

Memoirs of (Renegotiating) a Geisha: The Geisha as Pop Singer in the Early Shōwa Era

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Introduction

In every country, the arrival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of modern economic structures, with their concentrations of power in newly crowded urban spaces, caused sharp conflicts about social class, nationality, and gender. In Japan, these conflicts were (and continue to be today) worked out in the pages of newspapers and magazines, in the corridors of political power, in the mainstreams of popular culture, especially movies and pop music, and in the fine arts and literature. The struggles between conservative and progressive movements in all of these areas informs the early twentieth century, basically from 1900-1930, with a dynamic sense of possibility seldom dominant in other eras of Japanese cultural history.

In particular, the recording industry of the time worked hard to resolve these conflicts in a way that would satisfy its inherently conservative business approach with new demands from both its older, more affluent audience and from the new consumers of the growing middle class, and the upper levels of the working classes, who begin to have more consumption ability. Each of these groups, of course, experienced its own conflicts over the issues of social class (essentially, what is the “proper” behavior at various levels of society), race (what does it mean to be Japanese in the modern world), and gender (what are proper roles for men and women). The arrival of the “geisha pop star” figure in the recording industry in the late 1920s proved to be the most satisfying compromise to cover all these conflicts. In fact, the iconic geisha pop star works to reinforce nativist, conservative tendencies that were already gathering strength throughout Japanese popular culture of the late

1920s and early 1930s.

The Recording Industry and Modernity

The recording industry, like all pop culture industries, is in the difficult position of trying to offer a continually new product to an audience whose taste is continually changing. The industry can never know that what they have been successful in selling will continue to be so, and among all possible new directions for the fickle audience's taste, they cannot accurately predict which will indeed become popular. Consequently, the industry's basic approach is to repeat, stylistically, previously successful music. When the new direction becomes clear, all record companies rush to satisfy the new demand, until it begins to lag, and the process is repeated.

There is also a tendency to try and control new trends, presenting them as developments of existing styles and not as reactions against those styles. As will be developed below, "jazz" is a perfect example, where the record companies mark their own records as "jazu songu" even though there is little there that could be considered jazz content by today's understanding of the term. (Of course, closer to our own time, "punk" and "hip hop" have been marketed this way.)

At its beginnings, the recording industry in Japan could assume a more or less wealthy audience, with "educated" tastes (or pretensions to them), simply because the cost of record players and records was too high for even college graduates working at large companies. The first recording companies in Japan, Nipponophone in Tokyo (est.1909), Mikado in Kobe (est.1911), and Toyo, better known as Orient, in Kyoto (est.1912), strongly emphasized traditional Japanese musical styles in their catalogs, probably assuming that if the audience wanted Western-style music, they could buy the imported records. In fact, *Ongakukai* magazine of June 1908, commented, "The record player seemed likely to popularize Western music, but it has deepened appreciation of traditional Japanese music. Sales of imported records are poor."¹

So we can imagine that at the beginning of the Taishō era

¹ Quoted in Yamazaki 1997, Jan.15.

(1912-1926), which is also the beginning of a domestic recording industry in Japan, the more or less wealthy customers for records preferred traditional-sounding Japanese music such as *kouta*, *hauta*, *shinnai*, *gida-yu*, with occasional dashes of marches and Western classical music. (Contemporary record catalogs provide ample evidence of this—www.nipperhead.com.)

Japanese professional songwriters and composers of the time, however, were working more and more with Western instruments and musical forms. One particular area of growth was in songs (at least ostensibly) for children. These “*dōyō*” or “*shōka*” often celebrate the rapidly changing Japanese countryside, traditional folk practices, and an idealized innocent childhood, but they do so with music that is arranged for performance on Western instruments, mainly the piano. From this era, most new Japanese-sounding popular songs are actually written for performance in the adapted Japanese musical scale known as “*yo-na-nuki*,” which superimposes the traditional 5-tone scale onto the 12-tone Western scale. Few seem to have noticed the change from the actual scales used before that time.² These were also a staple of the early record industry. It is, of course, impossible today to know if consumers bought them for their children or for their own pleasure. Indeed, many of them are well loved songs even today, and there are several CD collections of this music. Most of them are not, however, reissues of original recordings from this era. And there is a similar emphasis on simplicity of melody in early twentieth-century popular music elsewhere in the world, with many well-known examples coming out of the professional songwriters of Tin Pan Alley.

There were also a few “pop” songs (newly composed for popular consumption, which means sales as music and /or lyric sheets as well as records), such as “*Rappa bushi* (bugle ditty)” and “*Tetsudō shōka* (railroad song),” sung by geisha performers, most notably Yoshiwara Shimeji and Hisanoya Tomiko, in a geisha, drinking party, singalong style.³ These songs, though, are the exceptions in the early years of records,

² Y. Sato 1999, pp. 61-64.

³ “*Rappa bushi*,” in particular, is still quite easy to find at flea markets or junk sales.

where most songs are taken from a more or less traditional repertory, well established by the twentieth century.⁴ The recorded offerings of the pre-Victor era record companies in Japan parallel this repertory very closely. Certainly, the Russo-Japanese War did help to introduce Western rhythms and sounds to a broad spectrum of Japanese society.

