

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 19: The Geisha and Japanese Women: Western Stereotypes

Reading and Viewing: Libretto and film version, Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, 1995, Mitterand and Scorsese, as the lead work for a humanities unit.

Suggested readings:

Women in Japan, 1987 Bingham and Gross chapter 5 "Japanese Women in the Tokugawa Period," "The Geisha," p. 109-117.

Geisha, 1983, Lisa Dalby, Preface, "Geisha and Anthropology," p.xiii-xvii

The Modern Madame Butterfly, 1996, Karen Ma Chapter 1, "Myth of the Modern Madame Butterfly," p. 17-23.

Romance and the "Yellow Peril," 1993, Marchetti Chapter 5, "The Scream of the Butterfly," p. 78-81, 85-89. Chapter 7, "Tragic and Transcendent Love" (Sayonara) p. 125-143. Chapter 9, "The Return of the Butterfly" (My Geisha and An American Geisha) p. 176-187, optional p. 187-201.

The Japanese Through American Eyes, 1988, Johnson Chapter 5, "The Sexual Nexus" p. 73.

Suggested Viewing: The extended unit can examine the legacy of Butterfly in other American films and America's fascination with the geisha. For more realistic images of the geisha, a few Japanese films are suggested:

American films

Sayonara, 1957 Joshua Logan, based on the Michener novel, deals with intercultural and interracial love in postwar Japan. Two American servicemen, an officer (Marlon Brando) and an enlisted man (Red Buttons), both love Japanese women and must battle against military regulations and racial intolerance for that love. (available from Facets.org)

My Geisha, 1962, Jack Cardiff, is a comedy in which a popular Hollywood actress (Shirley MacLaine) fools her husband movie director into believing she is a true geisha and perfect for the lead role in his film version of *Madame Butterfly*. (available from Facets.org)

An American Geisha 1986, Lee Philips, a made for television film is based on Lisa Dalby's *Geisha* an anthropological study of the geisha. To write the doctoral dissertation, the author spent a year as a geisha in Kyoto. The film version fictionalizes and romanticizes the true story. But it is an entertaining and useful film for teaching young students about the geisha world.

The Story of Noriko, 1987, a 27-minute video in the first *Faces of Japan* series. While

not about the world or lives of the geisha, it does present an image of the modern young Japanese woman trying to break away from traditional roles and expectations.

Japanese films

Snow Country, 1957, Toyoda, based on the Kawabata novel, deals with the love and disillusionment of a young geisha in the "Snow Country" of a prewar Japan. Note unit 10.

A Geisha (Gion Bayashi) 1953 or *Sisters of Gion (Gion no Shimai)* 1936 both by Mizoguchi whose sister was a geisha and supported him as he was struggling to become a film director. Both the prewar and postwar films offer realistic, sympathetic portraits of the life of the geisha. In the 1936 film two sisters work as geisha, the elder as an accepting traditionalist, the younger as a modern cynic and opportunist. In the 1953 remake, the elder sacrifices herself submitting to the demands of a patron while urging the younger not to do likewise.

Suggested grades: 9-12 and college, intercultural and interdisciplinary studies

Themes:

Depending on the length and depth of the unit - *Madame Butterfly*, *Cho Cho San*, the Western perception of Japanese women: in one view as the ideal woman and wife, and a tragic heroine; in another view as the victim of the male establishment and symbolically a victim of Western racist imperialism.

The geisha, as represented in other American and Japanese films, emerges in various images: as the essence of traditional Japanese femininity, as the trained cultural artist and entertainer, as the complement to the traditional Japanese wife, as an elegant prostitute, and as a slave or victim of the male-dominated society.

The story:

The "Madame Butterfly" story and myth lies at the heart of Western perceptions of Japanese women as passive, selfless, and dedicated completely to their husbands and families. The original story, written by an American in 1898 and made into a play in 1900, was transformed into operatic form by Giacomo Puccini in 1904. Since then, the continued world-wide success of the opera has elevated the story of the teenage, tragic heroine into a cultural archetype and stereotype, an icon and myth of the Japanese woman as the ideal of loving self-sacrificing, devoted wife to a Western husband.

The story has been told in many variations in Western novels, plays and films. The beautiful young Japanese woman, formerly of a wealthy and cultured family, has been forced by the sudden poverty of her family to work as a geisha. She is rescued by the dashing, romantic American officer who marries her (or promises to) sets her up in a home, and then leaves not knowing she is pregnant. The woman bears the child and waits faithfully for his return. Some years later, upon learning of the child, the husband, now married to an American woman, returns to claim the child. For the good of the child, the Japanese woman gives it up to the husband and then commits suicide.

Teaching:

If not a classic tragedy, it is a deeply moving tragedy of the heart. In a summer program for students grades 9-12 studying Japanese language and culture, I showed an 18-minute selection of scenes. The students were from mixed academic and socio-economic backgrounds. I was surprised, at the end of the showing, to notice that some of the girls were crying. Most of the students evaluated the film-opera experience as good to excellent.

The first goal should be to bring the students to some expectation and appreciation of the film-opera. This is not an easy task. However, the film's stunning cinematography with many close-ups of the 1900 Japanese setting and the young lovers, the opera's now immortal music, the arias actually sung by the beautiful diva, Ying Huang, and her

duets with handsome Richard Troxell; and the love story with betrayal as the theme, should win over most students.

The teacher's role should be not to extol the virtues of opera as a higher cultural art but rather to establish personal connections between the story and the students' interests and concerns. Introductory discussions can consider historic encounters and relationships between American servicemen and Asian women (Vietnam, Korea, the Pacific War and occupation of Japan) as a lead into the background information on the 19th-century story which is the source for *Madame Butterfly* (*The Japanese Through American Eyes*, Johnson, Chapter 4). Other possibilities include discussions of the issues of intercultural and interracial perceptions and love relationships.

The move into the film/opera can be made with selected scenes followed by discussion. Although the film is subtitled, the use of the libretto can help in closer examination of the dialogue. At this writing I have used the full two-hour film opera only with adult education classes. With high school students I have shown only excerpts and an edited version. The following general outline may serve as a guide to selecting scenes:

1. Minutes 15-25, the arrival of Butterfly and the wedding party (10 minutes) and 25-52, the marriage and love scenes, Butterfly and Pinkerton (27 minutes);
2. Minutes 58-65, Butterfly's waiting for his return, "One fine day" aria (7 minutes) and 105-129, Pinkerton's return for the child, Butterfly's suicide (24 minutes).

Later discussions can consider the students' feelings about Butterfly and Pinkerton, whether or not they can sympathize with both characters. However, the goal is to examine both as stereotypes of the Japanese woman and the American naval officer. The irony, of course, is that the opera was based on an American story, composed by an Italian, and, in this film version, Butterfly is played by a Chinese diva who sings in Italian. A helpful reading is from *The Modern Madame Butterfly*, Karen Ma, chapter one, which discusses the myth of "Madame Butterfly," and the roots of the stereotypes.

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