the hanamachi through the eyes of the lead character, Onizuka Kimihiko (played by Abe Sadao), a nerdy fellow with a schoolboy bowl-haircut and loud plaid suits, who leaves his devoted OL (Office Lady) girlfriend in Tokyo for Kyoto and his dream of playing strip baseball with a maiko. The girlfriend (actress Shibasaki Kou), who exaggerates the OL stereotype by carrying a cell phone weighted with charms, acting cute, and walking pigeon-toed, secretly follows Onizuka to Kyoto, becoming the maiko with whom he finally plays strip baseball (to their mutual disappointment). Frenetically paced from start to finish, *Maiko Haaaan!!!* follows the competition between Onizuka and a man named Naito, a baseball star-turned wrestler-turned actor-turned-star ramen chef, who becomes the mayor of Kyoto. Naito causes a ruckus when he promises to overturn the old-fashioned "no first-timer" rule of the *karyūkai* that refuses teahouse entry to anyone who shows up without an introduction from a well-known customer. When the maiko rush the mayor's office to protest this initiative, the lead maiko, who is also the favorite of Onizuka, learns that Naito is her father. *Maiko Haaaan!!!* ends

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<sup>44</sup> Fumiteru Nitta, "Shopping for Souvenirs in Hawaii," in Joseph J. Tobin, ed., *Re-Made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 204–215. *Shūgaku ryōko* (school excursions) take students to places of cultural significance in Japan such as Kamakura, Kyoto, Nara, and Nikko. According to Fumiteru Nitta, most Japanese take three or four such excursions during high school. In affluent times, such trips have extended to foreign locales such as Hawaii.

as Naito drops his fight to change the no-first-timers' rule and both he and Onizuka dress in geisha drag and take to the stage to dance with maiko.

In this fashion, Onizuka's maiko mania turns the film into a broad parody of the customs and stories associated with the karyūkai. Although the film provides gorgeous shots of some of Kyoto's most evocative places such as the wisteria-shaded streams of Ponto-chō, the Toji Pagoda, the Kamo River, and the Hanamikōji street of Gion, it satirizes nostalgic and reverent appreciation of the old capital. Taking a closer look at Onizuka's maiko encounters make this point.

As the film opens, we see Onizuka joining a crowd of frenzied photographers racing around the Gion to photograph a maiko on the day of her debut (*misedashi*). The scene ridicules the crowds who actually do gather to take such pictures. The humor gets more farcical the closer Onizuka comes to meeting maiko. Excited at finally getting to go to a teahouse, Onizuka takes out over 100,000 yen in cash and gets a loan for fancy "brand clothing," which in his case is another outlandish plaid suit. Following the custom of no "first timers" (*ichigen-san*), all the teahouses turn him away. This prompts the dejected Onizuka to break into song on the streets of Gion. Backed up by a band of maiko as showy as any Takarazuka Revue chorus, Onizuka ruminates on being poor "Mr. First Timer." Onizuka gets an excellent chance at entering a teahouse when he accompanies his boss, the president of a cup noodle company and a regular teahouse client. Here, shades of the hit 1986 film *Tampopo*, the film mixes the ordinariness of ramen with the elegance of the teahouse, adding humor and taking karyūkai pretensions down another notch.<sup>45</sup> In a spoof of a legend commonly told in books by geisha, Onizuka is turned away once again, this time by the wise old man who has so long and observantly cared for clients' footwear that he can tell just by looking at Onizuka's shoes that he needs to rush to the hospital, which he does. When Onizuka actually does get into a teahouse with his boss, he panics, realizing that the beginning of the party also ensure its end – a scene that can be read as a send-up of Mishima Yukio's well-known 1956 novel, *The Tale of the Golden Pavilion*, that explores a monk's obsession with the impossible-to-possess beauty of Kyoto's Golden Temple, Kinkakuji.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Tampopo* [Dandelion], dir. Itami Jūzō (1986).

<sup>46</sup> Mishima Yukio, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, trans. Ivan Morris (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1959).

For all its satire and over-the-top maiko parody, *Maiko Haaaaan!!!* regards the karyūkai as an institution well entrenched in the national project of revering Kyoto as the center of high indigenous culture. Rather than a poignant symbol of a vanishing past, the maiko of *Maiko Haaaaan!!!* – like *Maiko Jackson* and Kitty-chan Maiko – becomes the comic symbol of anxious desire to preserve the past in the present, even as the artificiality of this past grows in proportion to the reverence accorded it. Equally, the film satirizes obsession with the girl, and especially the good girl, as the key to this past.

### **Conclusion: Framing Japan's Good Girl in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The maiko boom, created by a variety of cultural texts and an increase in the actual numbers of maiko, crafts the appealing figure of a Japanese girl leading an extraordinary life, enjoying an extended girlhood, and free from the pressures of 21<sup>st</sup> century life through her nostalgic performance of the Kyoto maiden. As books by Ichimame and Komomo illustrate, however, the demanding training and communal life of the maiko is not as easy as it looks. Parodies of maiko obsession, especially *Maiko Haaaaan!!!*, satirize the reputed exclusivity of teahouse culture, and by extension, the Kyoto mystique itself. In conclusion, we consider how this depiction of Japanese girlhood differs from others and what both say about girl and nation in 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan.

