

***“Do Not Show But Let See”:
Resilience in the Kyōto Hanamachi and Maiko/Geiko Communities***

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic and its restrictions revealed a “double” crisis for the different “Geisha” districts (Hanamachi), forcing the Maiko and Geiko to halt their *ozashiki* (banquets) and *odori* (dances) practices. Touching the artistic performance and hospitality sides of the Hanamachi, the rules to curb the spread of the coronavirus accelerated the weakening of an increasingly fragile world, with less women interested in pursuing a career in this industry. Studying such communities is therefore a study of survival strategy but the crisis caused eloquent reactions in the Hanamachi. Some artists used the media, reaching out to their audience more directly while crowdfunding campaigns or events online were held, effectively bypassing the legendary *ichiken-san okotowari* rule (no newcomers without a proper introduction). This presentation focuses on these “emergency” activities, analyzing the data collected through direct observations of Kyōto during Covid times. It proposes to articulate the material using the lens of resilience and vulnerability (as discussed by Butler (2016)), to effectively discuss the position of Maiko and Geiko in 2022. In so doing, the multileveled implications of “bouncing back” (Manyena, 2011) are explored. Following Foreman (2008), Eguchi (2016) and Bardsley (2021), this presentation also aims at engaging new discourses on the Hanamachi voices, how they can be mediated without perpetuating the somewhat paternalist tropes that exist about the “iconic” Maiko and Geiko and without compromising the culture of the Hanamachi, where the maxim of traditional Japanese performance “do not show but let see” remains active, maybe even more than ever.

Keywords: Geisha Culture, Resilience, Kyōto, Hanamachi, Traditional Arts, Mediatization

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Introduction

Any attempt to study the social and cultural context within which Geisha artists live keeps leading to a certain ambivalence. In fact, Geisha — or Maiko (舞妓)/Geiko (芸妓) as they are called in Kyōto¹ — bear an ambiguous image, carrying a fair number of misperceptions, leading to polarized questions such as: are they artists (who perform dance and music) or are they prostitutes? The mix up happens, rightfully so, because of the places where they perform, which tend to be the same, and also because of the women's work regulation history. The changes in the “red light districts” industry created tangled situation with many overlaps, making it difficult to clarify the activities they undertake as their positions and “orientations” got established over time in a rather organic manner (Harajima in Endō, 1969 ; Downer, 2001). The “East vs. West” perception and fetishization of the women in this profession adds another layer of contrasted opinions about what they really do and if what they do is akin to prostitution or not (Kawaguchi, 2010). This complex “Geisha” history therefore leads to varied accounts, proving how the limits between types of urban “entertainments” is very thin. In other words, sexual and power ambiguity remains because the artists (all women) keep regaling clients (mostly men). Even specific terminology, such as the “enlightened Geisha”, that appeared to distinguish them from low class prostitutes (Stanley, 2013) ultimately confirms how multivocal and multimodal their situation was and, to some degree, still is.

Now, as demonstrated by different studies on the Geisha actress Sada Yacco (Kano, 1997 ; Downer, 2003) and the exhibition “From Geisha to Diva: Geisha Ichimaru's kimonos”², the artists' very nature is that they keep embracing “lifetime *liminas*” (Foreman, 2008:108) always traveling back and forth between categories, cultivating a certain desirable *iroke* (色気) or seductive ambiguity that is a key to appeal to their audience (Eguchi, 2016). Thus way, Maiko and Geiko are “creatures” that are to be understood as interconnected icons. As phrased by Andrew Maske (2004):

An icon is neither solely image nor reality, but rather a duality based on both [...] a melange of refinement and hedonism. [Geisha] represent both centuries of tradition in the performing and entertaining arts and real women dedicated to a contemporary profession, both recurring characters in history and art and a lightning rod in the interpretation of feminine and national identity. (p.9)

To illustrate this point, one can easily turn to any media platform that touches upon Kyōto, with an almost systematic usage of a Maiko or a Geiko's iconic presence to promote the city's culture. The artists and their unmistakable silhouettes³ effectively become the guides for anyone interested in discovering Kyōto, as evidenced with the various guidebooks that have been published recently (Fig. 1a and 1b) or the district video presentations available on

¹ Two distinctive terms in use to clearly mark the level within which the artists perform. Namely, a Maiko is a junior apprentice (nowadays aged between 16~20 years old) and a Geiko is a full-fledged “senior” artist (nowadays aged 20 years old~until retirement). Both practice music (playing the shamisen primarily) and traditional Nihon-Buyo dance (practicing different styles depending on the districts they belong to).

² Exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (2014) and Kelowna Art Gallery (2020).

³ most of the time their presence is anonymous but many examples, such as the ones cited in this paper, use clearly identified Maiko or Geiko, with artist name (and district name) fully in view.

YouTube⁴, where Geiko appear on the screen talking about her district, the type of dance they performs etc. In the majority of cases, Maiko and Geiko are epitomized as reliable figures, as traditional gatekeepers, their image commoditized to create an “old versus new” image, as seen for example with the Mouse computer parts company advertisement, promoting the high tech quality of their CPU processors, memory discs, RAM or graphics cards using two Maiko (Sayumi and Asuka) and two Geiko (Satsuki and Mitsuki) from the Gion Kōbu district⁵. Furthermore, it can be noted that Kyōto city government is predisposed to used Maiko and Geiko imagery to not only enhance a prim and proper “traditional” discourse but also reinforce reminders about local rules. For instance on ephemera that are easy to produce and distribute, such as *uchiwa* paper fans like the present one (Fig.2) featuring Maiko Fumiko and Katsuki from Kamishichiken district, as advocates for a safe and free of crime city.



Figure 1a: Geiko Koyoshi (Gion Kōbu district) featured in the JTB Mook *Geikosan ga oshieru Kyōto eekoto ataerukoto* [Learn from the Geiko: the best spots in Kyōto] (08/2020)

⁴ See for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uux9-ebjaqE> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrMGdgq6QMQ>

⁵ <https://www.mouse-jp.co.jp/campaign/miteokureyasu/>



Figure 1b: Maiko Masanao and Maiko Kanotomo (Gion Higashi district) featured in the gourmet magazine *Amakara techo: Kyōto no “real”* [The Sweet and Spicy notebook: the real of Kyōto] (05/2022)



Figure 2: Maiko Fumiko and Maiko Katsuki (Kamishichiken district) featured on a promotional uchiwa fan (their picture is on one side and on the other side there is a message from three different agencies about creating a safe and “hospitable” city as well as disaster (fire) and crime prevention (bicycle road rules, credit card theft). (Kitano Tenmangu Shrine - 2021/07/25)

Some local “rule reminders” posters (Fig.3a and 3b), go even one step further, associating Maiko Toshiemi and Toshimomo with a more direct crime prevention message, for instance how shop lifting (*manbiki* 万引き) is unforgivable. The word *akimahen* (あきまへん) typical of the Kyōto Hanamachi dialect is also used, which deepens the (virtual) implication of the Maiko figure to the message by “colorizing” it with specific Maiko idiom. In another poster example (Fig.3c), it is Toshinaho (posing next to actor Kawabata Yasushi) who appears for another strong crime prevention poster, warding off organized crimes groups (*boryokudan* 暴力団) giving face to the campaign in an allusive yet strong manner.



Figure 3a: Maiko Toshiemi (Miyagawachō district) featured on a poster with a police officer reminding that 万引き・*manbiki* (shoplifting) is a crime. (Gion area - 2015)



Figure 3b: Maiko Toshimomo (Miyagawachō district) featured on a poster reminding that 万引き・*manbiki* (shoplifting) is a crime. (Sanjō Horikawa Shōtengai area - September 2016)



Figure 3c: Maiko Toshinaho (Miyagawacho district) and actor Kawabata Yasushi featured on a poster inviting people to unite and ward off organized crime “boryokudan” groups. (Design: Kyōto Joshi University), (Sanjō Kawabata area - July 2021)



Figure 4a and 4b: Maiko Miwako (Gion Kōbu district) featured on posters promoting the “My Number” card and the points one can get if enrolling into the program. (Kyōto city buses - August 2022)

Equally soft and yet effective in inviting people to “comply” to the local government, the new *My Number* posters can be mentioned, as they are using maiko Miwako as the beckoning figure (Fig.4a and 4b), coupled with the following message: “Get about 20000 ¥ worth of coupons if you enroll in the *My Number* card program”.⁶

Adding to the “interconnected icons” discourse mentioned earlier, here with the above examples Maiko and Geiko can be understood as “soft power” cultural icons, as objects and

⁶ On a side note: the My Number bunny mascot, when used in Kyōto gets to “transform” its appearance by getting a full Maiko make-over.

subjects to be seen who, indirectly, look at people too. As indirectly demonstrated with the stickers placed on the back of Kyōto city buses (Fig. 5), displaying a tiny Maiko cartoon figure next to a security camera eye, on the look out for unruly drivers. All this network of images creates some kind of a paradox because the experience of anyone living in (or visiting) Kyōto is such, high chances are that you will be guided (one way or another) by a Maiko or a Geiko but the chances to see a “real” one is, while not impossible, quite rare.



