

The Loquacious Geisha: Lotus Blossom and the ‘Hidden Transcript’ of *The Teahouse of the August Moon*

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The ‘geisha’ is one of the most enduring Asian stereotypes in Hollywood film.

Popularized as a Western fantasy of the “quiet, submissive, and subservient” Japanese woman (Michener, quoted in Johnson 80), this stereotype has evolved into what Renee Tajima terms “Lotus Blossom Babies,” those more generic “passive figures who exist to serve men, especially as love interests for white men” (309). Tajima notes that the appeal of these women, at once sexual and childish, in Hollywood film is predicated on their depiction as “utterly feminine, delicate, and welcome respites from their often loud, independent American counterparts,” and she makes clear the persistent material effects of this stereotype in the form of “an entire marriage industry” (309) that has developed around the myth of the perfect (Asian) woman. In a broader sense, this stereotype has also been described as symptomatic of a more general postwar feminization of Asians as “humble and quiet” (Shim 345), as well as of a politically “submissive” Japan as the natural object of “America’s own paternalistic attitude” (Marchetti 135).

Given the clearly one-dimensional and problematic nature of the ‘geisha’ as representative of Japanese/Asian women, it is interesting to note that one definitive film of the genre, Daniel Mann’s *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956), was actually quite popular among Japanese audiences: at 178 million yen, *Teahouse* was Japan’s fifth highest-grossing film in 1956 (Murakami 168). While some of this popularity can

undoubtedly be attributed to specific conditions of the film's marketing and distribution in Japan,¹ as well as to its comparatively sympathetic representation of the country, the very nature of the 'geisha' stereotype, as defined by its critics, reveals hints of a more textual aspect to the film's acceptance by Japanese audiences. Describing a scene from *Teahouse*, Tajima writes

Brando sneaks away with a smile: "Good night, Boss." Kyo [Machiko, as the geisha Lotus Blossom], chattering away in Japanese, tries to pamper a bewildered Ford, who holds up an instructive finger to her and repeats slowly, "Me... me... no." Kyo looks confused. (310)

What is interesting in this account is Lotus Blossom's apparent silence and implicit visuality; while both Sakini (Marlon Brando), the interpreter, and Fisby (Glenn Ford), the American captain, are characterized here as contributing to the narrative through their English dialogue, Lotus Blossom's "chattering" is dismissed, leaving her only "look[ing] confused."

Yet, as James Naremore notes, while "the actor hardly exists except as an agent of the narrative, and the movie performers cannot be discussed apart from the many crafts that surround and construct them... clearly films depend on a form of communication whereby meanings are acted out" (2). In the case of *Teahouse*, this communication is characterized by the substantial presence of unsubtitled Japanese dialogue, spoken in large part by that same speechless geisha of the above example. The extent to which this dialogue permeates the film is such that it amounts to what James Scott calls the "*hidden*

¹ Specifically, *Teahouse* was coproduced with Daiei Motion Picture Company, which would have guaranteed the film's distribution throughout the country.

transcript... those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (4).

Inasmuch as cinema ostensibly renders texts both visible and public, the ‘offstage’ nature of Scott’s hidden transcript would appear incompatible with film critique; yet, as Robert Stam observes, “the Western masculinist imagination is strongly ‘visualist’, positing cultural facts as things observed or seen rather than heard, transcribed, or invented in dialogue” (19). This masculinist imagination imbues film criticism to such an extent that even issues of gender and race often center on questions of visual representation. This is not to suggest that speech is ignored. Indeed, key to Tajima’s argument is a critical positioning of the geisha as both visible and speechless within the dominant masculine narrative. Yet, insofar as such feminist critique ignores what the geisha actually does say, even it might be characterized as masculinist in its orientation. It is in this sense that such dialogue (as well as the performance(s) it augments) is rendered invisible, hidden from view by its very aurality.