The most significant change in the content of records in the Taishō era is caused by the success of “Fukkatsu shōka,” composed by Nakayama Shinpei and sung by noted stage actress Matsui Sumako in 1914. (“Shōka” is often used to describe a recently composed song, regardless of its style, and it may include a nuance of “singalong.” The children’s songs are sometimes called “Shōka,” as were “Rappa bushi” and “Tetsudō bushi.”) Also known as “Kachūsha no uta,” this simple, Western-style song was the first real hit record in Japan, and showed the record companies several new changes that they would have to consider. First, the audience was reportedly made up mainly of young male students, who turned out in droves to hear her perform the song on stage in the Geijutsuza’s production of Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*. (It was common to include songs even in serious drama.)

This showed that the cost of records was no longer so prohibitive and that young people’s tastes would have to be considered. Another important group of consumers of records would have to be drinking establishments, reaching down even into the working classes. Hayashi Fumiko writes of hearing it in an isolated mining town.⁵ Second, it showed that the star power of the performer is the most important feature in making a hit, knowledge that would lead to more theatre-song, and later film-song tie-ups, and other new uses of other media to promote records. Third and most important, it shows that there was indeed an audience for Western-style music performed by Japanese musicians and singers, something that prior to this record had scarcely appeared on record, even though there was an extremely active stage culture of music of this sort growing in major urban areas.

Thus, the location of popular music had changed and broadened greatly over the span of only twenty years or so, growing to include a

⁴ *Zokkyoku zenshū* (Tamura and Nakauchi 1927) shows this repertory.

⁵ Hayashi 2002, pp. 12-13.

range of Western influenced musical forms while retaining space for a variety of musical forms that would satisfy nativists at all social levels. At an even lower social level, “yose” (music hall) culture continued strong, with *naniwabushi* narrative songs gradually gaining in popularity (Asakura) as a mass culture alternative to *gidayu*.⁶ *Rakugo*, while hardly considered high culture, was similarly giving way to *manzai*, a comedy form usually associated with working class taste, a process accelerated by the arrival of radio in the mid-1920s.

Jazz and French Music

This new audience’s musical culture, however, was rather unlike that of the previous generation of record consumers, in that it was formed in the popular theatre, in vaudeville and review shows in Asakusa or Dōtonbori, where the model (whether conscious or not) would be more like Tin Pan Alley or French music hall, and not jazz, no matter how much buzz it was generating on the streets. (Indeed, the early records of Futamura Teiichi, one of the biggest stars of the early Shōwa era, while marked “jazu songu” on the label, sound very much like French popular music of the era.) The Takarazuka Girls Operetta Troupe re-invented itself as French-style music hall revue with their production of *Mon Paris* in 1927, released on record in 1930. Its popularity boomed, and was followed by many European-themed shows.

It is difficult to argue that the French influence was direct, even though popular poet and lyricist Saijō Yaso was a professor of French literature and surely familiar with French culture, and the Takarazuka company’s director for production like *Mon Paris* was newly returned from Paris himself.⁷ There were no releases on Japanese labels, includ-

⁶ There are many examples of *naniwabushi* in Taishō recordings, but the performances tend to be much shorter, in essence, highlights of a longer work. *Naniwabushi* would continue to be popular until the end of the war. There is one recording of “Rappa bushi” by Shimeiji of Yoshiwara which is marked as having a *naniwabushi* section, and other traditional songs are sometimes recorded with “naniwabushi iri” on the labels, strongly implying that *naniwabushi* was considered more a singing style than an independent genre!

ing Polydor, of European music other than classical during the 1920s.⁸ Whether such records were imported or not, it is unlikely that Japanese songwriters could have been familiar enough with the music to imitate it. Rather, it is much more likely that they were interested in finding an alternate path to modern sounds. The “modern” was overwhelmingly assumed to be the “American,” and it seems quite natural that young people—consumers and creators—would be interested in embracing the modern, but for reasons of cultural identity politics, not interested in becoming more like Americans. Since Western musical forms and instruments had come to dominate most types of popular musical culture, especially above the working class level, there was little alternative to their use, but songwriters would not have wanted to simply imitate American pop, and record companies would not have wanted to be accused of pushing the merely imitative (or worse, cultural treason!) The resemblance to French pop music of the 1920s, therefore, may be more coincidence than imitation. Indeed, the French also included references to popular American dance fads, like the Charleston or tango, without making much hot jazz. And even the “first jazz opera,” *Jonny Spielt Auf*, from Weimar Germany, had no real jazz content.

Though it is not possible to know how much “hot jazz” was imported, very little was actually released in Japan under license, even after Victor, Columbia, and Polydor set up their own Japanese subsidiaries in the later 1920s. What their catalogs show was a preponderance of “sweet” or even “symphonic” jazz (like Paul Whiteman) with almost no recordings by African American performers such as Louis Armstrong until much later. In this way the record companies could, to a great degree, control the definition of jazz, at least in the mainstreams of culture and media. Radio broadcasting had begun in the largest cities, but the amount of programming devoted to music of all types was rather small, with much less time for truly popular music. Again, controlling or taming the foreign threat to Japanese culture would have been a factor in song selections.

⁷ Hakamada 2002.

⁸ Polydor did release many recordings by Europe-based American Arthur Briggs and his Savoy Syncopators. Yamada 2002, p. 161.