Figure 5: Sticker on the back of Kyōto City buses with a cute Maiko kneeling next to a camera lens, to warn users and drivers that a security camera is on. (2021)



Figure 6: Maiko Fumisono stepping out of her okiya on her misedashi, first official day as a junior Maiko. (Kamishichiken district, Katsufumi okiya - 2021/07/01)

Mapping the reality of Maiko and Geiko communities, it is easy to at least see where they live and work. In total, there are five different districts, all distinct from one another — Kamishichiken, Pontochō, Gion Higashi, Gion Kōbu and Miyagawachō — and these districts (and the communities of Maiko and Geiko artists within them) are coherent with the history and geography of the city connected to important shrines (Kitano Tenmangu and Yasaka) and merchant areas (Nishiki market, Teramachi and Shinkyōgoku shopping streets). Furthermore, as a document from Kyōto City Government shows⁷, Maiko, Geiko and their Hanamachi are embedded into the image of the city as an established tradition that keeps transmitting tradition⁸, supporting tradition and traditional skills⁹. They keep following tradition, specifically rituals¹⁰ and keep actualizing the *omotenashi* (or hospitality) tradition as well.

Moreover, they are woven into the city architecture, as it can be seen with the *kaburenjo* theaters (歌舞練場), where Maiko and Geiko publicly perform *odori*, as well as with the network of *ochaya* (お茶屋), restaurants and inns for private *ozashiki* performances, itself interconnected to the network of *okiya* (置屋) boarding houses, where the Maiko and Geiko¹¹ live (Fig.6).

Kimono and costuming boutiques, to name only but a few shops that are linked to the Hanamachi's business, are also part of the map and add another layer of interconnections between the Maiko-Geiko communities with Kyōto traditional industry. As it can be seen with Kobayashi Ishō¹² or the Okazen shops¹³, the need for high quality kimono or costumes is constant, with orders coming from the *okiya* houses who need kimonos for the Maiko they have under their responsibility, or from the Geiko who place orders to have their own custom-made piece.

On another level, the Maiko and Geiko can be seen as the representatives of the strength of Kyōto, and the city is the place that gives them resistance, through discipline and rules. As Kashiwai (2020) pointed out:

Becoming a Maiko could be compared to becoming a monk at a temple. The training is as difficult. They are away from their family and have to follow the rules dictated by their peers and seniors, like they did in their times. In other words, it is the atmosphere, natural and spiritual features (風土 *fūdo*) of Kyōto that brings Maiko up as nice “Kyōto girls”. (pp.52–53)

⁷ <https://www.city.kyoto.lg.jp/bunshi/cmsfiles/contents/0000163/163831/kyo-kagainobunka.pdf>

⁸ Theater “musical” dances given in spring and autumn, playing the shamisen, the flute, the koto as well as practicing tea ceremony and flower arrangement

⁹ kimono, kimono dressers, obi, hairpins, wigs, footwear, fans, bags, music instruments, hairdressers, *Senjafuda* stickers (Maiko and Geiko specific business card system)

¹⁰ Ceremonies celebrating a change in their careers such as *Misedashi* (店出し or 見世出し) and *Erikae* (襟替え) and annual events such as *Setsubun* (節分), *Obake* (お化け), Gion Matsuri ceremonies, *Hassaku* (八朔) and *Kotohajime* (事始め).

¹¹ It should be noted that once the artist becomes a Geiko, she is considered as independent and so can be allowed to live in her own house / apartment. Still, her appointments ought to be made with the supervision of the *Okiya* she is connected to.

¹² <http://www.kobayashi-isho.com/tradition/history.html>

¹³ <http://www.okazen.jp>

All these visual and ethnographic observations, while prolonging the investigations Jan Bardsley conducted in her book (Bardsley, 2021), help in further delineating this ever ambiguous and moving terrain that is the Hanamachi, where weaving the masquerade to the body, the pose and the genuine is key.