This paper investigates the extent to which the hidden geisha transcript of *The Teahouse of the August Moon* at once “confirm[s], contradict[s], and inflect[s]” its surrounding English language film text through Japanese dialogue and performance. In shifting critical attention from the visual to the marginalized aural, I address both that paradigmatic post-colonial puzzle, “Who speaks?” as well as “Who listens, and what do they hear?” In his explanation of the hidden transcript, Scott issues this caveat:

Power relations are not, alas, so straightforward that we can call what is said

in power-laden contexts false and what is said offstage true. Nor can we simplistically describe the former as a realm of necessity and the latter a realm of freedom. What is certainly the case, however, is that the hidden transcript is produced for a different audience and under different constraints of power than the public transcript. (5)

Similarly, I do not intend to suggest that the body of Japanese language dialogue in *Teahouse* necessarily constitutes an unproblematic corrective to the representational excesses of the film's English language narrative. Instead, I hope to contribute to a more multi-accented understanding of the fluid meanings and implications of the geisha as an ethnic stereotype within both the United States and Japan, supplementing, rather than replacing, important criticism of Asian stereotypes in Hollywood film.

In a 1957 review of *Teahouse* in the English language *Japan Quarterly*, it is observed that "no foreign film has ever before used Japanese dialogue so skillfully... one might think it had been made for the benefit of Japanese audiences" (281). Indeed, several factors indicate an awareness of, and attempt to, address a Japanese audience.² Produced in cooperation with Daiei Motion Picture Company, the film's attention to 'authentic' detail is striking. Location photography took place in Nara Prefecture (Anderson and Richie 87), and its art direction and choreography were supervised by Japanese crewmembers. Moreover, in addition to an extensive cast of Japanese extras, *Teahouse* featured three Japanese stars: Nijiko Kiyokawa (Higa Jiga), Jun Negami (Seiko), and Machiko Kyo (Lotus Blossom), whose casting for this role was intended to capitalize on

² Takashi Monma's observation that "Japanese ≠ Okinawan (81) is critical here; indeed, the attention to details of Okinawan costume and song suggest a certain positioning of the film by Daiei as exotic spectacle for the enjoyment of 'mainland' Japanese audiences.

the American success of Akira Kurosawa's popular *Rashomon* (1950), in which she also starred. In particular, it is Kyo's performance that not only stands out as a comic *tour de force*, but which is also instrumental in providing a different perspective on the role of the geisha in Hollywood film. Identifying *Teahouse* as one of a group of films that popularized a geisha genre in the United States, Gina Marchetti notes that the women of these films were "seen as docile, eager to please, malleable, childlike, and vulnerable" (179); yet, as portrayed by Kyo, the geisha Lotus Blossom is a more complex character than this description suggests.

Initially brought to the village of Tobiki as a "present" for the newly arrived Captain Fisby, Lotus Blossom is introduced to the captain by his translator, Sakini. Eyeing the American, she immediately launches into a rhapsody of pleasure over her good fortune: "*Ara chotto, kochira wa hansamu ne! Atashi suki yo!*" [Oh my, but isn't he handsome! I like him!"]. Oblivious to Fisby's consternation at this unexpected turn of events, she looks around the room and continues, "*Atashi, koko ni sumun desu ka?*" [Is this where I'll be living?]. Eventually, Lotus Blossom turns to Sakini, who has been explaining the present to Fisby, and summarily dismisses him, saying, "*Mo ii wa. Domo arigato.*" [That will be all. Thank you.]. In this scene, Kyo's performance, both vocal and physical, punctuates her dialogue: clapping her hands and prancing about the bewildered captain, she proclaims her satisfaction with her new patron in a cloying tone of sexual interest. Lotus Blossom then promptly turns to the business of arranging her affairs, her words and – in particular, voice increasing in proprietary efficiency as, surveying the small room,

she prepares to colonize Fisby's quarters. Her dismissal of Sakini is imperious and abrupt; it is now Lotus Blossom who is in control of the situation.

