

# Introduction

## *The Maiko, Kyoto's Apprentice Geisha*

Arrive in Kyoto by train and you will see all manner of *maiko*—apprentice geisha—before you even leave the station. The quintessential Kyoto girl, she is the city's mascot and character brand, literally, its “dancing girl,” as the characters *mai* and *ko* indicate, and her likeness appears everywhere. Perky maiko grace maps, menus, and posters of the city's ancient gardens and temples. Milky maiko smile at you from the foam atop steaming cups of cappuccino and matcha latte (figure 1). In the station's souvenir shops, doll-like maiko in bright kimono morph into kawaii Post-it notes, hand towels, key chains, and candy wrappers. With luck, you may even catch sight of a real maiko, her distinctive hairstyle making her instantly recognizable, as she embarks on her own travels.

In April 2008, apprentices made the news when their numbers rose.<sup>1</sup> For the first time since 1955, Kyoto had one hundred maiko. Of course, other Japanese girls in unusual garb captured media attention at home and abroad around this time, too—sporting Lolita fashion, costumed for maid cafés, or uniformed for singing in AKB48—but the maiko stood for the traditions of Kyoto.<sup>2</sup> No wonder the so-called “maiko boom” occurred in tandem with a surge in domestic tourism to Kyoto. Driven by excitement over the purported thousand-year anniversary of Murasaki Shikibu's legendary *Tale of Genji*, Japan's most celebrated work of fiction and poetry, tourists flocked to Kyoto in 2008 to experience the “old capital.”<sup>3</sup> Maiko numbers fell somewhat in succeeding years but steadied at about eighty in 2012, where they hover in 2020. Enchantment with the maiko in the 2000s has sparked new Kyoto tourist activities and inspired popular media nationally. Maiko blogs, interviews,



FIGURE 1. Maiko Cappuccino at Caffè Ciao Presso in Kyoto Station, 2018. Courtesy of Kintetsu Retailing, Inc.

and dance performances, maiko-related goods, and even maiko movies and television dramas extended the boost in maiko numbers to a broader cultural moment. Photo studios offering maiko costume play mushroomed in Kyoto, attracting domestic and international tourists to don maiko wigs, makeup, and garments, creating the vogue for strolling in the old capital as a faux maiko. Clearly, representations of the maiko far exceeded her numbers in 2008 and continue to do so in 2020, suggesting that the millennial maiko as an emblem of Kyoto girlhood has struck a chord reaching far beyond her actual presence. Investigating this fascination as it took shape in early twenty-first-century Japanese media and popular culture is the subject of this book.

Exploring this phenomenon, I examine representations of the maiko as a cultural icon of Japanese girlhood for a national audience. This focus takes us to an appealing variety of popular books, films, TV series, and visual texts, generally aimed at broad audiences, produced in Japan mainly in the 2000s, and largely created by women.<sup>4</sup> Certain themes surface across the textual field, shaping these millennial representations of the maiko. Most importantly, we find active efforts to erase past interpretations of the maiko as a victim, observing how 1950s films, for example, commonly depicted her as an innocent with a limited future and inferior social status, whose sexuality was for sale. Banishing this stigma released the maiko's image for a host of new stories appropriate to late twentieth- and twenty-first-century Japan. Fundamentally, the maiko came to symbolize the hardworking young artist, the chaste keeper of traditions, and the exemplary Japanese girl. This transformation, which appears to have occurred over the postwar period, also elevated the maiko's Kyoto community as a site of deeply rooted cultural values. Occurring near the end of Japan's Lost Decades, a long recessionary period rocked by bank failures, natural disaster, and horrific crimes, the maiko boom elicited reassuring images of the past preserved and renovated with playful flourish.<sup>5</sup> Amid a conservative backlash in the 2000s in Japan against the nation's gender-equity initiatives of the 1990s, the maiko as quintessential Kyoto girl may have calmed anxieties about the blurring of gender identities.<sup>6</sup> As we will see, the maiko also stood in contrast to media hype over high school girls in the late 1990s, whose alleged delinquency and promiscuity, critics charged, threatened the health of the nation.

Millennial maiko narratives stress agency, underscoring that the apprentice has chosen this path of her own accord, largely due to her love of kimono and dance, and not because anyone pushed her into it. As the stigma of sexual servitude receded, replaced by emphasis on girls' agency, the notion of the exemplary *maiko-rashii maiko*, that is, the impeccably comported "maiko-like maiko" arose. As I suggest throughout the book, the perfection inherent in "maiko-likeness" has motivated various tropes of masquerade, inspiring maiko narratives of "ordinary Japanese girls" and even one ordinary boy in disguise striving to meet this ideal. Such narratives of masquerade speak to the effort and pleasure of performing femininity in millennial Japan, reinforcing the boundaries of gender while posing possibilities for subverting them. Comic interpretations, ones that spoof the pretensions of "maiko-likeness" and Kyoto as a world-heritage city, proliferate too, playing with the maiko image

to produce a lighter, even satiric look. Lastly, we also see how the maiko as exemplar of millennial Japanese girlhood motivates contrasting visions of the “ordinary Japanese girl”—the maiko’s hometown girlfriend or sister, the maiko before her transformation, or even the maiko incognito on her day off. In the book’s conclusion, I argue that constructions of both maiko and ordinary girls tell us much about girlhood in Japan, illuminating narratives of personal choice, gender-appropriate roles, regional and ethnic identity, and the performance of idealized and contradictory femininities.