In this paper, the goal is to see how this terrain got disrupted because of the recent crisis that occurred locally and globally. With what could be observed first hand, the recent crisis touch Maiko-Geiko iconic mediatization and the real performances they create, which gives two types of occurrences to observe: the first is the demonstration of resilient performance activities, seen through media and real interactions, to overcome COVID related challenges, prompting questions about resilience. The second is the revelation of a long term crisis, related to the difficulty in recruiting new artists as well as established Maiko and Geiko retiring from the profession earlier than anticipated, prompting questions about vulnerability.

1. Overcoming COVID-19: fashioning resilience.

In the idea of overcoming the coronavirus crisis, not surprisingly, Maiko and Geiko communities were quick to show how wearing masks was quickly adopted by all its members and follows the mandate diligently, although one can easily imagine they had to be inventive sometimes, since the elaborate hairstyles can be tricky for that (Fig. 7). At the end of 2021, a “clean the street” promotional event in the Pontocho district was reported¹⁴, showing the willingness for keeping active and maintain a “clean” connection with the outside, giving tourists a certain peace of mind because the Maiko took charge of doing the cleaning.



Figure 7: Geiko Mamefuji (Gion Kōbu district) posing while wearing a mask.
(© Kyōto Shimbun - 2021/05/06)

¹⁴ <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20211027/k10013323631000.html> ; <https://www.Kyōto-np.co.jp/articles/-/666039>

During seasonal greeting rituals, the mask etiquette was preserved, communicating directly and indirectly the adaptation of the Maiko and Geiko, definitely akin to the willow tree that symbolizes their world¹⁵. Beside news reports, for the past two years, a whole new set of communication posters flourished all over Kyōto, using Maiko as icons to remind people to follow all these new COVID rules, continuing the above mentioned “preservation/good manners” discourse (Fig. 8a). A prime example is with this large poster (Fig. 8b) displayed in Shinkyogoku, one of the most central shopping street in Kyōto, with the catchphrase being particularly eloquent, making a pun using the *ichiken-san okotowari* (一見さんお断り) expression with the *shingata* (新型) or new variant word that designates the virus, turning the Maiko into a magical figure that can ward off the “evil” covid, similar to when they decline customers who are not properly introduced.



Figure 8a: Good Covid-19 manners poster (Kyōto City subway - October 2021)

¹⁵ See for instance the other term that designate the Hanamachi : Karyukai 花柳界 or “world of flowers and willows”.



Figure 8b: Banner to remind people to wash their hands and wear a mask (and follow the Maiko’s example as they are good at ward off unwanted “custom(er)s” (Shinkyōgoku Shopping Street - July 2021)

More directly connected to the reality of Maiko and Geiko time of crisis activities: many newspapers articles reported that they were getting vaccinated in a timely manner¹⁶ and starting the thinking process of a new type of hospitality/*omotenashi*¹⁷. In the meantime, a crowdfunding campaign — organized by Ookini Zaidan group¹⁸ — was launched, stressing the urgency of the situation and the need for cash to maintain the districts afloat. A seemingly successful operation that raised over 1379 万 yens (about 92 000\$), although it is doubtful that the money reached the pockets of the *okiya* houses nor the artists themselves.

On a smaller scale, various online events got organized, taking the *ozashiki* entertainment, usually “closed” to the general public, to a new community of internet viewers. The first of such event that could be observed first hand was on April 2021, with Tomitsuyu from Gion Higashi district. The event was organized by Robert Von Koesveld, a photographer familiar with Tomitsuyu (and before Covid, he used to organize photo tours in Kyōto). During the online event, after an introductory presentation about Hanamachi arts and culture, Tomitsuyu appeared, entertaining with a *chanoyu* tea demonstration and a dance, then some direct Q&A were conducted. Since Tomitsuyu is bilingual (she lived in New Zealand when she was a teenager), it was particularly easy to talk to her. A strong incentive for the audience to join the event originally, which was about 40 Australian \$.

¹⁶ <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASP6Z3PKZP6XPLZB00K.html> ;
<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20210628/k10013107911000.html>

¹⁷ <https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000001.000063017.html>

¹⁸ <https://the-Kyoto.en-jine.com/projects/ookini>



Figure 9: Maiko Kohatsu and Maiko Fukuyu for an online Ozashiki [live streaming on YouTube] (2021/09/27)

The other online *ozashiki* observed in 2021 were via a livestream on YouTube, organized by Geisha Japan and Maiko Club (舞妓倶楽部) (Fig.9). While the sound and translation was smooth, the video quickly got blurry, diminishing the visual quality of the event, which was composed of a game and a couple of dances, Q&A session and since the registration to attend was free of charge, there was a call out for donations at the end. The dances were the most typical, the staple *Gion Ko-uta* performed every time. Questions were diverse, the most striking one was if the Maiko knew about movies and medias where Maiko and / or Geiko are featured. They answered yes, citing the movie *Maiko haaaan*¹⁹ and the manga/anime *Maikosan chi no Makanaisan*²⁰. About these references, they said how impressed they were with the research made to make the movie and the manga accurate and entertaining.