The ensuing battle of the bathrobe between Lotus Blossom and Fisby is both a comic highlight of the film and the defining moment of their early relationship. Describing the scene, Yumiko Murakami writes, "eager to 'mother' the captain, Lotus Blossom attempts to forcefully remove his clothes and shoes, saying, 'Now let's put on our kimono,' and 'Be a good boy and turn around'" (169). Indeed, both Lotus Blossom's language and actions in this scene are those of a mother: at one point, she pats Fisby on the cheek, cooing, "*Ti ko-chan ne!*" [What a good boy you are!], and she later tickles him under his desk as he, like a naughty child, attempt to evade her grasp. Murakami suggests that, although

a truly embarrassed Glenn Ford resists her with all his might, this... can be understood as the flip side of American male desire. As opposed to American society, where men must usually demonstrate their masculinity by taking the lead over women, here women faithfully pamper them, and they enjoy something of a return to their childhoods. (169)

From the outset, the American occupiers are portrayed as helpless within the Japanese (linguistic) sphere: Colonel Purdy, who learned French in preparation for D-Day, only to be sent to Okinawa instead, insists that there is no need to learn Japanese, since "we won the war" – all the while remaining dependent on the services of Sakini. When, in a moment of anger with the seemingly sleepy native, Purdy suggests firing him, his assistant protests, "We've got to have someone around that speaks the language, sir!"

Thus positioned in the English language narrative as linguistically dependent, the American occupiers are rendered all the more childlike through the film's Japanese dialogue. In this sense, the role of the geisha here is less one of clear subservience to her American master than of keeping her American charge in line, making sure he doesn't get into any trouble.

Lotus Blossom's relationship with Fisby also suggests an intriguing, if problematic, liberation from the confines of Japanese tradition, as demonstrated in a long conversation between the geisha and Seiko, an artist and the newly elected Chief of Agriculture. Approaching her as she leaves home, Seiko greets Lotus Blossom, offering her a chrysanthemum. Looking down her nose at the flower, the geisha coldly dismisses his gift, saying, "*Ara, kekko yo.*" [Ah, no thanks.]. Seiko follows her, urging her to accept this gift from his heart and insisting that, for her, "*Hara kitte shinimasu*" [I will disembowel myself], but Lotus Blossom haughtily observes that such customs are no longer "fashionable." Resentfully, Seiko demands, "*Amerika-san ga ii no kai?*" [You'd rather have the American?]. Lotus Blossom's heated indignation at his insinuation suggests that this is pretty much the case. Presented with the choice of allying herself with the dependent, childlike Fisby, or with a member of the patriarchal society from which she comes, Lotus Blossom opts for the road of least constraint.

Complicating any reading of this Japanese text as resistant to patriarchy is the fact that it exists, almost verbatim, in the stage play of *Teahouse*; indeed, the play is replete with "Luchuan [Ryukyu] dialect" (Patrick 36), although the author of this dialogue is

unacknowledged.³ Assuming that *Teahouse*'s American playwright (and screenwriter), John Patrick, enjoyed at least some – if not complete – authorship of the villagers' lines, the liberating tone of this scene may be understood less as a product of the actors' linguistic autonomy within the dominant narrative, than as an implicit message to postwar Japanese audiences that the old Japanese imperialist way of life was being rightfully supplanted by a new, democratic American dream.

Nonetheless, recognition of the maternal turn of the hidden geisha transcript of *Teahouse* at once offers intriguing insights into the broader implications of alternative Japanese narratives in Japan-centered, postwar Hollywood films, and it illuminates the motivations behind certain problematic elements of the film. In *The Japanese Woman*, Sumiko Iwao describes the “maternal instincts” of Japanese women in a manner that echoes strikingly Lotus Blossom's Japanese language dialogue:

A young woman can easily become absorbed in a kind of “play house-keeping” and may come to deem any and all devotions to her husband a a pleasure, regardless of the burden they impose... Then, too, there are the “maternal instincts” of these young women... which will cause them almost compulsively to lavish care where it will be received. The domestically helpless husband – and some women do call their husbands “my big baby” or “eldest son” – is a prime target for such care (88)

Iwao associates this behavior with the woman's desire “to keep the home a place that they can control and manage to their pleasure (89), noting that “as long as the house is in

³ In the Japanese film program for *Teahouse*, it is suggested that Japanese members of the original Broadway cast were responsible for translating Patrick's own dialogue into “Luchuan,” although which dialogue, and the extent of their contributions, remains unclear.

