

# A Past Re-imagined for the Geisha: Saviour of the 1950's Japanese Sex Industry

**Caroline Norma**

Asia Institute

*This article looks at public discussion surrounding the enactment of Japan's Prostitution Prevention Law in 1956. It homes in on the opinion of commentators that the exclusion of the geisha system from the law's provisions allowed the Japanese sex industry to flourish even after 1956. The paper asks why the geisha system was left out of the law, and why this exclusion was a boon for the Japanese sex industry. It argues that the geisha system established a 'respectable' standard for prostitution in Japan, which shielded the sex industry from legal intervention in the postwar period. It concludes that the geisha system has normalised and lent respectability to the activities of the sex industry in Japanese society to the detriment of its women and girls.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at public discussion surrounding the enactment of Japan's Prostitution Prevention Law in 1956. It picks up the opinion of commentators that the Japanese sex industry continued to flourish even after 1956 because the geisha system was left out of the law.<sup>1</sup> The paper asks why the geisha system was left out of Japan's Prostitution Prevention Law, and why this exclusion was a boon for the country's sex industry. It then broaches a theoretical explanation for the role the geisha system played in the success of Japan's postwar sex industry. This explanation draws on feminist Catharine MacKinnon's idea of the 'Playboy standard'.<sup>2</sup> The 'Playboy standard' is a phrase that stands for MacKinnon's opinion that the 'respectability' of *Playboy* magazine protects all pornography from attempts to curb its production and distribution. This paper argues that the geisha system established a similarly 'respectable' standard for prostitution in Japan, and that this shielded the wider sex industry from legal intervention in the post war. It concludes that the geisha system has normalised and lent respectability to the activities of the sex industry in Japanese society, to the detriment of its women and girls.

## PROSTITUTION AND TRAFFICKING IN THE GEISHA SYSTEM

Writer, anti-prostitution activist, and head of the Japan Protection of Children Society (*Nihon kodomo o mamorukai*) Kanzaki Kiyoshi (1904–1979) wrote a number of journal and newspaper articles in the 1950s discussing prostitution and trafficking in Japan's geisha system.<sup>3</sup> His writings are almost unique in their assertion that the geisha system is part of Japan's sex industry.<sup>4</sup> Kanzaki stands alone among scholars who nearly all imagine the 'Japanese geisha' to simply 'study classical Japanese music and dance, perform music and dance for parties in order to pay for their art lessons and elaborate stage performances'.<sup>5</sup> Scholars argue that women in the role of 'geisha' serve a legitimate and historically important function in Japanese society 'enlivening' (*kyou o soeru*) the banquets of elite business, military, and political men.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Kanzaki in 1955 argued that the geisha system sponsored human rights violations against girls.<sup>7</sup> Using Kanzaki's work, this section describes the prostitution and trafficking of girls and women that was carried out through Japan's geisha system

in the 1950s. This discussion intends to overturn scholars' dearly held historical picture of the geisha system as an institution of the arts.<sup>8</sup> Understanding the prostitution status of the geisha system is necessary to the paper's later examination of Japan's sex industry in the 1950s.

Girls are trafficked (*jinshin baibai*) into geisha houses, Kanzaki wrote in 1955, through geisha house managers buying the right to 'adopt' them through payments to parents or brokers. Geisha houses interned women and girls who were prostituted in escort-type arrangements to places like 'geisha restaurants' or *ryoutei*. Kanzaki described a *ryoutei* as a 'prostitution hotel with banquet facilities'.<sup>9</sup> The trafficking of girls into geisha houses, where they lived under the control of a 'proprietor' (*ookami*), was a longstanding practice of the geisha system, which used adoption contracts to disguise its trafficking of girls through debt bondage. The contracts bonded girls to geisha houses, as well as circumvented laws prohibiting trafficking and debt servitude. Kanzaki wrote that this practice 'exact[ed] an unimaginable toll on the human rights of girls who [were] entirely under the control of their "parental" masters' in the geisha system.<sup>10</sup> A survey by the Women and Youth Division of Japan's Ministry of Labour in 1953 on the sex, age, and receiving industry of children trafficked in Japan over a one-year period indicates that the scale of this trafficking wasn't actually large in relative terms. The survey found that, of 1489 children trafficked, thirty-one had been trafficked into geisha houses, which was only around three per cent of girls trafficked into Japan's sex industry that year.<sup>11</sup> However, the trafficking of girls into the geisha system at this time was particularly problematic for the way it was institutionalised through adoption contracts, and also for its social celebration as Japanese 'tradition'.

A range of elaborate rituals and protocols governed the entry of girls (called *maiko*) into the geisha system. In addition to some form of artistic training, they were subject to elaborate dress codes, beauty practices, housework obligations, and 'coming out' rituals refined over the long history of the geisha system.<sup>12</sup> The stylised conventions of particularly the top echelon of the system encouraged public acceptance of the prostitution of girls. British ex-military man AC Scott wrote in 1960 that pictures of *maiko*, or what he called 'apprentice geisha', 'appeared on postcards, posters, brochures, towels, crockery, and anything else that is available to put pictures on' in Japan.<sup>13</sup> A

girl remained a *maiko* until the day a man prostituted her. She was recognisable as a *maiko* (and not a geisha) on towels because she wore a different costume until the day she was prostituted.<sup>14</sup> Kanzaki criticised this practice, called *mizuage*, in which girls interned in ‘geisha houses’ would be ‘auctioned’ off to men to be prostituted for the first time at around age fourteen or fifteen.<sup>15</sup> In fact, he named it a human rights violation. Kanzaki lamented the fact that only geisha house owners could be punished for the crime under Japanese (child welfare) laws, while the men who prostituted girls walked free. He wrote that this situation constituted ‘legal recognition of the right of rich men to commit sexual violence because of their money and power’.<sup>16</sup>