About one year later, this particular online *ozashiki* format is surviving more than thriving. It switched to a “members only” mode with monthly payments in order to secure funds. An interview conducted with the founder of the Maiko Club and of this online *ozashiki* group gives three perspectives: the merits, the limits and the future.

The merits can be grouped in three points:

- Showing that online entertainment is technically possible (that was already on the thoughts of many before Covid, considering the change in technology).

¹⁹ Directed by Mizuta Nobuo (2007)

²⁰ also known as *Kiyo in Kyōto*. The manga was originally designed by Koyama Aiko (2016- on going (22 volumes)). The NHK produced anime series are directed by Suzuki Yōhei (2021-2022 (12 episodes)).

- The artists can reach out a wider and more international audience and this way find new ways to deal with the strict *ichiken san okotowari* rule (no newcomers without a proper introduction from sponsors).
- The Maiko and Geiko get to entertain a type of audience that is truly passionate about them and ask precise questions about their costumes, their practice etc. And they are happy to experience that.

The limits can be gathered around two points:

- Not enough members to be economically sustainable. Need to find new members but to do that, having new Maiko and Geiko agreeing to participate would be best. But in order to have new Maiko and Geiko to participate, more members need to be already enrolled! (Paradox)
- Each *ozashiki* is set on a program that tends to repeat and it can get boring for members. (Aesthetically, it might congeal the practice of dance and music to the eternal *Gion Ko-uta* song and *Konpira Fune Fune* game.)

As for the future, the informant's opinion was as follows: while it is *mottainai* (a shame to put something to waste) that all this talent can not be seen more, the online *ozashiki* format might be difficult to maintain as it is. The format needs to be constantly “reformulated” with relations difficult to maintain, sometimes copyright/privacy issues to deal with.²¹

Besides these online activities — and in between the infection waves and the different state of emergencies — some actual live performances have been taking place, specifically curated to fit the Covid-19 requirements. The first event of that kind that was directly observed took place at the Museum of Kyōto , in October and November 2020, connected to the Maiko Beauty art exhibition . The event was kept short with small self introduction, dances, Q&A and to finish the ever so popular picture time (Fig. 10a and 10b). The second one was held in open air, at Okazaki park near Heian Jingu shrine in March 27, 2021. With a set of dances first and then again some photo time at the end (Fig. 11a and 11b). Later in the spring of 2021, theaters were allowed to open and the regular stage dances were set to resume. But the only one that got the actual chance to do so and conduct the spring dance for real was in Miyagawachō district with Kyō Odori (京おどり). The others got shut down with a new state of emergency being issued early in April. Attending the Kyō-Odori, the first thing noted was that the tickets sold out in about 30 minutes the day they were available for sale. The second thing is that they shortened the program, with a quick play, a couple of dances and the finale group dance. So instead of the usual 1h10 minutes, the performance overall lasted about 45 minutes. In June of 2021, the public dance called Miyako no Nigiwai (都の賑い), with Maiko and Geiko from all five districts performing together, was luckily held. As reported by several news outlets, there was a particular emotion during this performance as many Maiko were dancing for the first time on public stage.

²¹ Informant interview conducted by the author online, via Facebook Messenger, 2022/09/15.



Figure 10a: Geiko Miehina, Geiko Kikuyae, Maiko Fukuna performing at the Museum of Kyōto (Kyōto Bunka Hakubutsukan - 2020/11/01)



Figure 10b: Maiko Katsuume and Katsuemi posing for pictures after their performance at the Museum of Kyōto (Kyōto Bunka Hakubutsukan - 2020/10/31)



Figure 11a: Maiko Kanotomo, Kanochiyo and Masano dancing on an open air stage (Okazaki park, Kyōto - 2021/03/27)



Figure 11b: Maiko Kanotomo, Kanochiyo and Masano posing for pictures after their open air stage performance (Okazaki park, Kyōto - 2021/03/27)

The third significant “Covid times” public dance observed was in Kamishichiken district theater, for a special program called *Fūkinkai* (楓錦会). Similar to the other venues, temperature and hand disinfection checkpoints were installed at the entrance, as well as special air cleaning ventilation devices inside and only 50% of the seats made available (Fig.12).