This favored attention to the maiko piques curiosity about *geiko*, the preferred appellation for geisha in Kyoto, and the one that I shall use for them in this book. After all, she has long been a cultural icon of Japan and exists in greater numbers today in Kyoto than the maiko. Small numbers of geisha are still active in Tokyo and other parts of Japan, but this book concentrates solely on Kyoto, *geiko*, and maiko.<sup>7</sup> As an arts professional, the *geiko* may pursue a lifetime career and develop as a leader in her community. Regarded as an expert in kimono and Japanese etiquette, the *geiko* can also exemplify Japanese femininity and *iki*, an insouciant chic.<sup>8</sup> Some millennial books about maiko, especially photo essays, may follow a woman’s transition to becoming a *geiko*, but, rather like romances that end with weddings, the story tends to stop there. Personal accounts published in the 2000s by former *geiko* emphasize their years as maiko even though they spent many more as *geiko*. Maiko narratives in films, fiction, and narrative manga in the 2000s represent the *geiko* as an ambiguous figure, uncomfortably associated with accumulated wealth, independence outside marriage, and single motherhood. It is one thing to cheer on the hardworking, chaste girl, whose future remains open, but another to root for the *geiko*. Anthropologist and expert on geisha culture Liza Dalby writes, “As Japanese women, the most important social fact about geisha is that they are not wives. Geisha and wives are mutually exclusive categories because of the way women’s roles have traditionally been defined in Japan.”<sup>9</sup> Wives are defined as keepers of home and children, while geisha “inhabit a space where men get together on neutral territory to socialize.”<sup>10</sup> Throughout this book, we will encounter different portraits of the *geiko* in Kyoto and geisha in the rest of Japan. In the conclusion, I argue that the ambivalence evident toward the *geiko* in millennial texts speaks to a broader discomfort in Japan with financially independent, career-focused single women.

What kinds of maiko stories preceded and attended the maiko boom? I introduce diverse narratives here by showing how they shape this book’s

chapters. I begin by describing the three chapters that I base on nonfiction books. This literature, comprised of popular histories, photography books, tourist guides, and academic studies, extols the *hanamachi* (the “flower districts” where geiko and maiko reside) and aims to preserve the community as a cultural site relevant to all Japanese.<sup>11</sup> Chapter 1, “The Maiko’s Hanamachi Home,” shows how such books introduce the history of the hanamachi, the community’s values, the teahouse system, and the roles of women in leadership and men as clients. Chapter 2, “The Well-Mannered Career Path,” explains the maiko-geiko career path and the values underpinning each stage, including maiko-likeness, by examining hanamachi etiquette guides and autobiographical books, all mainly authored by women. Moving to personal accounts, chapter 3, “Life in the Hanamachi: Voices of Maiko and Geiko,” explores how three women—former geiko Kiriki Chizu, geiko Yamaguchi Kimijo, and maiko Kamishichiken Ichimame—all maiko in different decades, ranging from the 1960s to the early 2000s—reflect on performing their public roles, developing as dancers, and their lessons learned.

Turning to fictional maiko narratives in chapters 4, 5, and 6, we encounter a range of stories from tragedy to comedy, fantastical adventures, and even absurd maiko portraits. Genres include film, TV, manga, light fiction, and comic art. Exploring mass-mediated stories, we take up five narratives produced in Japan from the 1950s through 2020, analyzing changing perceptions of the maiko’s social status and mission. Chapter 4, “From Victim to Artist: Maiko Stories in Movies and Manga,” opens with the 1950s maiko characterized as an impoverished girl in need of rescue in two quite different films: the 1953 drama *Gion bayashi* (released in the United States as *A Geisha*) and the 1955 musical comedy *Janken musume* (released in the United States as *So Young, So Bright*). The fraught life of a maiko in the late 1960s, based on former geiko Iwasaki Mineko’s 2001 autobiography, informs Yamato Waki’s manga, *Kurenai niou* (*Crimson fragrance*, 2003–07), a lavishly drawn story of a fiercely independent young artist, who fights against stigma.<sup>12</sup> Two other narratives of maiko produced in the 2000s take a much gentler approach, casting the maiko as an innocent artist and the hanamachi as her protective home. The 2008–09 series *Dandan* (*Thank you*), an NHK-TV morning drama broadcast nationally, follows the escapades of maiko Nozomi and her rural twin, Megumi, who meet for the first time as eighteen-year-olds, exploring how they mature over the next several years, growing up loyal to their hanamachi and countryside families. Koyama Aiko’s manga *Maiko-san-chi no Makanai-san* (*Miss Cook*

