

## Memoirs of a Geisha Film Review:

*"People think of the geisha as a prostitute, because prostitutes started wearing white makeup and silk kimonos and calling themselves geishas, and the line became blurred. But the actual word means 'artist.' Yes, they entertain men. But, more important, they're great dancers and musicians and great conversationalists. They were also the fashionistas of their time. They were like supermodels."...Rob Marshall*

*"A story like mine should never be told... I wasn't born to a life of a Geisha"...Sayuri Nitta*



**"In 1929 an impoverished nine-year-old named Chiyo from a fishing village is sold to a Geisha house in Kyoto's Gion district and subjected to cruel treatment from the owners and the head Geisha Hatsumomo. Her stunning beauty attracts the vindictive jealousy of Hatsumomo, until she is rescued by and taken under the wing of Hatsumomo's bitter rival, Mameha. Under Mameha's mentorship, Chiyo becomes the Geisha named Sayuri, trained in all the artistic and social skills a Geisha must master in order to survive in her society. As a renowned Geisha she enters a society of wealth, privilege, and political intrigue. As World War II looms Japan and the Geisha's world are forever changed by the onslaught of history"... dumpster\_cakes, IMDB.com**



I liked *Memoirs of a Geisha* a lot because it is a great example of how to correctly and smartly retell the immortal classic *Cinderella* saga with passion, respect and excitement. In recent years Hollywood has whipped out several teenage *Cinderella* rip-offs like Anne Hathaway's *Ella Enchanted*, Julia Stiles's *The Prince and Me*, and Hilary Duff's *A Cinderella Story*. But *Memoirs of a Geisha* is a highly entertaining and original tale because it is set in a Far East world that is defined by its own standards and not Western assumptions. No one in pre-World War II Japan cares whether two young sisters have been sold into slavery or forced into a life of servitude. It is as routine as buying a chicken or a pound of sausage at the local market. When a nine-year-old Chiyo and her older sister Satsu are brought to an "okiya", a Geisha house, the cranky head mistress, Hatsumomo, instantly sizes up the sisters' fates. Chiyo has beautiful Western blue eyes and good looks so she has the highest potential of being trained to be a future Geisha. Since Satsu does not have what it takes looks-wise—she is sent to work at a local whorehouse. Living there Satsu would most likely grow up to become one of their prostitutes. And it is this subtle distinction that director Rob Marshall (*Chicago*) does a good job at separating the pampered life of a Geisha from a harsh, bleak common hooker's life. Although being a Geisha does not automatically mean a woman will sleep with her many male companions, there is a quiet understanding in 1930's Japan that rich, powerful men could sleep with them.

At first Rob Marshall makes one see being a Geisha through Chiyo's eyes as a long, hard, arduous and exciting journey of learning how to walk gracefully, mastering the art of fan dancing or playing shamisen, a Japanese guitar. Chiyo even at nine is allowed to go to Geisha school on the firm belief that she will be groomed into a fine and cultured lady. Years later Chiyo is taught how to steal a man's heart with just a glance. Chiyo is not going to school to better herself. She is basically going to school to learn how to best please men. The transformation is complete when Chiyo swaps her common fisherman's daughter name to become Sayuri Nitta. Sayuri is obviously a name of that befits a young Japanese woman of stature, elegance and grace, potential and unquestioned beauty. Casting Ziyi Zhang to play Sayuri was probably a popular and easy decision by Marshall and Spielberg. Any studio exec would want the biggest Asian-not Japanese-female stars. But it was the best decision. Zhang really lets her character grow and blossom naturally on screen. Ziyi Zhang hopefully Hollywood will give her more mainstream--big budget major lead roles from now on.



