

# Coffee Girls – Reflections of Lived Cultures

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Japanese coffee girls are young women who work as maids in maid cafés in Tokyo, for example in Akihabara. These maids work next to game halls and offer a cozy atmosphere to the part of town where everything around them is shiny, high-tech and far from humanity. The coffee shop I had a chance to visit myself was called @home, which refers to the idea of shelter and caring in this plastic part of Tokyo. Maids in these coffee shops serve their customers with devotion. For example, they call their customers masters and express their respect to them by kneeling before them (See for example @home café official website, 2009).

The work of coffee girls is an interesting set of actions in itself, but what does it mean to work as a coffee girl? How flexible or fixed is their position as young women in Japan? My hypothesis is that the work of coffee girls in maid cafés gives them a chance to take an active role in their life and choose differently as Japanese women. This hypothesis links this study to the current discussion of agency in Western feminist research, and therefore, it is also connected to the theoretical shift in understanding gender as dynamic rather than static, and also as historical rather than natural (McNay 2000, 11-13). This perspective opens a possibility to study how gender can be structured in many different ways by individuals, and how this way is resisted given gender positions.

Geishas have been understood to be an exception in Japanese society, because their way of living gives them a chance to be more in charge of their life compared to women in other positions in Japan, where being a woman has been, and still is, quite a static position (Foreman 2005, 42-43). Hostesses also share some of their ways to entertain customers with geishas and coffee girls, and they also have the possibility to assume quite an independent position in society. However, in this paper I do not concentrate on hostesses, because my conclusion is that the work of hostesses is not as coherent a set of actions as the work of geishas or coffee girls. Still, they must be introduced to point out that their work may also have an effect on the work of young women in maid cafés.

Because these women have much in common in their work, their position in society may also be similarly flexible. Therefore, to understand who coffee girls may be and what their positions are in Japanese society, I will sketch a connection from geisha culture to coffee girls. After comparing coffee girls with geishas and hostesses I will continue to look for possibilities for coffee girls to choose differently in their lives. To clarify my position and to anchor my studies in sociology, gender studies and studies of Japanese society, I use the terms *fragile resistance* (Konttinen 2004, 126-127) and *kawaii culture* (Konttinen 2004, 127-129; also Turkki, 2005, 27). I have joined these two terms together in the term *playful innocence*. With this term I refer to the idea that these girls may not be as passive as they first seem, but that they are actually actively making choices about their lives by behaving and not behaving according to the gender expectations. The term *bad girls* (Foreman 2005, 33), which underlines the independence of geishas, will also be discussed as a possible term for describing coffee girls.

## Geishas, hostesses and coffee girls

The lines of work of a geisha, a hostess and a coffee girl are similar to each other. However, they are also part of their respective cultures and have their own unique characteristics because of that. Geisha culture is an entity of its own, hostessing is part of *mizu shobai* and coffee girls are part of *kawaii culture*. According to professor Ilmari

Vesterinen, the geisha culture is a living culture that uses traditional ways to entertain. It has a long history and it is an appreciated part of Japanese culture. The geisha culture is also classed as one of the cultural minorities in Japan, as for example the Ainu culture (Vesterinen 2001, 69; 95-96). Geishas undergo strict training and they have to learn many skills to become an artist. They are taught to dance difficult traditional dances, to play different kinds of traditional instruments and to sing professionally. Traditional art forms such as ikebana and tea ceremony are also part of a geisha's expertise (Vesterinen 2001, 37; also Foreman 2005, 34).

A geisha may be very independent and live by herself, and may also avoid marriage, if she prefers to do so. She is employed through a geisha house, where she takes the role of geisha. The place for meeting the customer is a so called no-man's-land, a liminal space, such as a teahouse. The geisha performs her role without revealing her true identity and the customer is expected to know the script of the meeting (Vesterinen, 45-48; 69). Surprisingly, entertaining customers is not mentioned as one of the skills of a geisha. But as Vesterinen points out, the most important roles of a geisha actually involve the skill to talk to a man as if he was a big leader and to be a so-called mother confessor, who has the ability to understand and hold any secrets that are shared with her (Vesterinen 2001, 76).