order, expected meals are on the table, and his wife is at home when he needs her, a husband does not pry into what she does otherwise” (90). If, as some critics suggest, Hollywood depictions of cross-cultural romance involving ‘geisha’ metaphorically represent the United States’ masculinist political interests and prerogatives concerning a feminized Japan, the hidden maternal transcript of *Teahouse* offers the possibility of an alternative reading of that relationship. Specifically, although this hidden transcript implicitly accepts the parameters of the American/male-Japanese/female binary established in the dominant narrative, it reveals a substantially different understanding of that relationship. Positioning the American occupiers as “domestically helpless” within the Japanese linguistic sphere, it assigns them the role of the childlike Japanese husband who, as the proverb goes, is best when “healthy and absent” (Iwao 90). They are tolerated within the domestic sphere, but are expected to eventually return to their own sphere of control, allowing the ‘wife’ to resume unimpeded control of her domestic affairs.

In discussing the ways that the hidden geisha transcript of *Teahouse* augments and even transcends the English language text, it is important to acknowledge that this hidden transcript exists precariously under less than ideal conditions. As critics such as Marchetti and Tajima rightly observe, the inscription of Japanese/Asian women within Hollywood films as quiet, subservient, and submissive geisha stereotypes is a real, demonstrable practice, and Kyo’s performance is not exempt from its effects. Throughout *Teahouse*, Lotus Blossom’s deference to Fisby increases in direct proportion to his increased comfort in Tobiki society. At one point, she is shown at his feet, playing the koto and singing that paragon of Japanese songs, “Sakura.” Later, she stands at his side, fanning

him as he takes a call from his superior. When, at the end of the film, Lotus Blossom begs Fisby, “*Kekkon shite! Issho ni Amerika ni ikitai no!*” [Marry me! I want to go with you to America!], his superiority – and that of the United States itself – is asserted, silencing the formerly feisty geisha.

If the effects of the geisha stereotype are material and significant within a broader American framework, they are no less so in a Japanese context. The *Japan Quarterly* review of *Teahouse* notes that, “In the film... there are Japanese subtitles for those who cannot understand English” (280); Japanese audiences are, thus, privileged with a more complete film text than their English-speaking counterparts. As the film’s Japanese subtitler, Shunji Shimizu, observes in an essay included in the film’s Japanese program,

As Japanese viewers are able to understand the film’s English subtitles, they can fully appreciate the amusing interplay of English and Japanese. In other words, those who can appreciate the funniness of the Japanese dialogue are limited to viewers who can understand both English and Japanese, and those who are used to reading Japanese subtitles onscreen. This is something planned neither by the writer, John Patrick, nor Daniel Mann, the director... a coincidence.

Pushed further, this access suggests that not just humor, but the entire narrative – stereotypes and all – would have been fully accessible to its Japanese audience. Thus it is that access to and awareness of Hollywood misrepresentation encourages criticism of the authenticity of such depictions, as in Takashi Monma’s discussion of *Teahouse* and, in particular, his etymology of such supposedly Japanese/Okinawan names as “Sakini,”

“Higa Jiga,” and “Lotus Blossom,” which, he notes, “to a Japanese person sounds much more Indian or Buddhist [than Japanese].”

Yet, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have argued,

the exclusive preoccupation with images, whether positive or negative, can lead to a kind of essentialism, as less subtle critics reduce a complex variety of portrayals to a limited set of reified formulae. Behind every Black child performer the critic discerns a “pickaninny”; behind every sexually attractive Black actor a “buck”; behind every corpulent or nurturing Black female a “mammy.” Such reductionist simplifications run the risk of reproducing the very racial essentialism they were designed to combat. (199)

Within the context of Hollywood films, similarly essentialist criticism of the ‘geisha’ stereotype have themselves resulted in precisely this effect: robbed of any potential for agency within the scripted Hollywood text, the geisha becomes a neat and discrete category for East Asian women, both real and imagined. They may speak, but we don’t listen, and in failing to hear what these women have to say, critics miss a valuable opportunity to better understand the fluid and complex nature of stereotypes, as well as the ways they function in not only ‘dominant’ society, but in the societies being stereotyped themselves.

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