That is what Hollywood does best with *Memoirs*. It makes a film about a young women becoming a mysterious and highly valued manservant the most honorable, acceptable and highest honor a woman can achieve in pre-World War II Japan. Even the old and no longer used “mizu-age”, the Geisha tradition of men bidding on the virginity of a Geisha-to-be--is treated as an innocent contest between two rich suitors, Dr. Crab and The General. We--the audience--root for Sayuri to loose her virginity to the love of her life the Chairman, played by Ken Watanabe. But the film sort of explains that the Chairman cannot dishonor his friend The General by bidding on Sayuri’s virginity because the Chairman is more concerned with the General being happy than himself. And notably Sayuri would reluctantly accept The General as her first sexual experience because it would please her true love the Chairman. Furthermore, we even want Sayuri to get the highest virginity bid of a Geisha because the money will allow Sayuri to repay her high debts to Hatsumomo and become a top Geisha like her bitter rival Mameha. That is the beauty and irony of *Memoirs* is that it makes a viewer easily accept Japanese women being objectified and subservient to men in exactly the same manner that Gary Marshall made the world love Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. No one gave a damn that Julia played an expensive call girl. Julia became one of the world’s biggest international stars not because she was a great hooker, but rather Gary Marshall made an audience focus on us wanting Julia to escape her hooker lifestyle with “Mr. Right”—Richard Gere. Rob Marshall equally accomplishes the same thing by letting us hope that Sayuri will be able to be a top Geisha as well as end up with her Mr. Right—Ken Watanabe.

Although Ken Watanabe gave an impressive performance in *Last Samurai*, I felt he was just okay in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. His Chairman role was quite predictable and he was a little too damn passive. I mean he should have at least tried to intervene at the Baron’s resort to make sure Sayuri was not ravished by the Baron’s lustful intentions. They could have shown him upset or jealous or some damn emotion. Watanabe might have been burying his emotions for his character’s sake, but this was actually more an oversight of Marshall being a US director. He was far too more concerned when he was directing on how Sayuri’s scenes were presented than the Chairman’s story. We know nothing about him and why he is single and did not settle down. Mameha played by Michelle Yeoh was done well and not too over the top as Sayuri’s rival. I even liked Youki Kudoh as adult Pumpkin. Her bitter betrayal of Chiyo at the film’s climax only reinforces the *Cinderella* motif of having evil sisters.





Lastly I must say it was pleasure watching young and well-trained actor like twelve-year-old Suzuka Ohgo. She definitely has a bright future in films. Suzuka was at her best when she was acting with Michelle Yeoh. Their best scene was when Chiyo caught Mameha making out with her thug boyfriend, Koichi, played by Karl Une (*Anacondas: Hunt For Blood Orchid*). I must also give Ziyi Zhang her props again as Sayuri because the whole film is riding on her back. If she were not believable as a top Geisha than this film would be a cinematic train wreck. As far as the controversy over the non-Japanese or Pan Asian casting I'll leave that to be explored in a Los Angeles Times article below. It has been quoted in the media a few years ago that Rob Marshall said quite bluntly that there were no Japanese actresses suitable for Geisha roles. But if Hollywood never casts even new Japanese actresses in big budget films like *Memoirs* they may never get a break. Next summer Universal is releasing *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* set in Japan and there are no major female leads played by Japanese actresses. At least Devon Aoki was in *Furious 2*.

In Japan the real Japanese Geishas have no interest in supporting the *Memoirs*. The kimonos are not wrapped right, the Geisha hair is not done right, the white face make-up is not applied right—or at all in most of the film's Geisha scenes. Many will nitpick this film to death in Japan. But without Hollywood making even a flawed *Memoirs*--the only Asian females featured in leads would only be in martial arts and X-Men sequels. And if one does not have the time to read Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, then this Sony/Amblin adaptation will do. It should be noted that the book's real Geisha, Mineko Iwasaki, has sued Golden for millions because of alleged inaccuracies about her life story. One can watch a more realistic Hollywood Geisha film like Frédéric Mitterrand's *Madame Butterfly* or go rent a more authentic Japanese Geisha films like Juzo Itami's *Tale of a Golden Geisha* or Kinji Fukasaku's *The Geisha House*, but I believe one will not find a more satisfying, engaging and entertaining escapist Geisha fantasy film than *Memoirs*. I greatly recommend anyone watching *Memoirs of a Geisha* and that it get four cheesecakes out of five.