Hostesses also attend to their customers by serving them drinks and by listening to their troubles just like their more traditional sisters do. The growing amount of hostesses is explained by the need for more entertainers as the amount of geishas has been declining. The fact that the services of a hostess are usually less expensive compared to those of a geisha, might also explain their increasing popularity. Hostesses keep up the conversation in no-man's-land, usually in a bar or a night club. They give male customers a feeling of leadership and masculinity just like geishas do. Contrary to geishas, they do not get long training for this work, but instead, they learn it by doing it. Working as a hostess is also quite a temporary stage in a woman's life, which tempts young women because it is a quick way to earn money (Vesterinen 2001, 82-85, 92; Allison 1994, 59). Hostesses are understood as part of mizu shobai (water business), which usually means night-time entertainment. Even if they basically serve their customers as geishas do, the sexual aspect is more clearly visible in their work than in the work of geishas (See e.g. Allison 1994, 59-60.).

Coffee girls seem to have adopted quite a lot both from geisha culture and from the work of hostesses, but their work seems to be an updated version of the work of these entertainers. During the fall of 2005 I had a chance to visit @home coffee shop in Akihabara, in the technology district of Tokyo. This sugary pink and kawaii (cute) coffee shop is usually full to capacity and there are usually people waiting in line to get inside. The coffee girls are dressed up as very cute manga waitresses and in this way, they are a part of this subculture of fantasy and romance. Coffee girls offer services just like geishas and hostesses do. They make their customers feel like a leader, calling them master, and they are ready to offer motherly care, even feeding them their meal. A paid ritual can for example consist of having a game session with a coffee girl or being massaged by a coffee girl (Akibanana.com, 2009).

When you look for similarities between these three groups of women, it is possible to say that the work of coffee girls is in some ways adopted from the geisha culture and also from the work of hostesses. The work of all of these entertainers takes place in a so called no-man's-land, and all women in these occupations assume a role in the workplace. All of these occupations are based on women taking care of male customers who are flattered with phrases that strengthen their masculinity or sense of leadership.

The differences between these groups of women grow from the cultural disparities behind them. Geisha culture is an old and traditional way of living. The geisha entertains the customer and the customer is expected to know the script of the play. Hostesses work among male customers at nighttime and a lot of alcohol is involved. Of these three occupations, their work is most openly sexual. The work of a geisha is a way of living, but hostessing, as well as being a coffee girl, is usually a temporary job taken to earn some quick money (See e.g. Vesterinen 2001, 92). Coffee girls work, as do geishas and hostesses, entertaining their customers. In this manner coffee girls are reflections of the lived cultures of geishas and hostesses. The difference is that the place and the costume they wear also make them part of the so-called kawaii culture, where things are still quite innocent and playful compared to the world of geisha culture with its strict rules of performance, or compared to the role of hostesses as sexual objects.

## **Feminism and fragile resistance in the Japan of individuality**

Japanese culture has changed in how people are connected to their social groups. This means that Japanese culture cannot be delivered to new generations as it was done for generations before them. Work as the main essence of

life and the position of being a woman and a man has been challenged. Individuality has become more central in Japanese society, which was previously built on traditional values without individual needs (Valaskivi & Hoikkala 2006, 217).

Younger generations in Japan want to be free and choose differently because they live in a wealthy society where the citizens have lost the need to work as hard as possible in order to reach a reasonable standard of living. Their life is all about experiences, enjoyment and pleasure. This new way of living becomes more interesting, when it is pointed out that this new lifestyle is controlled by the younger generations themselves by creating new rules that fit them better than the existing ones (See e.g. Valaskivi & Hoikkala 2006, 228-229; Turkki 2005, 27). Due to this change in Japanese society, the older and younger generations differ from each other in their loyalty to society. They also have a different understanding of individual needs and life in general. Especially girls or young women have their ways to avoid old traditional gender roles. This does not mean that these girls or young women are feminist in any way, but there is a chance that their actions are a sign of resistance to current society.

There is a living feminist movement in Japan, but nevertheless, the most radical movement works underground. These feminists who follow the so-called radical feminist movement no longer fit in the system, where you still need to be very feminine and adorable in every possible way. Therefore, it is explained, that younger generations probably have no idea of gender equality as it was understood for example in the 1970s, when feminist ideas started to take shape as its own movement (See e.g. Konttinen 2004, 123-126). This may also partly explain the existence of services, as explained here, which are based on male customers' need to buy female care. These occupations of geisha, hostess and coffee girl do not seem to support gender equality in any way, but again the way these servants see their position and the culture they are a part of, may give them a chance to resist the fixed position of Japanese women.