Kanzaki did not limit his criticism of Japan’s geisha system to its sponsorship of child prostitution. He described in the major Japanese *Chuo Koron* journal in 1954 the case of a woman who was trafficked into the geisha system at age twenty. Kanzaki’s description of the violence of the geisha system not just for girls, but also for women, reflects an abolitionist stance toward the sex industry. In other words, Kanzaki objected to any ‘legal recognition of the right of rich men to commit sexual violence because of their money and power’ in Japan, irrespective of whether these men prostituted girls or women. His rare and remarkably in-depth account of the trafficking and prostitution of a woman in the geisha system in Japan in the 1950s exists in counterpoint to the great bulk of writing on the geisha system that endlessly lauds its romantic and aesthetic aspects.<sup>17</sup> An excerpt from Kanzaki’s account is reproduced in translation in the next section in order to suggest that the geisha system operated as part of Japan’s sex industry in the 1950s—and not as an institution of the arts.

### THE STORY OF ‘TANAKA MICHIKO’

In the early 1950s, ‘Tanaka Michiko’ was trafficked into a geisha house from Nagano in northern Japan when she was twenty years old. Her sister had been trafficked into another part of the sex industry before this. Tanaka had previously been in a stripping venue in her home town, but was ‘adopted’ by a Tokyo geisha house owner when she left Nagano for the capital. The geisha house owner made her again strip as part of her ‘hostessing’ activities. Obscenity charges were eventually brought against Tanaka for this, and she returned to her hometown and attempted suicide. She complained to her family that

the geisha house owner in Tokyo had controlled her every move.

After recovering from the suicide attempt, she found herself destitute and approached the local sex industry venue where her sister worked. This venue owner trafficked Michiko into a local geisha house where she was held in debt bondage. One third of the money for Tanaka’s sale was paid to the venue that trafficked her, which was run by family members of the geisha house. This geisha house, too, soon required Tanaka to strip for male buyers. She was there for four months. During this time she didn’t receive any income; it was taken from her as board and ‘debt’ repayment.

The geisha house owner wholly directed Michiko’s interaction with male patrons, and forced her to have sex with those men who requested it, even during menstruation. She was unable to refuse the manager’s orders because of fear of retribution. Tanaka apparently ‘sold well’ to customers so wasn’t beaten by her manager, but she did witness another girl who tried to run away being verbally abused by the manager. In the early stages in the geisha house, Tanaka contracted syphilis, but had to continue seeing male buyers. Tanaka was prostituted by buyers every night, so became physically tired, and struggled with sleepiness. As a result, there were occasions when buyers were able to run off without paying. The house had a rule that geisha had to replace fees that clients had failed to pay with their own money. As a result, Tanaka began to inject methamphetamine to stay awake. Her condition began to deteriorate and she eventually ran away from the geisha house with a buyer.

The geisha house then contacted the police in order to recover Tanaka’s debts. When police investigated the case, they uncovered twelve underage girls interned in geisha houses in the same area as Tanaka, including two in the geisha house where Tanaka lived. One of these girls had been sold to the house by her father when she was thirteen years old and had been in the house for three years being prostituted by male buyers. The second girl was fifteen years old and had also been sold by her father.<sup>18</sup>

### THE GEISHA SYSTEM

A study of the trafficking of girls in Japan conducted by a Japanese public welfare agency in 1957 noted that ‘recruiters’ [traffickers] in poor rural areas were a problem in Japan at that time, but that there

were also many cases of ‘fathers, for example, who proclaimed that “what’s wrong with me doing what I like with my own daughter” after they had been caught selling their daughters to recruiters.’<sup>19</sup> The social acceptability and public acceptance of the geisha system in Japan at this time doubtlessly encouraged unwitting fathers to sell their daughters into prostitution, and perhaps even gave some an excuse for doing so. The geisha system had been ‘reformed’ in Japan after the Second World War when the labour ministry licensed geisha industry unions (i.e. *kenban* offices) as ‘employment mediation agencies’.<sup>20</sup> Women in the system were then recognised in law as ‘independent contractors’, which turned the houses where they lived under the control of ‘managers’ (*ookami*) into legally benign ‘boarding houses’.<sup>21</sup> The introduction of a minimum age of compulsory schooling in Japan after the war also meant that girls under sixteen years could no longer legally enter the geisha system. This meant that social welfare agencies in Japan for the first time were able to monitor the trafficking of girls into the system.

After the war, but before the amendment of Japan’s entertainment industry regulations in 1954 (discussed below),<sup>22</sup> therefore, the geisha system operated in Japan according to legal arrangements very different from those governing the rest of the sex industry.<sup>23</sup> The rest of Japan’s industry consisted of sex businesses that were either operating with full legal recognition (i.e. in ‘red light’ or *akasen* districts), businesses operating under a legal fiction created by the ‘food sanitation’ permit (i.e. in ‘semi red light’ or *aosen* districts), or operating illegally (e.g. military base prostitution and street prostitution).<sup>24</sup> But the geisha system operated according to its own scheme of regulation, which was endorsed by government under employment mediation laws.