Sincerely,

*David L. Watts a.k.a. Money Train*



## *Memoirs of a Geisha* Asian Casting Controversy:

Los Angeles Times  
March 6, 2005



**'THE FIT':** The casting of Chinese actors was much debated at Sony. But Ziyi Zhang, who portrays Sayuri, is a star in Asia whose athleticism and dancer's training impressed director Rob Marshall.  
(David James / Columbia Pictures)

### The Geisha, in translation

- *In Rob Marshall's "Memoirs of a Geisha," with Chinese stars and a pan-Asian cast, will some essence go missing?*

*By Bruce Wallace, Times Staff Writer*

Every move Komomo makes is rooted in Japanese ritual. The way her body sinks to kneel, or how she uses just the fingertips of her right hand to slide open the wood-framed Japanese doors. The way she moves like smoke across the room on her dancer's toes.

Inside this cramped okiya, a household where aspiring Geishas such as Komomo study the way dance, music and conversation can spin an enchanting mood, every action is a piece of performance art based on Japanese tales whispered down through generations. "The dances are not just action; they are stories from our history, and you have to know that history to express it," says Koito, a retired Geisha who owns the okiya and watches over Komomo with a mentor's possession. "You really have to understand Japanese culture to understand Geishas."



**Bottling the Japanese essence is the challenge facing American film director Rob Marshall and producer Steven Spielberg as they try to bring Arthur Golden's bestselling 1997 novel, "Memoirs of a Geisha," alive onscreen. Marshall recently finished shooting and has begun editing the estimated \$85-million-budget movie, now scheduled for Christmas release.**

**But long before audiences have even seen a trailer, "Memoirs" has generated an underground controversy over the director's decision to cast non-Japanese actresses in the three leading Geisha parts. From the opaque alleys of Kyoto's Geisha districts to Internet movie chat rooms and the cast of the movie itself, the decision has created unease over what kind of footprint Hollywood will leave on this iconic element of traditional Japanese culture.**

**Declaring that "my only criteria was who's the best person for the role," Marshall chose China's Ziyi Zhang ("Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon") to play Sayuri, the fictional Japanese girl snatched from her humble fishing village and taken to a Kyoto okiya where she becomes the most celebrated Geisha of the 1930s.**



**Marshall then cast Gong Li, perhaps the most recognizable international Chinese star of her generation, as Sayuri's conniving rival, Hatsumomo. He picked Malaysian Michelle Yeoh, also of "Crouching Tiger" fame, to play the guiding mother figure, Mameha.**

**And he salted his vision of Japan's imperial age with supporting actors and extras from a multitude of Asian ethnicities.**

**The choice of a pan-Asian cast raises hard questions about the way Hollywood views the world outside America. By using Chinese actors in quintessential Japanese roles, has Marshall become the Quiet American director, an innocent abroad, shaving the edges off human diversity to produce an imagined Japan for an American audience that doesn't know the real thing?**

**Or is it a progressive act, as Marshall says, nothing more sinister than hiring the best-qualified actors, regardless of ethnicity, to do what actors do: act?**

**"Geisha is a part of Japan's eternal culture," leading Chinese director Chen Kaige ("Farewell, My Concubine") said at a symposium on Asian values at Japan's Kobe University last November. Chen has directed Gong in three movies, but he sharply criticized Marshall's decision to cast her and other non-Japanese actresses as Geishas. "Every action you make, how you walk, how you use a Japanese fan, how you treat people and what kind of facial expressions you have when you talk is going to be expressed based on your Japanese cultural sophistication," he said. "Japanese culture, as well as Chinese [culture], has something very profound which can't be easily expressed.**

**"For Hollywood, however, this does not matter. For them, there is no difference between Japanese and Chinese."**

**The studio responded to Kaige's comments by pointing out that he once expressed an interest in directing the film. Golden, the author, did not return phone calls seeking comment. For his part, Marshall counters by saying that he is proud of what he calls "nontraditional casting."**

**"I'm not doing a documentary of the Geisha world — this is a fable," the director said in a phone interview during a break from editing in Culver City. "I'm very proud of an international cast. It is a celebration of the Asian community. I think it brings the world together."**