Contemporary social critics, such as Oya Sōichi, however, relentlessly argue over the role of jazz in the new culture of Taishō and early Shōwa. There are so many references to jazz that it can be assumed that at dance halls or cafes, the new American sounds were, to some degree, accessible.⁹

“High” Tones in Modern Sound: The Making of Japanese Lieder

In reaction to this plethora of music cultures, the record companies greatly expanded their catalogs of offerings, hoping to meet the musical needs of an extremely broad range of potential customers. Since the middle class continued to expand, and since the price of both records and record players continued to drop, record companies were faced with the problem of finding the proper kind of music to sell to this new audience. They were careful to mark their offerings so that customers could tell at a glance what the intended audience was. For example, the original core audience of the rich were favored by having their releases marked with a red label and a higher price. (There is no reason to believe that the physical composition of the record itself differed in any way from cheaper alternatives.) Red label releases tended to be Western classical music, or a new type of hybrid, a kind of Japanese lieder or bel canto written by Japanese composers and performed by Japanese singers with formal operatic training. The most famous of these was Fujiwara Yoshie, known at the time as “waga tenor (our tenor),” who performed songs written by songwriters such as Nakayama Shinpei, who had written “Kachusha.” As European song had always mined European folk music roots for inspiration, so these Japanese lieder took motifs or strains from *min’yō* songs and set them to Western orchestral accompaniment. To modern ears, the most successful of these were the works of Sekiya Toshiko, who both composed and performed as a soprano. She is probably the first Japanese composer of art music to have her works performed by a foreign company, the orchestra of La Scala theatre in Milano.

The need for a music that was both modern and Japanese was therefore strongly felt. The lieder performed by Fujiwara Yoshie and Sekiya

⁹ See Atkins 2001, pp. 45-91.

Toshiko require a level of musical knowledge and experience that music consumers at large did not have, even after a generation of exposure to Western music in school education. Though their records are still common today, this style of music gradually disappears, and indeed, the red label itself seems to disappear until revived in the latter days of the Pacific War, reserved for special hortatory releases performed by groups of singing stars. Fujiwara's career continues well into the 1940s and includes some propaganda songs in the war years, but Sekiya tragically commits suicide in 1941. (Another type of crossover found in the early red label records is work by Miyagi Michio, the father of modern *sōkyoku*, or songs for koto. His recordings often include parts for violin, and, while sounding more or less traditional, are not.)

Geisha on Record

Geisha had had a long history in the recording industry, and indeed, represent one model of professional singer or musician. The earliest recordings in Japan, made in 1903 by Fred Gaisberg for the Berliner company, however, barely include geisha performers. While other explanations are certainly possible, this would seem to imply that geisha were not considered appropriate subjects for recording. The artists chosen for recording were mainly from more accepted genres, such as *nagauta* or *kiyomoto*. There is a good deal of *rakugo*, which would not have a particularly high class image, but that is easily explained by Gaisberg's dependence for introductions on a British *rakugo* performer. This is, of course, before there is a domestic recording industry in Japan, and the number of owners of record players was definitely very small, limited to those who could afford imported records costing more than a week's wages for office workers.

There were, however, serious obstacles to the attempt to recast geisha as socially acceptable popular entertainers. Looking in Taishō or early Shōwa literature, the image of the geisha was hardly a positive one that could be used as a cultural ideal. The obvious place to look is in the novels of Nagai Kafu, which often feature geisha and other denizens of the demimonde. His frequently paired novels, *Udekurabe* (1918) and *Okamesasa* (1920) show two sides of geisha culture that, while superfi-

cially different, ultimately agree that the main role of the geisha is the sexual satisfaction of paying customers. Okoma, in *Udekurabe*, is a skilled dancer and singer, and her success in the stage revue of geisha dancers is central in the novel. There are many references to samisen practice, too, but none of those skills are used in any scenes where she is actually entertaining a customer. Rather, her sexual relations with a series of men are the essence of her competition in the upper reaches of geisha culture. One of her rivals is a new geisha who shocks the oddly conservative Okoma because she shows her body as part of her entertainment. She is, significantly, compared to Matsui Sumako whose performance of *Salome* with the Geijutsuza theatre company was critically acclaimed! Shock aside, it shows clearly that “geisha” is not merely a performer of a traditional repertory of music and dance, but an entertainer with a need to adapt to the popular, and with a large content of sexuality at the base of the entertainment.

In the first half of Shiga Naoya's *An'ya kōro* (1921 and later), as protagonist Kensaku's personal life reels out of control, he complains about wasting time playing childish games with geisha. There is no singing or dancing mentioned in these scenes, and, although the prostitution in the novel takes place elsewhere, it is hard to see the “geisha” presented in these novels as anything other than a type of bar hostess.

Although the geisha image is not without its own contradictions, it could solve some of the modern social problems by presenting geisha as representatives of a superior cultural class (at least musically) but one that is more accessible to average listeners than *nagauta*, for example, might be. They are also unquestionably Japanese, so uncomfortable modern cosmopolitanism would be pushed deep into the background. And, as they had professionally entertained men for many generations, geisha presented an image that would idealize premodern sex roles and relationships. Combining this “traditional” image with modern songwriting sensibilities created a new genre that continued to be popular until the next big crisis in Japanese culture, the loss of the war.