In 1952, an estimated 53,115 women were prostituted illegally in geisha venues in Japan.<sup>25</sup> Around the same number, 47,459 women, were prostituted legally in brothels operating with police permits as ‘special eating and drinking’ venues (i.e. *tokushuinshokutengai* venues).<sup>26</sup> The greatest number of women in Japan’s sex industry (214,425) were prostituted illegally, however, in venues that were registered under Japan’s food sanitation regulations (*shokuhineiseihou*).<sup>27</sup> These bar-like venues commonly had upstairs rooms for prostitution, which made them more vulnerable to police detection than the geisha system with its escort arrangements.<sup>28</sup> Another 53,115 women were prostituted illegally through wholly unregistered venues, or in street

prostitution.<sup>29</sup> Overall, therefore, the geisha system was responsible for the prostitution of approximately fourteen percent of women in Japan’s sex industry in 1952.<sup>30</sup>

While the geisha system did not occupy a large part of Japan’s sex industry in the 1950s, it exerted a disproportionately strong influence on Japanese culture. The ongoing trafficking, prostitution and abuse of women in the geisha system contrasted with its high social status and mainstream respectability. A number of prominent women spoke out in the 1950s against this normalised presence of the geisha system in Japanese society. Director of the women and minors bureau of the Department of Labour, Yamakawa Kikue, in the *Yomiuri* newspaper in June 1953, for example, wrote:

[T]here’s no other country in the world where women have a public role that involves acting as a hostess for men’s gatherings to make them more pleasant. And there’s no country that would hold up such women as its national ‘culture’. Pretending that they’re artists is just the height of sophistry.<sup>31</sup>

Later, in December 1953, she also criticised organisers of the Asia regional meeting of the International Labour Organisation held in Japan for offering foreign male delegates women from the geisha system during the conference.<sup>32</sup> A letter to the editor of the *Yomiuri* joined her in this criticism, stating that the geisha system was nothing but ‘a symbol of Japan’s cultural, moral, and economic impoverishment’. The writer continued that, ‘regardless of the outer appearance of the geisha, the real geisha system is nothing but prostitution’.<sup>33</sup> Much later, in 1958, Japan Socialist Party founder Fujiwara Michiko criticised the role the geisha system was playing in normalising the prostitution behaviour of men in Japanese society. She said that Japanese men travelling abroad would inevitably ‘step over the line’ with women whenever they’d ‘had a bit to drink and were socialising with women as they would geisha’.<sup>34</sup>

### BECOMING GEISHA IN THE 1950s

Given the level of social acceptance it enjoyed, it was ironic that actually a spate of incidents involving the trafficking of girls into the geisha system finally forced the passing of Japan’s Prostitution Prevention

Law on 21 May 1956. Female MPs had sponsored versions of this law five times before this, only to face opposition from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.<sup>35</sup> The notoriety of two particular geisha house trafficking incidents (one in Kagoshima and one in Oota ward, Tokyo) finally rendered opposition to anti-prostitution initiatives unviable, and the women were able to get the government to cede to a compromise law that (weakly) curbed the activities of the sex industry.<sup>36</sup> The geisha system, however, was left out of the law. This section looks at why the system was left out of the law, and how this bolstered Japan's sex industry in the 1950s.

By 1953, there were clear signs in Japan that the government was going to clamp down on the activities of the sex industry.<sup>37</sup> As the most identifiable part of the sex industry, legal brothel owners had scrambled since the early 1950s to protect their commercial operations by reinventing themselves as geisha purveyors. They predicted that the geisha system would evade attention in forthcoming legislation. Brothel owners didn't necessarily arrive at this decision on an individual basis. One brothel owner interviewed in 1956 said that his local area brothel union had decided to thereafter act as a geisha registry (*kenban*) office, and was going to turn his business into a geisha house (*okiya*). It had been decided that the rest of the brothel businesses in the area would become geisha restaurants (*ryoutei*), which would allow the whole area to operate as a geisha district.<sup>38</sup>

In 1954, Kanzaki complained that Japan's sex industry was being 'geisha-ised'. By this he meant that sex industry businesses (which he called *baishun kigyō*) operating under the 'geisha' name were proliferating in Japan. Fuelling this trend were entrepreneurs who were converting their legal brothels into geisha establishments. They apparently weren't finding this a difficult task. All they had to do was make the women in their service comply with Japan's amended 22 March 1954 'entertainment industry regulations' (*fuuzoku eigyō torishimari hō*). These regulations newly specified that women in the geisha system must 'primarily host guests by entertaining them with Japanese-style Broadway songs'.<sup>39</sup> One such brothel owner boasted to a Japanese daily newspaper in 1956 of his plan to convert his premises into a geisha house (i.e. an *okiya* where women in the geisha system lived under the control of a 'manager') and register the women in it as 'geisha'. He was then going to make business links with local hotels where he could dispatch the women in the style of the 'American call

girl system'.<sup>40</sup> Another brothel owner, Fukuda Toshiko, admitted to having already converted her venue into a 'geisha restaurant' (i.e. a *ryoutei* or 'room salon' where men intermingled with geisha women and/or prostituted them).<sup>41</sup>

A May 1956 editorial in the *Yomiuri* newspaper criticised such brothels owners who were 'hiring out apartments and putting up women posing as "geisha" who pour alcoholic drinks'.<sup>42</sup> A nationwide survey in 1957 confirmed that the majority of women formerly in legal brothels had been moved into the geisha system.<sup>43</sup> The 'geisha-isation' of the Japanese sex industry in the 1950s is also evidenced by the fact that a majority of legal brothels had been converted into Japanese-style inns (*ryōkan*), which was the main venue that hosted geisha prostitution in Japan in the 1950s.<sup>44</sup> The geisha model was a desirable option for legal brothel owners wanting to change their businesses into a more inconspicuous form because of the escort prostitution arrangements of the geisha system, which were less detectable than the brothel arrangements of other parts of Japan's sex industry.