for the maiko girls)—begun in 2016 and still running in 2020—revolves around home-cooked food, girl friendships, and ordinary girls’ struggles to manage appetites while striving to perform as maiko-like maiko. Moving to an imaginary boy’s experience of maiko life takes us to chapter 5, “Adventures of a Boy Maiko.” In her 2002–14 light novel series, *Shōnen maiko: Chiyogiku ga yuku!* (Boy maiko: There goes Chiyogiku!), Nanami Haruka reimagines the maiko as an icon for gender play. Creating tall tales, Nanami depicts the boy Mikiya alternating between the language, behavioral codes, and sentiments of a middle school boy and his weekend masquerade as maiko Chiyogiku. This fantastical view of maiko continues in chapter 6, “Hit a Homer, Maiko! Maiko Visual Comedy,” as we consider humorous visual texts found in two prominent Kyoto sites: the legendary textile firm Eirakuya and the Kyoto International Manga Museum. Here we find maiko pictured in absurd situations, even engaging in sports in full costume, or their masquerade extended by morphing across different species and with other icons. We observe how artists tease us to guess who is behind the mask, posing both an ordinary teenage girl and interlopers embracing the guise of girl consciousness. The conclusion, “The Ordinary Girl in the Maiko Masquerade,” wraps up *Maiko Masquerade* by reflecting on the alternate portraits of girlhood in Japan represented by fictions of the maiko and her foil, the ordinary Japanese girl, and considers the ambivalence directed toward geiko.

Having sketched out the book’s chapters and maiko sources, I use the remainder of this introduction to set the stage for *Maiko Masquerade*’s journey into representation. I begin with a historical overview of the maiko—her current position, her changing legal and social status, her relationship to other stigmatized girl figures, and, briefly, her role in modern art. Moving to her iconic costume, I show how the maiko’s distinctive look extends to the touristic commerce of cosplay, character branding, and the souvenirs of millennial *Japonisme*. Despite its anachronistic quality, the maiko’s look confirms her as a *shōjo*, the girl-character long associated with the self-expression of girls’ culture in modern Japan. The maiko’s *shōjo* resonance inspires millennial fiction and manga, and brands Kyoto itself as *shōjo* territory. Turning to academic research on geisha, I connect *Maiko Masquerade* to a wealth of English-language scholarship on geisha, especially on the history of their representations. All this leads me to what I find most interesting in maiko texts—the themes of masquerade. I trace the concepts of masquerade relevant here, opening a new perspective on millennial maiko stories.

## WHAT IS A MAIKO?

Contemporary maiko are young women, typically between fifteen and twenty years of age, who have chosen to train in an arts profession with roots in the merchant culture and pleasure quarters of the Edo period (1603–1867). Their archaic hairstyles and kimono link them to this artistic past, easily identifying them as maiko. Although other geisha communities in Japan once had apprentices, too, the maiko is famously a Kyoto phenomenon today.<sup>13</sup> Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the maiko's community and her career path in detail, but here, in brief, are the defining features of her life in the 2000s. Maiko live and work with geiko in one of Kyoto's five hanamachi, neighborhoods that are the historic and current sites of exclusive teahouses. True to their title as "dancing girls," maiko spend their days in rigorous training in traditional Japanese dance, music, and other arts, joining geiko at evening teahouse parties where they may dance for small groups of mostly male clients. Maiko also perform in spectacular dance productions open to the public in spring and fall and take visible roles in Kyoto festivals. They often promote Kyoto products and tourism by appearing in commercials and booster events in Japan and abroad. Although over 90 percent of maiko in the 2000s hail from outside Kyoto, all must master the lilting Kyoto dialect of Japanese used in the hanamachi—uniformly described by maiko as the hardest part of their training, even for Kyoto-born girls. They must become adept in the customs, dress, and etiquette of these communities. Eligibility requirements are not strict, but the training is, and succeeding in this training can mean going from ordinary teen to a kind of Kyoto celebrity.

Photographs of maiko taken over the past hundred years document the continuity of her costume. But the nature of the maiko's apprenticeship has changed radically over time in terms of her age and obligations. The origins of the role are somewhat hazy. Andrew Maske, an expert on Japanese art, finds few references to maiko in documents of the Edo period, and observes that the maiko "came to specifically mean 'an apprentice geisha dancer,' usually from Kyoto, in the Meiji period (1868–1912)."<sup>14</sup> Author and photographer Kyoko Aihara, who has documented the hanamachi in several books, writes that the practice of inviting local girls who studied dance to perform at banquets in the Pontochō hanamachi near the Kamo River in the 1800s may have been one of the origins of the maiko.<sup>15</sup> By the late 1800s, we observe maiko emblemizing Kyoto in modern art. For one example, the 1893 painting *Maiko* by Kuroda Seiki, designated an Important Cultural Property, features an intent maiko as she sits