Japan researcher and sociologist Annamari Konttinen explains that, in Japanese culture, women are still understood in terms of a dichotomy, as the opposite of men. A woman's place is at home in the private sphere as a companion to the man who works in the public sphere. Konttinen also mentions the opportunity to attend the public sphere and work outside the home. These women are called modern women, whose choice usually means mixing together private home life and public working life, which may create many conflicts and multiple role expectations and make these women's lives very challenging (Konttinen 2004, 120-122).

Several young women do not take their roles as given, and a modern woman's life is not what they are looking for either. These young women have even found exits to a bigger personal freedom than was possible for previous generations. Konttinen argues that this group of young women conduct fragile resistance. These young women look for personal freedom through small changes and they rethink their existing positions to reach their goals. For example, they choose professions which allow them to give up family life. This way they keep out even from the destiny of modern women and their complex lifestyle. It is noticeable that these actions are not necessarily political, but that they are based on their individual dreams and expectations of life rather than some overall ideology or agenda (Konttinen 2004, 126-127; See also Turkki 2005, 25).

### **Being kawaii and bad, but playfully innocent**

A phenomenon that supports these new individual needs of Japanese young women is the kawaii culture. This culture was born in the 1970s and it has its background in the worlds of manga, fantasy and romance (Konttinen 2004, 127-129). Japan researcher Teppo Turkki has argued that Japanese young people do not want to grow old. The world of games, technologies, role-play and kawaii culture hides all the unpleasant sides of real life and offers young people an opportunity to forget the world around them. In this way, life is spent in a never-ending childhood among nice things and fantasies of manga and anime stories (Turkki, 2005, 27). Thus the young women who are part of this culture are able to conduct fragile resistance in their lives and stay away from the world of adults.

The work of coffee girls first looks like a highway to a world of adults' play, where the old dichotomies and gender roles are still alive and re-represented in a new form that fits the new generations. However, I would rather explain their choice to take this role of entertainer through the term playful innocence. This term makes sense if the coffee girls are understood as part of kawaii culture, which gives them a chance to avoid adulthood and the responsibilities it entails. This way, they also conduct fragile resistance as explained earlier.

Kelly Foreman, researcher of Japanese music and geisha culture, explains that women who have been trained as a geisha have been understood as bad girls. In Japan, the avoidance of family responsibility and monogamy in order to focus on a career in the performing arts renders geishas bad in a society that measures female goodness

in terms of humility and loyalty. On the other hand, the term bad girl is used to refer to a geisha because of the misunderstanding that geishas are prostitutes (Foreman 2005 33; 42). Either way, I interpret that it is possible to understand being a bad girl as a sign of resistance to current society.

I argue that being playfully innocent is possible inside the kawaii culture, and that by adopting the spirit of the geisha culture, coffee girls continue the line of bad girls. This way, coffee girls again reflect the geisha culture as part of their work. They are being bad girls, influencing their own destiny which has otherwise been easily dictated by Japanese society.

## Will being bad and kawaii save you from your destiny?

For a Western researcher the work of coffee girls is an amazing journey to a world of contradictions. Coffee girls, as well as geishas, seem to be controlled by their customers in their role as servants and also because of their gender. Nevertheless, they are at the same time very much in charge of their lives. These contradictions are revealed when studying the issue in the context of agency and understanding individual choices as a possibility to enact one's gender differently.

The work of a coffee girl has the same characteristics as the work of a geisha or a hostess. In this way, coffee girls reflect these other living and lived cultures. In their work, all these three groups of women, with geisha culture being the mother culture of the other two, show a way to resist expected gender roles. The biggest difference, beside the fact that the work of a coffee girl, or a hostess, is not as strict as the work of a geisha, is that coffee girls are inside their kawaii world and have their own unique way to resist current society. This fragile resistance means making choices to reach individual aims rather than choosing as the society around the coffee girls is pushing them to choose.

Playful innocence is probably not a sign of coffee girls being feminists. However, when coffee girls conduct fragile resistance and are playfully innocent, they are able to take this mental step away from the real world which is very much about being an entertainer adhering to the rules of the customer. Thus, this action itself is possible to understand as a feminist action. As a conclusion, it is possible to argue that coffee girls are rewriting their position as Japanese girls and women in their own fragile but determined way.

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