According to novelist Hirabayashi Taiko, writing in the *Yomiuri* in 1957, brothel owners assumed that because the geisha system catered to elite men, elite male politicians wouldn't include the system in their drafting of a law curbing the activities of the sex industry.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, in July 1958, Japan Socialist Party MP Kamichika Ichiko noted in the Diet that male parliamentarians were staunchly against the idea of intervening in the geisha businesses of *machiai/ryoutei*, and that unfortunately 'these men make up the majority of the house'.<sup>46</sup>

The close connection between male ruling cabinet members and the geisha system was exposed by Nihon Shakaitō (Japan Socialist Party) founder and prostitution prevention special committee member Fujiwara Michiko in May 1956, when she tabled in the parliament an article from the *Nihon kankō* [Japan tourism] newspaper that listed the names of male Liberal Democratic Party members either owning or investing in geisha restaurants. This list included Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichirō. She criticised the ruling government over the information, saying:

the very cabinet that is trying to introduce a law to outlaw trafficking is [at the same time] either managing or investing in a system that promotes debt bondage restricting people's

freedom, forces the majority [of its women] to prostitute themselves, and preys on weak female members of society.<sup>47</sup>

Another Japan Socialist Party member, Takada Naoko, went further in May 1956, calling the ruling Liberal Democratic Party the ‘red light district party’ (*akasentou*) for the fact that so many sex industry businessmen had signed up to the party during the years when anti-prostitution measures were being debated.<sup>48</sup>

### FORESEEING GEISHA-ISATION

As early as 1951, Kanzaki warned against overlooking the geisha system in abolitionist campaigning against Japan’s sex industry. As head of the Tokyo government city child welfare committee, he noted that: ‘different to the brothels in the licensed [legalised prostitution] districts, the geisha districts, which are safely hidden behind treated pine walls and *mikoshi* pines, haven’t yet attracted scrutiny.’<sup>49</sup> Kanzaki believed that the respectable veneer of the geisha system disguised prostitution practices that were ‘even more feudal than those of Japan’s legalised prostitution districts.’<sup>50</sup> He emphasised the fact that ‘in the geisha districts, there [was] human trafficking, forced prostitution, and heinous exploitation.’<sup>51</sup> Kanzaki was further concerned that the ‘respectability’ of the geisha system served to protect the rest of Japan’s sex industry because, ‘in terms of retaining practices necessary for a revival of the feudal style of [legalised] prostitution in Japan’, it was the ‘geisha districts, more than anything’ that posed a risk to society because of their widespread acceptance.<sup>52</sup> Socialist Party member Yamashita Yoshinobu, speaking to parliament in 1955, was similarly worried about the licence the respectability of the geisha system gave the rest of Japan’s sex industry to continue its activities. He argued for the banning of the geisha system under the provisions of the anti-prostitution law, on the basis that ‘the geisha system [*geisha seido*] forms a “model” for prostitution’ whereby ‘every-one looks to the model and copies it’.<sup>53</sup>

In Kanzaki’s final piece on the geisha system in June 1955, he wrote in the *Yomiuri* of his concern that lawmakers would abolish Japan’s sex industry only in part, tackling only its most overt activities. He worried that the anti-prostitution law would curb street prostitution while leaving the geisha system untouched. He said that ‘harsh

police attitudes toward *panpan* street prostitution are contrasted with soft attitudes toward the hostess bar sector, and an even softer stance on geisha.’<sup>54</sup> Kanzaki wrote presciently that this approach would ‘turn the [upcoming anti-prostitution] law into a law that actually protects the prostitution business.’<sup>55</sup>

### THE SUCCESS OF GEISHA-ISATION

Kanzaki was right. The geisha system came under the ambit of the entertainment industry regulations of March 1954. These regulations governed *non-sex industry alcohol venues*. The geisha system was included in these regulations despite a newspaper in March 1954 reporting that the geisha system needed to be brought under legal regulation because, ‘in the past, there has been trafficking into the [geisha] system that hasn’t been properly dealt with.’<sup>56</sup> Before 1954, the geisha system had essentially operated in a decriminalised environment. Even after 1954, however, the decision to define the geisha system in law as a non-sex industry alcohol business awarded it a badge of respectability at a time when it was under real scrutiny. Crucially, the decision gave tangible form to the long cultivated historical idea that geisha wasn’t a system of prostitution. In other words, the geisha system was saved from inclusion in any upcoming legislation criminalising the activities of the Japanese sex industry through its inclusion in the entertainment industry regulations as merely an alcohol related business.

Geisha-isation was a strategy that paid off for Japan’s sex industry in the 1950s. The Prostitution Prevention Law was passed in May 1956, but criminalised only the most public activities of the sex industry. It targeted legal brothels and street prostitution, while the entertainment industry regulations protected the rest of the bulk of the sex industry’s trading of women. This was carried out through the geisha system, ‘food and alcohol’ establishments (*inshokuten*), and ‘cafés’. No mention was made of the geisha system in the Prostitution Prevention Law’s provisions. As a result, as Kamichika noted in parliament in July 1958, the law effectively allowed prostitution to continue in Japan with impunity. She protested that: ‘while the law might tackle “red light” and “semi-red light” districts, it [didn’t] address the geisha districts where prostitution was being carried out.’<sup>57</sup>

Socialist MP Takada Naoko, too, thought the Prostitution Prevention Law tacitly permitted the continued operation of the sex industry in Japan. Her criticism centred on the entertainment industry regulations. These regulations approved *'machiai*, "food and alcohol" establishments (*inshokuten*), cafes, and other venues *providing staff for other types of hosting of customers*' (my emphasis). Speaking to parliament, Takada asked who 'staff providing other types of hosting of customers' could possibly be if they weren't waiters and bartenders. In other words, she saw the entertainment industry law as tacitly permitting prostitution to continue in Japan under the guise of 'hosting'.<sup>58</sup> The inclusion of the term 'hosting' in the law meant that both 'food and alcohol' venues, as well as geisha establishments, could continue to offer women to male patrons, even as they were legally defined as alcohol venues. They need merely provide women as 'hostesses'—rather than as 'prostitutes'—in order to successfully evade the criminal sanctions of the Prostitution Prevention Law. As a result, the Japanese sex industry was able to continue its activities even after 1956 by cloaking its prostitution of women in the 'hosting' rhetoric of the entertainment industry regulations.

