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Maiko Masquerade: Crafting Geisha Girlhood in Japan

JAN BARDSLEY, 2021

Oakland: University of California Press

283 pp., ISBN 9780520296435, \$85.00 £66.00 (hardback); ISBN 9780520296442, \$29.95 £24.00 (paperback); ISBN 9780520968943, \$29.95 £24.00 (ebook)

Jan Bardsley's engaging and informative "interdisciplinary cultural studies project" (p. xii) is a survey of the representation of one of Japan's most readily identifiable cultural icons. Charting the changing depictions and discussions of maiko through tourism and etiquette guides, historical materials, novels, non-fiction writing, cinema, manga, and art, Bardsley notes a move away from mid-twentieth century depictions of the maiko as young vulnerable victim towards a contemporary trend that imagines the maiko as a well-disciplined subject of neoliberal ideals of self-control. Investigating changing representations of the maiko across time, Bardsley gives an account of "the creation of local and national narratives" (p. xiii) in Japan that speak to issues of gender, but also more broadly to questions of regional and national identity.

While in the early decades of the twentieth century the maiko was often a child, Bardsley defines contemporary maiko as "young women, typically between fifteen and twenty years of age, who have chosen to train in an arts profession with roots in the merchant culture and pleasure quarters of the Edo period (1603–1867)" (p. 7). Noting that, "the maiko is famously a Kyoto phenomenon today" (p. 7), Bardsley devotes the first chapters to key elements of the maiko's life and work, from training to graduation along the career path to independent geisha or geiko. Chapter 3 offers rare access to the voices of maiko and geiko, drawing from auto-biographical and popular etiquette texts authored by maiko and geiko over the last five decades. As these texts are not available in English, and rarely sold outside Japan, this chapter makes a significant contribution to scholarly understanding of maiko and geiko's experiences by closely reading how they represent their own lives, work, and relationships to their vocation. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 address fictional representations of maiko in popular media texts including films, manga, light novels, and artwork, providing an overview of the changing representations of maiko from the 1950s to the present day.

The mixed methods that Bardsley employs throughout her study are of particular interest at the present moment, when opportunities for travel to Japan remain uncertain during the COVID-19 pandemic. The deep grounding of the book in the five hanamachi entertainment districts of Kyoto demonstrates the importance of classic observational research methods, from strolling through each area recording micro-regional specificities in custom and speech, to noting how maiko are represented in the many promotional materials around the city, advertising not just Kyoto itself but the city's train lines, department stores, and food. At the same time however, Bardsley incorporates innovative research methods available to any student of Japan no matter where they are located, for example, analysing reader responses posted on Amazon to understand the reception of texts as varied as Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) and Koyama Aiko's *Maiko-san-chi no Makanai-san* (*Miss Cook for the Maiko Girls*, 2016-). Along with the classic film analysis of Chapter 4, visual and narrative analysis of manga text and light novel plots in Chapters 4 and 5, and a discussion of the maiko-themed artwork in the Kyoto Manga Museum in Chapter 6 that includes analysis of exhibition practices, *Maiko Masquerade* demonstrates a broad range of methods for research on Japan that will be invaluable for scholars.

Bardsley's deep and thoughtful analysis also draws our attention to the elements of maiko life and work that are not publicly discussed, and to information unavailable even to the closest reader. Chapter 3 focuses on "life in the hanamachi" as presented by three prominent maiko and geiko authors and bloggers, and in doing so highlights "what readers

will *not* hear from these three authors” including stories of “sex and romance” and information on “geiko incomes” (p. 85). Instead, Bardsley demonstrates that narratives by and about maiko and geiko today focus on self-discipline, especially in regard to training in the traditional arts. Similarly, addressing the issue of historical stigma against maiko and geiko that associates the role with the *mizu shōbai* or sex and entertainment areas, Bardsley questions why male customers of the maiko and geiko feel comfortable hiring their services when they state that they would disapprove or even forbid their own daughters from training as maiko (p. 97). These perceptive observations raised some further questions for this reader, including what kinds of unauthorised representations of maiko might be present in popular culture texts not covered in this extensive study, such as pornography, erotic and genre fiction, and fan-authored texts and scrapbooks. While these are clearly outside the scope of this well-structured and in-depth study, they may be areas for future investigation.

Maiko Masquerade presents new and significant information not previously available in English to the scholar or interested reader of Japanese culture. With its beginnings in a long-running university course on “Geisha in History, Fiction, and Fantasy,” the book offers an ideal resource for teachers of undergraduate and postgraduate Japanese Studies and Gender Studies, as well as those teaching on or learning about tourism, entertainment cultures, and even business. The provocative and perceptive questions that the volume raises will inform future scholarship on this fascinating topic.

(846 words)

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