Figure 12: Covid-19 dispositions at the Kamishichiken theater during the *Fūkinkai* public dance (2021/09/25 and 2021/10/02)

The curtain opened not with the usual type of theater play but instead with an announcement, given by two of the artists scheduled to perform that day. They talked about their situation, mentioning for instance the characteristics of the *Fūkinkai* program:

This *Fūkinkai* is inspired by a 1918 dance performance performed in the district to ward off the “evils” brought by the Spanish flu. So in these Covid times, it feels appropriate to perform that program. To prevent the spread of the virus, the music is not live but tape recorded. The record is from 50 years ago, from the tea house Nakazato. It is interesting to dance on music from our predecessors like this. Also, let us tell you that this performance is the occasion to see new Maiko, on stage for the first time, as well as “veteran” Geiko...so please enjoy!²²

The disruptions caused by Covid were also pointed out:

During Covid, no more business and no more practice time (dance and music altogether). So we resorted to running and taking walks to keep active and in shape. Overall, the things that we had taken for granted were suddenly gone and it was weird, if not depressing. Especially no being able to practice and learn from watching

²² Edited transcript from the DVD and notes taken while attending the performance on 2021/09/25 and 2021/10/02.

our peers and seniors felt like the leadership/tradition connection was weakening. So now, we are all grateful to be back on stage.²³

The message conveyed in this announcement preceding the *Fūkinkai* was well groomed yet sincere and valuable, giving a genuine glimpse into the reality of the artists' lives and their relationship with the stage. These notes show how they tap into the idea of perseverance, looking at the previous generations or senior members of the community for inspiration. A point similar to the message found on a poster featuring Maiko Toshinana (Fig.13).



Figure 13: Maiko Toshinana featured on the 牛乳石鹼 Gyūnyū Sekken Milk “Beauty” Soap posters (displayed inside JR Kyōto station and at many Kyōto City Bus stops, on and off since October 2020)

The poster is an advertisement for a face soap but the text written next to her does address the crisis. It translates as: “From senior to junior, the flow needs to keep going. Even though off days kept continuing, we kept practicing.” A note that was confirmed by Ms. Taniguchi, the owner of the Shigemori (しげ森) *okiya*:

The hanamachi culture has been in existence for more than 300 years, hasn't it? If I don't pass it on to the next generation, there is no meaning to my life. I would not be able to face my predecessors if I let the hanamachi die out over something as trivial as Corona.²⁴

At the most recent 2022 Spring and Fall dances , another demonstration of perseverance was observed with the Maiko welcoming the spectators to the theater’s lobby and inviting them to give cash donations to a relief fund their district organize for Ukraine (Fig.14).

²³ Edited transcript from the DVD and notes taken while attending the performance on 2021/09/25 and 2021/10/02.

²⁴ Interview of Taniguchi Michiko, head of the *okiya* Shigemori in Miyagawachō: “Address the young generation through the Hanamachi culture” (03/2021) <https://serai.jp/hobby/1017007>



Figure 14: Collecting support funds for Ukraine
 Left: during the Kyō Odori (2022/04/08) / Center top: during the Kamogawa Odori (2022/05/05) / Center bottom: during the Kitano Odori (2022/10/21)/
 Right: during the Gion Odori (2022/11/04)

2. On the other side of resilience: facing vulnerability

The Covid-19 crisis somewhat revealed a more lingering crisis, which relates to the difficulty in recruiting or keeping the formed artists in the community, and this can open new perspectives on the issue of vulnerability. Thus, besides all the relatively enchanting and hopeful resilient events mentioned so far, it is important to keep in mind that every year a fair number of young Maiko quit and many adult Geiko retire “early” (Fig. 15a). In 2008, there was hope as the numbers of “new recruits” were up, but now the most recent data shows a decrease in both Geiko and Maiko categories, with a negative balance between newcomers (Maiko starting their careers) and retirees (Maiko or Geiko quitting the profession) (Fig. 15b), which deeply impacts the total numbers of artists active in the Hanamachi.