Effectively, the type of prostitution legally permitted in Japan after 1956 was the geisha model of prostitution. That is, prostitution carried out under the guise of women hosting food and alcohol related events for groups of men. While the 'hostess bar' sector was certainly a well-developed part of Japan's sex industry before 1956, it wasn't necessarily socially approved of. The geisha system, on the other hand, over its one hundred year history had fostered social acceptance of a 'hostess' role for women in Japanese society. This role was eventually endorsed in law as a form of 'traditional arts'. The geisha system had garnered enough social status that, once anti-prostitution measures came to be considered in Japanese society, its 'respectability' distinguished it from the rest of the sex industry. The incorporation of traditional music and dance in women's 'hosting' of men in the geisha system gave 'hostessing' an air of legitimacy, which diverted attention from the prostitution and trafficking of women that the hostess role had facilitated throughout modern Japanese history.

Once this geisha or 'hostess' model was fixed in law, it was available to the rest of Japan's sex industry to use. The geisha system, as its 'alternative' model of prostitution, was therefore the saviour of Japan's sex industry in the 1950s. In the face of the Prostitution Prevention

Law in the early 1950s, Japan's sex industry had needed to distance itself from its former brothel model of operation. By adopting the 'hostessing' model of the geisha system, the sex industry was able to continue its activities into Japan's profitable years of high speed growth in the 1960s.<sup>59</sup>

## THE GEISHA STANDARD

The protection the geisha system afforded Japan's sex industry in its uncertain days of the 1950s can be understood in theoretical terms through a concept devised by US feminist Catharine MacKinnon in 1987. This concept, which MacKinnon calls the '*Playboy* standard', describes the protection that the 'respectability' of *Playboy* magazine affords all pornography against attempts to curb its production and distribution.<sup>60</sup> While MacKinnon developed the idea of the '*Playboy* standard' through a discussion of pornography and *Playboy* magazine, the concept can be used to illuminate the role the geisha system played in shielding Japan's sex industry in the 1950s from government attempts to curb its activities. The next few paragraphs recall MacKinnon's discussion, and apply her idea of the '*Playboy* standard' to the hitherto discussed 1950's history of Japan's sex industry.

MacKinnon theorised that the respectability of *Playboy* magazine gave it authority over all pornography. She wrote that widespread social acceptance of *Playboy* as the world's most 'respectable' form of pornography established the magazine as a standard bearer for pornography. That this meant that things done to women in pornography were judged according to 'the standard *Playboy* sets, rather than measuring *Playboy* by some other standard of how women should be treated'.<sup>61</sup> In other words, *Playboy* placed the issue of whether women should actually be turned into pornography beyond question. She observed that *Playboy* magazine had garnered social respectability through printing 'respectable' literary articles alongside its pornographic pictures of women. *Playboy's* articles 'serve to legitimize what their pictures do to women... [and] [a]t the same time the articles help make it seem legitimate to treat women the way *Playboy* does, because the articles are so legitimate'.<sup>62</sup> The articles encourage social acceptance of *Playboy*, in other words, which makes its treatment of women an effectively socially agreed upon 'minimum standard' for all women in pornography.

MacKinnon observed that *Playboy's* good social standing protected not just its own commercial operations, but also those of the pornography industry as a whole. She saw *Playboy's* treatment of women as making the subhuman treatment of women in all forms of pornography respectable. MacKinnon wrote that *Playboy* protects all pornography from attempts to curb its production and distribution because 'anything that might hurt *Playboy*, meaning anything real addressing pornography, can't be done... since nothing can be done about pornography that wouldn't also hurt *Playboy*, nothing can be done about pornography.' In other words, attempts to stop pornography being made out of women are suppressed on the grounds they interfere with the 'legitimate' commercial operations of 'respectable' outfits such as *Playboy*. MacKinnon coined the phrase the '*Playboy* standard' to describe this catch-22 situation confronting anti-pornography feminists.

The geisha system operated in a similar way to *Playboy* in protecting Japan's sex industry from government attempts to curb its activities in the 1950s. Just as *Playboy* established a minimum acceptable standard of treatment of women in pornography, the geisha system established a legally acceptable model of prostitution in Japan. This model, which was legally enshrined in Japan's 1954 entertainment industry regulations, consisted of women 'hosting' men's group-based alcohol fuelled gatherings. The geisha system gave historical and cultural legitimacy to this prostitution role for women, which was romanticised through an association with the arts and elite Japanese men. The respectability of the geisha system allowed this model to emerge as a minimum standard of treatment of women in prostitution in Japan in the 1950s. In other words, the 'hostess' model was believed to be something different from, or something better than, prostitution. As with the *Playboy* standard, as a result, nothing could thereafter be done about Japan's sex industry that wouldn't also hurt the geisha system (or 'hostess' bars). Because a 'hostessing' role for women in Japan had already been made socially acceptable by the geisha system over its lengthy history, as long as the organisation of women for prostitution was carried out under the respectable mantle of 'hostessing' from the 1950s, nothing could be done about it.