By the time domestic recording began to flourish, however, geisha recordings become increasingly common. The repertory is almost exclusively traditional, with many versions of “Dodoitsu,” “Kappore,” “Yakko-san,” and so on—songs that had been popular in geisha performance

since the nineteenth century.¹⁰ The previously mentioned, rare, “popular” songs, “Rappa bushi,” “Tetsudō shōka,” and a handful of other non-traditional compositions were, however, performed by geisha. From this it can be inferred that geisha were the cultural equivalent of pop singers, as opposed to more prestigious performers of more culturally valued music. Judging only by the records that exist today, found in private collections, flea markets, and junk shops, however, Shimeji of Yoshiwara was the biggest recording star of the Taishō era, often bootlegged by a variety of small operations, there being little concept of copyright at the time.¹¹

As an alternative to the *lieder*, red label compositions, record companies called on their songwriters, again notably featuring Nakayama and Sassa, to create another new genre, drawing upon *shinmin'yō*, to create *shin-kouta*. This genre featured geisha as vocalists and continues the blending of Japanese and Western musical influences. In this way, the three main social and cultural issues of class, nationality, and gender can all be resolved in a way that is both satisfactory to consumers and profitable for record companies. Significantly, these are black label records for every company, even though they are often written by songwriters who had also written for red label singers. Usually called “[place name] Ondo,” or “[place name] Bushi,” these, too were geisha party styled songs, intended for group singing, and probably intended to evoke a feeling of traditional festival. Some of these songs were indeed from the traditional *min'yō* repertory, some were adaptations, but in fact, many more were original compositions by, again, Nakayama Shinpei or Sassa Koka, two of the most active songwriters of the pre-war era. Significantly, almost all of the performers on the recordings were identified as members of a geisha troupe, and not by individual name. The appearance of these *shinmin'yō* (“new folk songs”), roughly contemporary with the arrival of foreign capital in the recording industry, implies, again, a strong appeal to nativist sentiments in the record-buying population. It

¹⁰ *Kouta kenkyū* (Yuasa 1925, p. 247) does caution that the *dodoitsu* performed by geisha are not the authentic, high quality variety.

¹¹ Perhaps the second most popular recording artist of the Taishō era would be Toyotake Rosho, a performer of “Musume gidayū,” a narrative form that would gradually lose its popularity to *naniwabushi*.

could also be argued that a renewed nostalgia for the ancestral home in the countryside is actually a way to exploit new markets for records, either those actually living away from urban areas, or those who had migrated to the city for work and had now acquired the means to consume recordings. There was, of course, a popular attempt to locate a Japanese “volk” ideal, placed in the isolated countryside by nationalistic anthropologists such as Yanagita Kunio.¹²

Geisha and “Modern Girls”

If modern urban culture was identified as strongly American, then matters of history and identity were at stake, and a strong, institutionalized, anti-modern nativism becomes increasingly strident as the Shōwa years continue, and not only in politics. This nativism is not the exclusive possession of the cultural critics who lamented the decline of Japan’s great traditions, real or newly created (or was it merely the challenges to their own culturally privileged position), but represented a core resentment of Western involvement in Japan that was both widely and deeply felt. The young people who felt a strong attraction to Western or American culture most likely were not interested in becoming, in some way, American. They were, however, clearly interested in possessing the wonderful, fascinating things associated with America (and perhaps, through possession, taming the threat it represented?)

The record companies were on fairly familiar ground with this kind of music. The problem was with the large and growing middle class and their varied interests. There was a very real fear of the pestilential influence of American popular culture—its movies, its music, and its fashion. American movies were extremely popular with students and women, groups that had been called upon to learn and follow traditions, but who were now openly showing resistance. American music was associated with dance halls and cafes, where, live or on record, it served as a background for a variety of new and threatening commercialized “erotic services” or even outright prostitution. American fashion, similarly, was leading young Japanese women to abandon their very identity as Japa-

¹² Harootunian 1998, pp.144-145 and more.

nese, by cutting their hair, wearing makeup, and displaying their bodies in entirely anti-traditional ways. In reality, there were not huge numbers of these “modern girls,” but the social critics of the age responded to the threat as if there were.¹³

Even Kikuchi Kan’s immensely popular *Tōkyō kōshinkyoku* (1929), which has as one of its plotlines the social redemption of a geisha, the following description of a geisha is made by the representative of “modern girls” in the novel: “Like a doll, offering herself for money, just doing whatever men want. I hate that.”¹⁴ The geisha who gradually, and then suddenly, rises in social rank is also described as having a beautiful singing voice, but in the scenes where she is with customers, she never sings. She entertains the young office workers with casual chat about movies, theatre, and popular music, while she is sexually assaulted (unsuccessfully) by the representatives of older male authority, who obviously expect her to be a type of prostitute.

This does not sound like a good candidate for a new cultural ideal! However, part of the solution to the problem appears in the new rival to the geisha that had arrived in the modern urban culture of the 1920s, the café hostess or “*jokyū*.” (The other new type of erotic service, the taxi dancer, strangely, is scarcely taken up as a topic in movies or popular literature. They were considered a serious enough threat for Osaka to close its dance halls in 1927 in an attempt to protect public morals!¹⁵) In a sense, the *jokyū* is a debased version of a geisha, with no particular skills other than the conversational, and possibly sexual. Since the café bars that employed *jokyū* were a feature of the new urban culture, the *jokyū* is strongly connected to modernization itself. Even though they were not, in the fashion defined sense, “modern girls,” they were seen as a cultural phenomenon caused by westernization. Even though the work they were doing, flirtatiously entertaining men, was hardly a new or unusual occupation in Japan, they were associated with the perceived moral decline caused by modern culture.