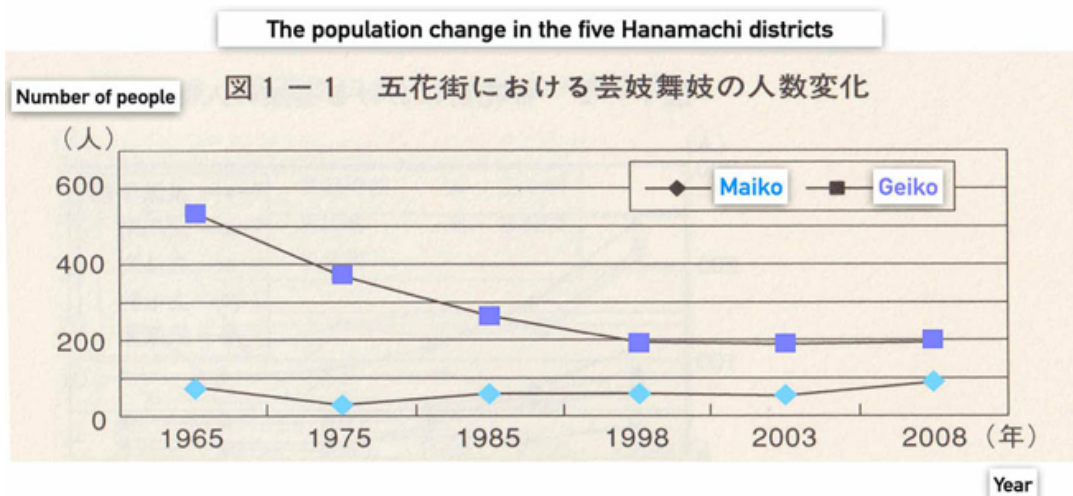


Figure 15a: Edited chart showing the decrease in the number of active Maiko and Geiko in Kyōto’s Hanamachi (Original source: Ota Toru and Hiratake Kozo (2009) 「京の花街ひと・わざ・まち」 p.33)

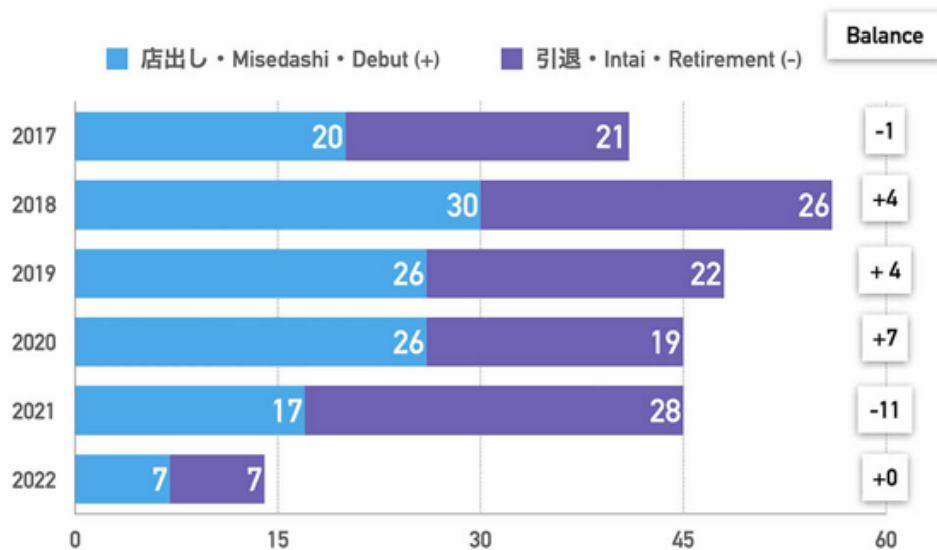


Figure 15 15b: Proportional chart counting the number of Maiko starting their career (*misedashi*) and Maiko/Geiko ending their career (*intai*) (As of October 17th, 2022)
Data compiled thanks to different online sources, notably Mylokoville (<https://missmyloko.tumblr.com>)

Usually, there is no media coverage about these rather sad news. Among the few that could be found, there is the prime example of Geiko Satsuki (紗月), the top, most popular, Geiko in Gion Kōbu district for the past seven years (2014-2021). Upon quitting, she gave an interview explaining the reasons why she came to take that decision. The Covid was of course a big factor, as she says:

Even if the corona virus recedes and the situation goes back to normal, the Hanamachi culture will never be the same. I am actually getting married too, so this is a good time to leave.²⁵

Another example of a successful business that got to close permanently was the Maiko theater, a popular venue that was contracting several Maiko from the Miyagawachō district, to perform tea ceremonies and dances in a relaxed atmosphere, catering primarily to tourists. It is very sad news indeed as their business model was strong and on target considering the influx of tourism in Kyōto but the strict borders closing rule and prefectural restrictions were too much to cope.