In 1958, for example, in response to news that 'the Tokyo Metropolitan Youth Problems Council... [had] recommended an 11 P.M. closing time for all bars, cafes, night clubs, restaurants, and [geisha]

tearooms [to curb prostitution],' a *Japan Times* newspaper editor in September 1958 insisted that '[w]e are opposed to this on the grounds that it punishes legitimate business along with the illegitimate. And it punishes a large segment of the public as well.'<sup>63</sup> This statement indicates that a 'geisha standard' operated in the 1950s to protect the Japanese sex industry against government intervention on the basis that 'legitimate' hostessing venues (e.g. bars, geisha restaurants, and cafes) would be unduly affected by any measures tackling prostitution. As MacKinnon points out, the catch-22 of this situation is that any measures substantially addressing the problem of prostitution will invariably affect the business of 'legitimate' hostess bars, and therefore little can be done about the sex industry as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

We might say that the Prostitution Prevention Law's forgetting of the geisha system is one of its biggest loopholes.<sup>64</sup>

Japan's 1956 Prostitution Prevention Law made little dent in the activities of the sex industry in the country. This came as no surprise to commentators inside and outside of Japan's parliament, who had predicted the law's neglect of the geisha system would leave a window open to the sex industry to continue its activities. The geisha system established a historically and socially legitimate prostitution model that the sex industry could use in lieu of the brothel model. The geisha system had historically cultivated a 'hostess' model of prostitution, which had facilitated the prostitution of women and girls in Japan for over one hundred years. 'Hostessing' was a role for women originally developed within Japan's sex industry. Nonetheless, the legitimacy of the geisha system allowed this role to be eventually enshrined in law. Women 'hosting' men's alcohol fuelled gatherings thereby came to be seen as something other than a prostitution model. When Japan's sex industry in the 1950s faced opposition, therefore, it was able to cast off its former model of brothel prostitution in favour of the more socially acceptable hostess model. In other words, the sex industry continued its business of trading women for prostitution, but after 1956 this increasingly took place in 'geisha-ised' environments. Japan's sex industry was able to continue its activities into the boom decades

of the 1960s and 1970s thanks to the geisha or 'hostess' model of prostitution.

The operation of a protective 'Playboy standard' in Japan in the 1950s allowed Japan's sex industry to grow in the lucrative decades thereafter. This left women and girls in Japan, and abroad, increasingly vulnerable an expanding domestic sex industry that was desperately trying to procure the 'commodity' it needed to trade. In the 1960s and 70s, Japanese and Korean women and girls were brought into the industry.<sup>65</sup> Women from the Philippines and Thailand joined them in the 1980s.<sup>66</sup> Today, Chinese and Korean women are increasingly objects of trade within the Japanese sex industry.<sup>67</sup>

For feminist and other abolitionists seeking to dismantle the global sex industry and its prostitution and trafficking of women and girls, therefore, there is a lesson to be learnt from 1950's Japanese history. In the absence of clear abolitionist strategies and analysis targeting 'marginal' forms of prostitution, the sex industry will use these 'marginal' forms to reinvent its business in times of public scrutiny. As long as models of prostitution exist that are thought to be 'better' or 'less harmful' for women, the sex industry will be able to renew its public image whenever it comes under pressure. As was the case in Japan in the 1950s, it will simply make its activities fit these 'better' models in order to placate critics. It is important, therefore, that abolitionists include even 'glamorous' models of prostitution in their academic and activist work against the sex industry. Some of these models, such as stripping, have gone largely unchallenged by abolitionists in the West,<sup>68</sup> and the euphemised *enjo kousai* ('compensated dating' or prostitution targeting teenage girls) has even been defended by feminists in Japan, such as Ueno Chizuko.<sup>69</sup> This paper has drawn on history to demonstrate the folly of creating such a hierarchy in the ways that men prostitute women and girls. Such a hierarchy will only aid the global sex industry as it comes under increasing public pressure for the atrocities it is currently committing against the world's women and girls. ❖

