

THE GEISHA WORLD



In Japan, the occupation of geisha has a long and honorable history. Geisha—high-class, well-educated hostess-courtesans—entertained wealthy, sophisticated, and powerful Japanese men who desired cultured and brilliant conversation and elegant entertainment in an atmosphere of decadent refinement. The geisha profession has lasted so long in Japanese society because it has provided more than just sex—it was an admired art form. In 1956, when the government abolished legal prostitution in Japan, those cultivated ladies, the geisha, were exempted from the law, implying that they should be viewed as exotic entertainers preserving the traditional arts, not as prostitutes.

The geisha tradition goes back to the Edo period (1615–1868) and the world of the Kabuki theater and the pleasure quarters (or “floating world”), separated from the rest of the city by walls, found in the major cities of Edo (Tokyo), Osaka, and Kyoto. By 1779, the government licensed the pleasure quarters and issued a code of professional conduct with disciplinary rules and regulations. The Kabuki theater provided entertainment for the townspeople, and many teahouses were set up nearby for food and drink. The actors and theatergoers who frequented the teahouses, as well as patrons of the brothels within the pleasure quarters, often enlivened their parties by requesting the services of independent performers who could sing, dance, and play music. These performers came to be called *geisha* in the seventeenth century. The word is made up of two characters: *gei*, meaning “art” or “accomplished,” and *sha*, “person”—so *geisha* can be translated as “accomplished person” or “person who lives by the arts.”

The earliest geisha were male entertainers, jesters, and musicians, but by about 1780, female geisha outnumbered male geisha and soon came to totally dominate the trade. Some of the younger courtesans in the pleasure quarters turned to the role of entertainer. As professional entertainers and hostesses, geisha became an important part of traditional social life for

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