One last example is with former Maiko Ichikoma (市駒)²⁶, who took upon Twitter to denounce the abuse she had experienced as a junior Maiko. In short: the forced heavy drinking and near molesting situations she found herself in. As she reports:

This may result in my erasure from this world, but this is the reality of being a maiko. When I was 16, I was made to drink so much alcohol, you could take a shower in it. I

²⁵ Yomiuri Shinbun Online, 2021/11/13 <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/local/Kyoto/feature/CO052552/20211112-OYTAT50016/>).

²⁶ who publishes now on Twitter under her civil name, Kiritaka Kiyoha (桐貴清羽)

was then coerced into mixed bathing – another name for taking a bath with a customer. (Although I tried with all my might to run away.) I would like you to consider if this is truly what one would call traditional culture. The photos are from when I won a drinking competition with a customer, seeing who could chug a bottle of Yamazaki 18-Year faster, as well as other instances of drinking.²⁷

She recounted other instances of sexual harassment and assault within the same Twitter thread:

I had clients slip their hands through the side openings of my kimono to fondle my breasts, and when in private rooms they'd opened the hems of my kimono so as to touch my crotch. Maiko don't generally wear underwear, you see. When I told the house mother about these incidents, she directed her anger at me, saying I was at fault.²⁸

Her testimony is extremely valuable (and potentially starting another #MeToo movement?) while allowing some articulation about the Hanamachi culture and way of conducting business. As she concluded:

I don't want the geisha occupation to disappear. The industry should rebuild, oriented in a better direction. I want it to hone the art of those who love the arts, passing down our traditional culture. Until now, it's been a closed occupation. I think it's time for it to open. They can monetize their training sessions and the entertaining of guests via livestreams and video uploads. They can sell DVDs of the sort of events we've always put on, as well as spring and autumn performances. Geisha can appear on TV. I want the industry to live on through those sorts of clean methods that do something for society.²⁹

These various accounts are critical material when studying the state of contemporary Maiko and Geiko communities as they interrogates deeply issues of resilience through vulnerability, highlighting how Maiko and Geiko remain real women who not only have a function to fulfill but also dreams and willingness for agency, a desire to keep their image and reality strong and pure. In other words, Maiko and Geiko, while repeating and respecting the patterns of tradition remains individuals with a spontaneity they ought to be able to harness, like a smile suddenly peaking through the composed face (Fig.16).

²⁷ Source: Twitter, 2022/06/26.

English translation of the tweets: <https://unseenjapan.com/abuse-in-the-geisha-world-former-maiko-speaks-out/>

²⁸ Source: Twitter, 2022/06/26.

English translation of the tweets: <https://unseenjapan.com/abuse-in-the-geisha-world-former-maiko-speaks-out/>

²⁹ Source: Twitter, 2022/06/26.

English translation of the tweets: <https://unseenjapan.com/abuse-in-the-geisha-world-former-maiko-speaks-out/>



Figure 16: Geiko Yuriha posing in front of the Tatsumi shrine during her *erikae*, a ceremonial day that marks the moment when a Maiko becomes a full fledged Geiko (Gion Kōbu district - 2021/06/29)

Conclusion

Looking at how crisis has hit the Maiko and Geiko communities, several layers in the concept of resilience are exposed. With the Covid and recruitment “double” crisis hitting the Hanamachi, it is resilience in an iconic and highly mediated community that can be observed. This interrogates image and reality correlation, simulacra and simulations (Braudillard, 1981), as in the question: “would Kyōto continue to use the Maiko and Geiko’s image if they were not here anymore?”

What is presented is also resilience within an artistic community that is reflective upon its traditions, the past and present talent, the mental and physical perseverance and motivation of the artists (Rutter, 1985), paving a way for a future that would be between the “bounce back/bounce forward” dialectic (Manyena, 2011). On another level, it is resilience within closely interconnected professionals that is under scrutiny, prompting a chilling observation: if the Hanamachi culture collapses, a whole network of makers is in danger (banquet restaurants, shops selling kimono, wigs, hairpins footwear etc.). Ultimately, as the last points in part two exposed, what this study highlights is resilience within a women’s community, with artists entertaining/catering to clients to please, which interrogates vulnerability (Butler, 2016) and a form of resilience that should come from within, not as an assignment to please the male, tourist, fan, institutional (and anthropologist) gaze.

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