Contemporary narratives of the maiko and geisha separate them almost entirely from sexuality of any kind, associating them with an imaginary past of refinement. The anachronistic qualities of Ichimame's persona and the fictional maiko of "Dan Dan" come as much from their maidenly aspects as their allegiance to Japanese tradition. But Japan is not the only reference for such nostalgia. The Japanese manga version of Jane Austen's *Emma*, discussed in the article in this volume by Inger Brodey, shows a similar romanticization of the girl in Victorian culture. Women and girls' fondness for these representations recall the reactions of fans of the Takarazuka Theater. Although middle-aged female fans interviewed in the Takarazuka documentary *Dream Girls* confess to sneaking away to the theater to indulge their fantasies and not telling their families about this, the plays that they enjoy are often Cinderella-like fantasies of an ultra-feminine

woman's romance with a Prince Charming.<sup>47</sup> The fans' covert attendance and the fact that all roles are played by women gives the event a subversive quality. It is a resistance simultaneously contained, however, by the conventionality of the narratives on stage. Sharon Kinsella's work on cuties in Japan analyzes a similar mix of resistance and accommodation.<sup>48</sup> Curiosity with the maiko bears evidence of the same fascination with cuteness, romance, and a temporary escape from the push to do well in school and lead a fast-paced life in the contemporary world.

Thus, the maiko offers an alternate vision of girl sexuality in an era when the numbers of young women becoming bar hostesses is on the rise and when world-famous Japanese author Yoshimoto Banana spins stories of girls engaging in casual sex – hetero and bisexual – and even orgies as sport.<sup>49</sup> The maiko is radically different from the teen characters involved in violent crimes in detective writer Kirino Natsuo's *Real World* and Akutagawa prize-winning author Kanehara Hitomi's best-selling novel *Snakes and Earrings* about sadistic sex, tattoos, piercing, and murder, that features a young character who puts on a kimono only for a seedy temporary job.<sup>50</sup> Even conservative romance writer Hayashi Mariko features world-traveling heroines who initiate sexual liaisons with single and married men as they concentrate on achieving the career success that pays for the luxury brands they favor, and like geisha, they travel first

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<sup>47</sup> *Dream Girls*, dirs. Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams (1994). See also Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," in Lise Skov and Brian Moeran, eds., *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), pp. 220–253.

<sup>49</sup> "Women's Work and Japan's Hostess Culture," *New York Times*, August 11, 2009 (accessed September 9, 2009, <http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/11/womens-work-and-japans-hostess-culture/>). See, for example, a collection of short stories by Yoshimoto Banana, *Lizard*, trans. Ann Sheriff (New York: Grove Press, 1995).

<sup>50</sup> Kirino Natsuo, *Real World*, trans. Philip Gabriel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008). For a view of girl culture and violence, see Kanehara Hitomi, *Snakes and Earrings*, trans. David James Karashima (New York: Dutton, 2005).



class.<sup>51</sup> The erotic display of contemporary pop singers such as Koda Kumi and the pornographic genre of ladies' comics, discussed in the articles in this volume by Yuki Watanabe and Kinko Ito respectively, further the bad girl image. Concern in Japan over such visible girl rebellion staged in these examples and also in outrageous fashion, self-photographs, and compensated dating might be somewhat assuaged by the new popularity of the modest maiko.<sup>52</sup> She represents a far safer course than the self-destructive characters of popular fiction about girls.

As the symbol of old Kyoto culture, the contemporary maiko brings innocence and accessibility to the aura of native aesthetic traditions. If she stands in some way for nationalism, then it is an idea of nation that is magical and appealing, a soft power girl-world apart from industry and the military. As the colorful figure of numerous cultural texts, she makes Kyoto cute, not imposing. In this way, her image dovetails with Japan's Foreign Ministry's initiative to select three young women as "ambassadors of cute" who will promote travel to Japan. They will encourage the J-cool of manga, youth fashion, and music abroad.<sup>53</sup> Yet, as Laura Miller writes in her remarks on girl images in Japanese culture in this volume, how cool can cool be when devised as government initiative? Don't such programs neutralize even the defiant aspects of cuteness?

Whether or not the maiko boom continues, the appeal of girl culture will surely last for some time in Japan, and with or without government promotion, will continue to captivate fans. The concern for maiko, geisha, and others in the *karyūkai*, however, is how to maintain this world beyond the ups and downs of trends and the economy, and at a time when few maiko wish to become geisha.

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<sup>51</sup> For example, Hayashi Mariko, *Kosumechikku* [Cosmetics] (Tokyo: Shōgakkan, 2002). For discussion of Hayashi's *Cosmetics*, see Jan Bardsley and Hiroko Hirakawa, "Branded: Bad Girls Go Shopping," in Miller and Bardsley, eds., *Bad Girls of Japan*, pp. 110–125.

<sup>52</sup> See Sharon Kinsella, "Black Faces, Witches, and Racism against Girls," pp. 143–158; and Laura Miller, "Bad Girl Photography," in Miller and Bardsley, eds., *Bad Girls of Japan*, pp. 127–142.

<sup>53</sup> Jun Kamanishikawara, "'Cute ambassadors' roam globe to promote Japan's pop culture," *The Japan Times*, June 17, 2009 (accessed August 15, 2009, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20090617f1.html>).

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