On the other hand, in movies such as *Tōkyō no onna* (1933) and *Yo-*

¹³ B. Sato 2003, pp. 49-75.

¹⁴ Kikuchi 1994, p. 296.

¹⁵ Atkins 2001, p. 63.

goto no yume (1933), *jokyū* are treated with great sympathy as women who take on this work (and it seems to be clearly associated with prostitution) out of desperation to help their families. Hirotsu Kazuo's linked novellas, collectively called *Jokyū* (1931), while having highly melodramatic plot elements, are strongly feminist in their support for the women in this position, frankly discussing issues of exploitation and discrimination, and ending with a sense of independence and empowerment. His women are not prostitutes, but they rely on sexual attraction to be successful in their work. *Jokyū* are also taken seriously in Hayashi Fumiko's *Hōrōki* (1929), and even proletarian fiction hero Kobayashi Takiji has one activist take a job as a *jokyū* to help her agitation cell, in *Tō seikatsusha* (1933).

Both the geisha and the *jokyū* seem to contain, in their social construction, threats to male supremacy. After all, both make their living by exploiting the pocketbooks of men who are suckered by them. They, by necessity, must take a very active role in their relationships with men, which clearly threatens perceived traditions of male-female relations, where men are supposed to be in control.¹⁶

If the geisha can be "redeemed" by showing that she is really a representative of high class traditional culture, then she can be used as a compromise figure to settle the contradictions in culture and society caused by modernity. She can be mainly a hired performer of traditional, elegant arts rather than a type of prostitute. In Kikuchi's novel, this is fairly clumsily performed by having the geisha discover that her father is a rich industrialist who had treated her geisha mother poorly. After she is rescued from geisha life by her real half-brother, she ends the novel in a convent school in England, completing the journey from factory to elite.

Of course, geisha, no less than *jokyū*, enter the profession from the lower classes, due to economic distress. That they learn traditional performing arts and manners obscures this basic class-based contradiction and changes their class-image. Even though a fairly low class of, basically, prostitute could be called geisha in the Taishō era, several cultural

¹⁶ Indeed, there are many examples in film and literature that concern this threat to masculine control, but most have resolutions that reaffirm masculine prerogative.

trends work to elevate the class-image of the geisha, enabling her to serve as a new cultural icon.

Although she is obviously not foreign, consciousness of foreigners is also part of the rehabilitation of the geisha image. In a fascinating book of 1933, *Geisha to sono yurai*, the author emphasizes several times that foreigners must not be told of any connection between geisha and sexual services.¹⁷ The image of the “geisha girl” was already strong in foreign countries, and in the earliest record catalog intended for foreign residents of Japan, from roughly 1903, *kouta* are called “geisha song” in English.¹⁸ In other media, such as stereoscopic images, any well-dressed young Japanese woman would be called a “geisha girl.” So, raising the image of Japan in the world could also be accomplished by recasting the geisha as skilled performer instead of sexualized object.

Of course, it would be impossible to completely remove sexuality from the image of the geisha, but the sexuality that would remain would be in the art more than in the person of the geisha, and this, of course, restores the traditional sex roles of male command and female response. Even if it could become conceivable that women might attend a party where a geisha entertains, clearly the prevailing image would be that men hire geisha to entertain men, controlling her more than being controlled by her. (Whether the image corresponds to any kind of reality is another serious problem, indeed!)

So, although the idea of an idealized iconic geisha was a possible cultural solution to modern contradictions, the predecessors of the geisha pop star, Yoshiwara Shimeji, Hisanoya Tomiko, and Yamamura Toyoko did not achieve that position. It seems that image and skill alone were not enough to push the icon into real popularity.

Tōjin Okichi as Modern Heroine

An important background to the success of geisha pop singers in the late 1920s was the phenomenal popularity of the story of Tōjin Okichi. Starting with Muramatsu Shunsui’s novel *Kurofune* in 1925, the story

¹⁷ Akiyama 1933, p. 6, etc.

¹⁸ www.nipperhead.com

was quickly revised and repeated by many other writers, all of whom were popularly successful. Jūichiya Gisaburō's *Tokio no haisha Tōjin Okichi* (1930) and Yamamoto Yūzō's stage play *Tōjin Okichi* (1929) are just two of the most popular of many imitations or adaptations. Muramatsu returns to the story with a new version *Jitsuwa Tōjin Okichi* in 1931. In the meantime, the story is filmed twice in 1930, once again in 1931, and once annually from 1935-1938.¹⁹ There are also several songs written, some of them tie-ins with movies. A *naniwabushi* version also appeared. The successful stage version, a Geijutsuza production featuring noted actress Mizutani Yaeko, was also popular in a recorded version. Quite simply, it was one of the most popular stories of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The reality of Okichi's life is rather difficult to penetrate, and it seems not to have overly concerned the many writers who took up the story, even when they called their work "Jitsuwa." Research by educational philosopher Ikue Takayuki, unpublished in his lifetime, (*Waga kyū-jūnen no shōgai* 24) basically discounts the whole basis of the drama. But that is not really important, since the story took on its own life.