## ENDNOTES

- 1 This was obviously not the only reason the sex industry continued to grow in Japan after 1956. The main problem with the law was that it failed to properly see prostitution buyers (johns) and sellers (pimps, traffickers) as criminals, and prostituted people as victims. The current law in Sweden, in contrast, is an example of a law that effectively tackles prostitution. See Gunilla Ekberg, 'The Swedish law that prohibits the purchase of sexual services', *Violence Against Women*, vol. 10, no. 10, 2004. In this paper I do not draw any distinction between the 'real' geisha system and so-called 'pillow' or 'hot springs' forms of the system. The reason for this is outlined in Caroline Norma, 'The ancient art of man hiding: a past rewritten for Japan's geisha system', *Critical Asian Studies* (forthcoming).
- 2 Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 1987, 138.
- 3 See also Kanzaki Kiyoshi, *Baishun: ketteiban Kanzaki repouto*, Gendaishi Shuppankai, Tokyo, 1974; Kanzaki Kiyoshi, *Sengo Nihon no baishun mondai*, Shakai Shobou, Tokyo, 1954.
- 4 Two other rare exceptions are Masutomi Seisuke, 'Gotaiten to geigi mondai,' *Kakusei*, October 1915; Okazaki Ayanori, 'Geigi no baishun,' [Prostitution of geisha] *Horitsu no Hiroba*, vol. 17, no. 6, 1964, 53–54.
- 5 Kelly Foreman, 'Bad girls confined: okuni, geisha, and the negotiation of female performance space', in Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, *Bad Girls of Japan*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, 34.
- 6 For example, A C Scott, *The Flower and Willow World: A Study of the Geisha*, London and Melbourne, Heinemann, 1959; Lesley Downer, 'The city geisha and their role in modern Japan: anomaly or artiste?' in Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (eds), *The Courtesans Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006.
- 7 Kanzaki Kiyoshi, 'Shoujo geisha no jinshin baibai' [Trafficking of young female geisha], *Heiwa*, vol. 1, 1955, 81.
- 8 I argue in 'The ancient art of man hiding: a past rewritten for Japan's geisha system,' *Critical Asian Studies* (forthcoming) that the geisha system originally developed as a system of prostitution, and its status as an institution of the arts has merely served to conceal its role in the trafficking women and girls for prostitution by largely elite men in Japan.
- 9 Kanzaki Kiyoshi, 'Shoujo geisha no jinshin baibai,' [Trafficking of young female geisha] *Heiwa*, vol. 1, 1955, 78.
- 10 Kanzaki, 'Shuoujo', 81.
- 11 'Mada aru jinshin baibai no higeki,' [The ongoing tragedy of trafficking] *Yomiuri shinbun*, 5.
- 12 See Lesley Downer, *Women of the Pleasure Quarters: The Secret History of the Geisha*, Broadway Books, New York, 2001, 70–76; Kanzaki Kiyoshi, 'Geisha in urareta musume,' [Daughter sold as a geisha] *Mainichi Jouhou*, vol. 6, no. 7, 1951, 83.
- 13 A C Scott, 196. One of the earliest accounts of the geisha system written in English is contained in J E De Becker, *The Nightless City: or, The History of the Yoshiwara Yukwaku*, M. Nössler, Yokohama, 1905.
- 14 See Lesley Downer, *Geisha: The Remarkable Truth Behind the Fiction*, Headline, London, 2002, 265.
- 15 See comments by Fujiwara Michiko, 20th meeting of the Diet upper house legal affairs committee, 17 May 1956 on the average age girls were first

- prostituted in the geisha system. All Diet transcripts cited have been taken from the online National Diet Library archive at <http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp>
- 16 Kanzaki, 'Shuujo', 80.
  - 17 The most well-known example in English is Liza Carihfield Dalby, *Geisha*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983.
  - 18 Kanzaki Kiyoshi, 'Geisha', *Chuo Koron*, vol. 69, vol. 7, 115–123.
  - 19 'Reigaichi Hokkaido no jinshin baibai mondai', [The problem of human trafficking in the cold land of Hokkaido] *Shakai jigyou*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1957, 53.
  - 20 See comments by Fujiwara Michiko at 9th society and labour committee meeting, Diet upper house, 23 May 1955. See also Yamakawa Kikue, 'Boshi kifukin ga yuukou ni tsukaeru you ni', *Yomiuri shinbun*, 30 December 1953, 5.
  - 21 See Kanzaki, 'Geisha', 114 and 'Geisha to okiya: saikin no futatsu no hanrei kara,' [Geisha and geisha houses: two recent legal decisions] *Toki no hourai*, vol. 151, no. 3, 1954, 30–36. From this time, geisha houses (*okiya*) were no longer recognised in Japanese law.
  - 22 'Geisha no touroku seido nado kafee to kyabaree o meikakuka', [Will registering geisha and the like make cafes and cabarets more identifiable?] *Yomiuri shinbun*, 31 March 1954, 6.
  - 23 Fujime Yuki's description of the structure of Japan's sex industry in the post war in 'The prostitutes' union and the impact of the 1956 anti-prostitution law in Japan', *US-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 5, 1993, 8 (and repeated in Vera Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan: Citizenship, Embodiment and Sexuality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, 137) is partially incorrect. The description pertains to the years 1954–56, after the amendment of the Entertainment Industry Regulations, and before the enactment of the Prostitution Prevention Law when the geisha system was regulated as a 'food and alcohol' establishment. Before 1954, the geisha system was not regulated together with those sex industry businesses operating with 'food sanitation' permits.
  - 24 The words *akasen* and *aosen* mean literally 'red line' and 'blue line', but their translation is best rendered 'red light' and 'semi-red light' districts.
  - 25 Yoshida Manji, 5th budgets committee meeting, Diet upper house, 13 December 1955.
  - 26 This figure was said to be 60,000 by Ikeda speaking at the 22nd culture and education committee meeting, Diet lower house, 4 July 1955.
  - 27 Yoshida Manji.
  - 28 Tsuduki Michio, *Sakunichi no Tsuduki desu*, Shinchou bunko, Tokyo, 1987, 112–114.
  - 29 Yoshida Manji.
  - 30 Before the Meiji renovation in 1868, the Japanese feudal government recognised prostitution in the geisha system through a policy that allowed women in the geisha system to officially register as 'prostitutes', in addition to registering as 'geisha'. This system did not survive into the modern period.
  - 31 Yamakawa Kikue, 'Boukokuchou senden', *Yomiuri shinbun*, 20 June 1953, 5. See Mackie 81–84 for a discussion of Yamakawa's feminist work excluding her abolitionist activities. See Ueno Chizuko, *Nationalism and Gender*, Trans Pacific Press, Melbourne, 2004 for a brief discussion of Yamakawa's anti-prostitution stance.
  - 32 Yamakawa Kikue, '1953 no fujinkai o kaerimite', [Reviewing the 1953 women's committee] *Yomiuri shinbun*, 30 December 1953, 5.