In the story, a geisha with a famous singing voice is forced by local authorities to become a companion to U.S. consul Townsend Harris in Shimoda, at the beginning of Japan's opening to the West in the 1850s. The authorities have been accused by Harris of lying and dissembling and they must comply with his demand for female companionship in order to save face and buy time for further negotiations. Even though Okichi is not at all pleased with the assignment, she accepts, persuaded that it is for the good of the country. Things don't work out well at the consulate, and a sexual relationship with Harris is strongly hinted at. Though Okichi shows herself to be selfless and devoted when Harris takes ill, she is discarded, and then spirals downward through the prejudice of Japanese, who now call her *Tōjin* (a contemporary term for foreigner), and alcoholism. In Yamamoto's play, she maintains a sense of independence and spirit, but in most of these stories she is merely a tool of men, both American and Japanese, used and discarded, tragic (but only in a shallow sense of the word, since she drowns herself in the

¹⁹ Japan Movie Database-www.jmdb.ne.jp.

ocean long after the important events of the story).

What is important, however, is that she becomes a symbol of resistance to America. Arguably this is not in the story. After all, she does what she is told and goes to the consulate. She even helps when Harris is sick. Somehow, though, her resistance to going, and her attitude while there and after struck a strong chord in the Japanese audience. Her ability to maintain her independence, both from the Americans and from the Japanese authorities, clearly resonated with a large part of the Japanese populace.

It is generally accepted now, in popular histories, that the historical Okichi was, ironically, a kind of *jokyū*, who served sake to sailors in Shimoda.²⁰ In Inoue's research, there appears to have been some evidence making her a hairdresser and not a geisha. Indeed, hairdressing was an important part of geisha life and a hairdresser would have been part of the staff at a geisha *okiya*. In the stories, though, she is clearly a geisha, and a locally famous singer, who, after her exposure to foreigners, falls to the level of hairdresser. So, even if she is a drunk and a failure, and called a foreigner, she really represents idealized Japanese behavior—resistance to foreignness, forbearance, and duty. If these qualities could be added to the prevailing geisha image, which was much more mercenary, or even predatory, then the geisha could be a positive icon for the modern age, a symbol of resistance to America, and a supporter of traditional class and sex roles while at the same time showing resistance to petty authority. This would preserve a popular picture of social order with absolute authority being, by nature, benevolent, but direct, local authority being capricious, greedy, and suspicious.

And indeed, the working class that was gradually becoming an important market for movies, records, and other popular culture was the class least likely to have had any direct exposure to real geisha (unless it were the experience of young girls from poor families disappearing into the profession.) While the rich may have enjoyed the singing and dancing of elite geisha, and the middle class may have enjoyed the chatty company of mid-level geisha, the working poor were rather unlikely to know precisely what a geisha was or did. Their images of the world of

²⁰ *NHK rekishi hakken* 1994, p.10.

the geisha probably assumed a high social level, with performing arts more important to this image than they may have been in the real world of geishas. And these images were likely derived from popular culture such as movies and plays.

So, if the geisha is a quintessentially Japanese figure, resistant to American influences, representing high social class and traditional arts, and freed, more or less, by the *jokyū* and taxi dancer from unfortunate sexual associations, she is a new and useful figure, and a possible icon of a Japanese modern culture. Once “redeemed” from a previously held image that included negative connotations, she can be used by the basically conservative recording industry to symbolically resolve some of the nagging contradictions in modern society and culture, in a way that is satisfying, both to large numbers of paying consumers and to the arbiters of appropriate cultural content.

Geisha and “Jazz Singer” Side by Side: Fujimoto Fumikichi, the First Geisha Pop Star

To complete this transformation, it would be necessary to connect the geisha to the modern cultural life of urban Japan. This would not be easy—urban culture was seen as Americanized, and the primary thrust of contemporary ethnology was to imagine that the “real” Japan was rural.²¹ Clearly, while there were always geisha wherever reasonably wealthy people gathered, most of them worked in cities. The class-based approach helps to solve this problem—they are traditional for the elite, and modern commercial culture presents the life of the elite mainly as a matter of consumption and possession, denying cultural and educational differences that are difficult to express. (Sophistication is shown in the movies as the possession of the proper things.)

Second, the authenticity of the performer must be emphasized, as mass audiences were more and more aware of the artifice of popular culture, having seen many “geisha” on stage or screen whom they knew to be actresses. Young people and women, a major part of the record buying audience, of course would not be expected to have much real knowl-

²¹ Harootunian 1998, pp. 144-145.

edge of the geisha world.

Third, the problem of the sexual identity of the geisha would have to be controlled, or the conservative record companies might accidentally be unleashing an even worse form of morally questionable *moga* into the culture. The idealized geisha of the pop music world, therefore, could not be like the geisha of the *machiya*.

When Victor Records began to use the geisha Fumikichi as a recording singer, they clearly had not crossed into this idealization mode. Her first recordings, in late 1928 and early 1929, were of a *nagauta*, “Matsu no midori” (accompanied by piano and *yokobue* flute, an unusual combination that hints at future attempts to blend Western and traditional sounds) and the “regional” *ondo*, *shinmin’yō* style still popular. “Ryūkyō kouta,” another Nakayama song, and “Misasa kouta,” with music by Nakayama and lyrics by poet Noguchi Ujō were fairly typical of the genre (and are listed as merely typical in *Rekōdo hayariuta*).

Starting in June of 1929, though, Victor began to see Fumikichi in a different way. Her next recording was “Shiki no manshū (Four Seasons in Manchuria),” released as the B-side of Futamura Teiichi’s “Manshū zen’ei no uta (Song of the Manchurian Frontlines).” While neither was a hit, this record is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it shows a very strong concern with Manchuria that is early—although newspapers and politicians had had strong interest in Manchuria, it does not become a common topic for popular song until after the Manchurian incident of 1931. “Kokkyō keibi no uta,” however, had been a popular song in the mid-1920s, sung in a *kouta* style. Yamamura Toyoko was one of many to record it, and in a geisha style. (It was also the only real song referenced in Kikuchi’s *Tōkyō kōshinkyoku*.) Second, one popular song of the geisha repertory was “Kyō no shiki (Four Seasons in Kyoto),” so Fumikichi’s song connects the modern project in Manchuria emotionally to a traditional romantic mood, naturalizing the view of Manchuria as part of the Japanese empire. (Miriam Silverberg finds resonance between the boom in *jokyū* and the colonial era.)²² Thus the traditional becomes modern. The pairing of a modern, Asakusa “jazu” singer with a geisha on thematically linked, imperialistic songs also shows Victor’s thinking

²² Silverberg 1998, p. 215.

about its real and potential audience, that they are equally confused and desirous of having the trappings of modernity without losing a presumed essential Japaneseness, however contradictory those desires may superficially be.

The next month, the same two singers return with two versions of “Naniwa kouta (Naniwa [Osaka’s old name] Tune).” This is the logical extreme of the *shinmin’yō* movement. The title refers to old repertoires, but Futamura’s version uses a modern jazz orchestra, a rousing march rhythm, and of course, his Asakusa stage voice. While this does not signal the end of the rural *shinmin’yō* songs, increasingly the same musical vocabulary becomes applied to cities. There are Osaka *jinku*, Tokyo *ondo*, Nagoya *kouta* and many more (*jinku*, *ondo*, and *kouta* are the type-names of pre-Meiji folk-popular songs). Typically the urban versions of the *shinmin’yō* boom pair a Western-style singer on the A-side—for Victor this is usually Futamura Teiichi or Satō Chiyako. Today, Fumikichi’s version of “Naniwa kouta” is by no means forgotten, but Futamura’s is much more widely known. Indeed, Satō Chiyako’s trained Western soprano will disappear from the mass market soon after this era, but she is still the voice of “Tōkyō kōshinkyoku” in 1929.

Having two versions of one song on one record is a rare practice in the recording world, but “Naniwa kouta’s” coupling creates some interesting resonances. Futamura’s A-side is identified as a “jazu songu,” with accompaniment by the Nihon Victor Jazz band. The B-side, which is exactly the same melody at a slower tempo, is a “ryūkōka,” (fashionable or popular song) with accompaniment by two samisen players (regulars on Fumikichi sides) and an unnamed pianist playing in a percussive, koto-like style. Each singer sings part of the complete lyric by Shigure Otowa, with no overlap except for the short refrain. The lyrics have casual references to landmarks of modern Osaka, but are mainly sung from the viewpoint of a jilted lover, an extremely common trope in songs sung by women. Here, however, Futamura gets the line about “wet sleeves”! This implies that the modern city feminizes the modern man (and perhaps, by implication, empowers the modern woman?)

Fumikichi’s credit lists her as Yoshi-chō Fumikichi. By naming the district in Tokyo where her *okiya* (not named) could presumably be found, Victor reminds the audience of her authenticity and reinforces her

weak social position as an “owned” geisha. In the first few years of geisha pop this naming of the geisha district is common. By the mid-thirties it has become rare. Yoshi-chō comes and goes on Fumikichi’s Victor records. She later becomes Fujimoto Fumikichi.²³

In November of 1929, Fumikichi returns to the “rural” *shinmin’yō* with “Maizuru kouta,” yet another Nakayama song, with lyrics by Shigure. She sings the long song over both sides. Her other release is another split with Futamura, called “Modan bushi.” Seemingly a can’t-miss attempt to follow the success of “Naniwa” with another song combining modern and traditional, it does not sell. By this time, however, the word “modan” has probably been overused and its novelty value is greatly diminished.

Conclusions—Geisha Singers in the Entertainment Industry

By January of 1930, the “eiga kouta” era has begun, and Fumikichi’s next record is “Gion kouta,” another two-sided song, this time composed by Sassa Koka. The record industry’s marketing abilities have improved and they have begun to use tie-ins with popular movies to increase sales. It must be noted that all movies in Japan were still silent at this point, however, an evening of entertainment at the movies, in a major urban theatre, would customarily have included some kind of musical stage show. *Gion kouta ehigasa* (identified on the record as “Ehigasa”) was a three-part movie released in early 1930. Clearly, the Gion-geisha connection was foremost in the plan for this record.