- 33 Ishino Chiyo, letter to the editor, 'Josei no koe', [Women's voice] *Yomiuri shinbun*, 21 September 1953, 5.
- 34 Fujiwara Michiko, 17th legal affairs committee meeting, Diet upper house, 17 March 1958.
- 35 Baishun taisaku shingikai, *Baishun taisaku no genkyou*, Tokyo, 1968, 13.
- 36 For the Matsumoto incident, see Kanzaki, 'Shoujo geisha no jinshin baibai', 79 and the 1968 edition of *Baishun taisaku genkyou*. For the Oota incident see Fujiwara Michiko, 13th full session meeting, Diet upper house, 13 May 1955.
- 37 Yamakawa Kikue, in 'Boshi kifukin ga yuukou ni tsukaeru you ni', [How we can use charity monies effectively] *Yomiuri shinbun*, 30 December 1953, 5, wrote that a cabinet committee looking at tackling prostitution related problems was established on 18 December 1953. Whether to include the geisha system in the criminalising law was still up for debate in 1955, as indicated by the June 1955 survey of the geisha system by the Prostitution Prevention Special Committee. See 'Geisha no jitai chousa', [Survey of the current geisha system] *Yomiuri shinbun*, 10 June 1955, 3.
- 38 'Baishun hou kyou setsuritsu e', [The prostitution law to be enacted today] *Yomiuri shinbun*, 21 May 1956, 7.
- 39 Kanzaki, 'Geisha', 112.
- 40 'Baishun hou kyou setsuritsu e', *Yomiuri shinbun*, 21 May 1956, 7. The suggestion that hot springs resorts were used for prostitution was confirmed in the Diet by MP Okawa Mitsuzou who said that eighty percent of geisha prostitution in Kyoto was carried out at *ryokan*. See 2nd legal affairs committee closed meeting, Diet upper house, 19 December 1957.
- 41 'Baishun boushi hou ga dekite Yoshiwara no onna tachi ha doko e itta no darou', *Bungei shunju*, vol. 67, no. 2, 1989, 138.
- 42 'Henshuu techou', *Yomiuri shinbun*, 22 May 1956, 1.
- 43 See Aoyama Seiichi, 2nd legal affairs closed meeting, 19 December 1957, and consultant Kato Takeji speaking at the 2nd legal affairs committee closed meeting, Diet upper house, 7 June 1958.
- 44 Tanahashi Kotora and Okawa Mitsuzou at 1st and 2nd legal affairs committee closed meeting, Diet upper house, 19 December 1957 testified that the majority of legal brothels had converted into *ryokan*. As noted, the majority of geisha prostitution (eighty percent) took place in *ryokan* around this time.
- 45 Hirabayashi Taiko, 'Baishun gyousha no tengyou', [Industry transition for prostitution businesses] *Yomiuri shinbun*, 7 August 1957, 1. In this article, Hirabayashi is sharply critical of the strategies the sex industry was using to undermine the Prostitution Prevention Law.
- 46 Kamichika Ichiko, 5th legal affairs committee meeting, Diet lower house, 1 July 1958.
- 47 Fujiwara Michiko, 51st full session meeting, Diet upper house, 21 May 1956.
- 48 Takada Naoko, 45th full session meeting, Diet upper house, 9 May 1956.
- 49 Kanzaki, 'Geisha ni urareta musume', 81.
- 50 Kanzaki, 'Geisha ni urareta musume', 81.
- 51 Kanzaki, 'Geisha ni urareta musume', 81.
- 52 Kanzaki, 'Geisha ni urareta musume', 81.
- 53 Yamashita Yoshinobu, 29th legal affairs committee meeting, Diet upper house, 21 June 1955.

- 54 Kanzaki, 'Geisha ni urareta musume', 87.
- 55 Kanzaki Kiyoshi, 'Seiritsu sasetai baishun houan', [I want to see the enactment of the Prostitution Prevention Law] *Yomiuri shinbun*, 17 June 1955, 5.
- 56 'Fuuzoku eigyou torishimari,' [Regulating entertainment industry businesses] *Yomiuri shinbun*, 31 March 1954, 6.
- 57 Kamachika Ichiko, 5th legal affairs committee meeting, Diet lower house, 1 July 1958.
- 58 Takada Naoko, 45th full session meeting, Diet upper house, 9 May 1956.
- 59 See Takahashi Kikue, *Baibaishun mondai ni torikumu: seisakushu to Nihon shakai*, Akashi Shoten, Tokyo, 2004.
- 60 MacKinnon, 138.
- 61 MacKinnon, 138.
- 62 MacKinnon, 138.
- 63 Japan Times, 20 September 1958, quoted in AC Scott, 193.
- 64 Editorial, 'Baishun boushi wa konki yoku', 13 July 1959, *Yomiuri shinbun*, 9.
- 65 See Takahashi, *Baibaishun mondai ni torikumu* for information on Japan's sex industry in the 1960s and '70s.
- 66 See Yamatani Tetsuo, *Japayukisan*, Iwanami shoten, Tokyo, 2005 for the situation in the 1980s.
- 67 See newspaper reports listed on the anti-trafficking organisation Polaris Project website for the current extent of involvement of Chinese women in Japan's sex industry at <http://www.polarisproject.jp/news-feeds>, accessed 31 August 2008.
- 68 Notable exceptions are Kellie Holsopple, 'Strip club testimony and study', The Freedom and Justice Center for Prostitution Resources at [www.ccv.org/downloads/pdf/Strip\\_club\\_study.pdf](http://www.ccv.org/downloads/pdf/Strip_club_study.pdf), accessed 30 August 2008; Andrea Dworkin, 'Why women must get out of men's laps' at <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/lapdancing.html>, accessed 30 August 2008; Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade*, Routledge, New York, 2008.
- 69 Quoted in David Leheny, *Think Global, Fear Local: Sex, Violence and Anxiety in Contemporary Japan*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2006.