Fumikichi’s real breakthrough record came in February of 1930, with “Tōjin Okichi kouta.” This, too, was a movie tie-in, jumping on the Okichi boom in all media. The A-side, “Tōjin Okichi no uta” is sung by Satō Chiyako, still one of the most popular Victor singers, but this time, the B-side by Fumikichi became the hit. The popularity of Satō’s style may have already been on the wane, as she has fewer and fewer success-

²³ Indeed, in the pre-Victor era, the district name or the *okiya* name is the norm for geisha singers’s records. Even Yamamura Toyoko, which seems like a normal name, is “Yamamura Toyoko” on some records, showing that the name Yamamura was that of her *okiya* and not her own.

es before “retiring” from pop music to pursue a classical career. Unlike “Naniwa kouta” and several other split records, the songs are different on each side. Presumably the public is invited to superimpose the image of Fumikichi on Okichi, the modern geisha, musically resisting the inroads of the Westerners and maintaining her Japaneseness against all odds. There is, of course, piano in the background, but a casual listener could easily mistake it for a koto. Lyrically, too, Fumikichi’s side is much more poetically oblique than the more Western side, with falling camellias and the “black ships” invisible in the mist. The lyrics of both sides are by Saijō Yaso, but there is a clear stylistic difference, with Satō’s side much more concretely blaming America for Okichi’s suicide. (Both focus on her tragic end.)

By late 1930, Satō’s star is clearly in decline, and a new version of her big hit “Tōkyō kōshinkyoku” is recorded, this time by Yotsuya Fumiko, with the B-side by Fumikichi. These two, in November, also release “Miss Nippon /Nippon musume” as a tie-in with a Nikkatsu movie called *Miss Nippon*. Yotsuya’s side is very jazzy, in a Paul Whiteman style, with banjo, saxes, and even a trumpet solo. Lyrically, her version of the “Japanese woman” has cut her hair, put on high heels, begun to dance the tango, and become very aware of American capitalism to the east and Russian communism to the north. Fumikichi’s “Japanese woman,” on the B-side, is obsessed with the loss of yesterday’s dreams, compared to *kanzashi* hair ornaments dropped in water. She is encouraged, however, to endure and have hopes again. The musical accompaniment this time is samisen and *narimono*, with no Western instruments. Despite a certain sense of loss, it is clearly more comfortable to be Fumikichi’s Japanese woman, with less pressure from a wide society of consumption and politics.

By this time, the new genre of geisha pop has become well established and all of the major record companies are using geisha as singers of new songs. Some of Fumikichi’s rivals, such as Ichimaru and particularly Katsutarō, go on to be major stars. All of them follow the same basic strategy of combining the traditional with the modern, the *shinmin’yō* “traditional” sounding style with thematically modern compositions. The new genre has shown that pop need not be Western. It has also shown that Japanese can be modern. Lastly, it has clearly placed Japanese wom-

en (whether their style is Western or not) back in comfortable positions of social inferiority, sexual objectification, and resignation.

The biggest of all geisha pop hits was “Shima no musume,” sung by Katsutarō and released by Victor in late 1932. With accompaniment by guitar (enjoying tremendous popularity at the time due to the success of Koga Masao’s compositions), she sings as a young island girl waiting for her sailor love to return. This is the perfect image for 1930s Japan, as foreign involvements take more and more young men and more patience and endurance are called for among women. The combination of guitar and *kouta* style singing seems natural and organic, as many of the contradictions of modernity have been papered over in the embrace of colonialism. The Japanese have been refigured from the feminine position of Okichi vis a vis the Americans into men with an overseas mission. The women have had their moment of independence and now have returned to their proper role. The traditional is now comfortably modern.

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Discographical Notes

The single most difficult problem in researching the music of Japan before 1927 is the dearth of reissues. Some very early recording sessions by foreign companies, intended for foreign release (and possible export to Japan) have been reissued on CD, including the Kawakami Ichiza recordings in 1900 (Toshiba-EMI TOCG-5432) and the Gaisberg sessions for Berliner records in Tokyo in 1903 (Toshiba-EMI TOCF-59061-71). Other pre-Victor era recordings that have been reissued will scarcely fill two CDs, so the student researching the music (as opposed to the musical culture, which includes a great deal of printed material) is forced to become a record collector. Most collectors of 78 rpm records in Japan are mainly focused on pop music, jazz, Japanese issues of foreign artists, and a few popular artists, so the competition for really old records is not too great. Junk and antique dealers are not in the business of offering obscurities, unfortunately, so their willingness to carry large, heavy boxes of records that are difficult to sell is a serious problem. The archaeological record (no pun intended) is therefore

quite fragmented, and attempts to reconstruct the practices of pre-Victor record companies involve a large amount of conjecture based on a fairly small sample of existing records. That said, the ease of finding examples of the music discussed in this essay surely proves that it was, indeed, very popular, and that many different experiments were tried in early efforts to find compromises between Western and Japanese musical sounds and styles. The *Shōwa ryūkōka sōran* directory of “popular” record releases of the prewar and war era is an extremely valuable resource, and one that I used to check facts on Fumikichi’s early records, but it is not a rare occurrence to come upon a “popular” record of that era that is not listed in that directory, showing that there is still much work to do on Japanese popular music of the 78 rpm era. There is no similar resource for recordings from before 1928.