**Into the past Cross-CULTURAL casting is nothing new to Hollywood. After all, Al Jolson was not just a white man in blackface. He was a Lithuanian Jew. Marshall points out that the coveted role of Scarlett O'Hara went to English rose Vivien Leigh, Egyptian Omar Sharif played the Russian Dr. Zhivago, and American Johnny Depp was perfectly credible as Scotsman J.M. Barrie last year in "Finding Neverland." But the Chinese-Japanese relationship is significantly more fraught than the one between the United States and Scotland. The Asian neighbors share a history of invasion, occupation and brutality over the last century that has left millions dead and memories scarred.**

**"Memoirs of a Geisha" is set during the 1930s imperial period in Japan, when Japanese troops were marauding across Asia, conscripting tens of thousands of Chinese and Korean men into slave labor and forcing "comfort women" to provide sex to Japanese soldiers. In the name of throwing the Western powers out of Asia, Japan's militarist government claimed to be uniting Asians under its leadership, and argued that Korea and the parts of China it had conquered were no longer foreign countries but a part of Japan.**

**Ironically, the military government used Geishas as a propaganda tool to spread the notion that Japan had united the countries of Asia in one happy pan-Asian family. In the late 1930s, Kyoto's annual springtime Miyako Odori dance celebrated such monstrous events as the Japanese conquest of Nanking, where thousands of Chinese civilians were killed in a slaughter that is still a pulsing wound between the countries.**



Marshall's response is that he does not know — and does not care — about that history. "I don't go into that world of Japan and China," the director says. "That's something I can't speak about because I don't know the relationship there. That's not what I'm doing. I'm re-creating a work of fiction as a filmmaker.

"If I were a political being and that was something I was interested in and a part of, that would be something I would be focused on," he says. "But that's not where my focus is. My focus is bringing this to life."

Others argue it is critical that Hollywood pay attention to the subtleties of history and politics. The rest of the world is judging American values, they say, and one of the criteria is whether Americans can see foreign cultures as something more than a pretty backdrop, more than an exotic stereotype to be appropriated and marketed.

"Americans are too often oblivious to distinctions between Asian cultures, and Hollywood should not be encouraging that," says Merry White, an anthropology professor at Boston University who was a consultant on Golden's book. "History has to be recognized. The world is watching us, to see how we see them."

Marshall acknowledges that casting a movie of mixed cultural complexion was not his original preference. The director says he spent a year searching for a Japanese actress with the combination of dancing skills, beauty and English proficiency to play Sayuri.

"She also had to be someone who could hold a movie, carry it on her back," Marshall said. "I felt like I was casting Scarlett O'Hara."

Several years ago, Steven Spielberg found a Japanese Sayuri. He acquired the rights to "Memoirs" in 1997 (back then, Akira Kurosawa, the legendary Japanese film director who was a friend and hero to the American director, was pressing him to shoot the movie in Japanese with English subtitles) and within a year, he cast Rika Okamoto, a Tokyo-born, New York-based dancer, in the lead.

"I was very lucky at that time," Okamoto said in a phone interview from New York, where she now dances in the Tony Award-winning "Movin' Out." But filming kept getting postponed and, "as things dragged on, I had to move on with my life," she says.

Okamoto says she understands why there is a debate about the ethnicity of the actor who replaced her. "People are sensitive about this; Japanese culture has always been mis-described in American movies," she says. "Japanese people are very proud of their culture, and Geisha is a special part of that culture."

But she is sanguine despite losing the role and praises Marshall's choices as "very talented actors."

"It's a Hollywood movie," she says. "I understand what happened because I'm in show business. And this is his show."

## Casting a wide net

But "Memoirs" had trouble getting liftoff. Filming was postponed, in part, by a lawsuit over Golden's book from Geisha Mineko Iwasaki, who had given the author a behind-the-sliding-door tour of the Geisha world, then declared that the book's references to sex-for-sale tarnished her reputation. Spielberg gave up plans to direct the movie in 2002 (though he remains as executive producer), eventually turning direction over to Marshall, who was looking for a suitable project to follow "Chicago," his dazzling directing debut.

Marshall says he auditioned and looked at tapes of "dozens and dozens of Japanese actors" but couldn't find one who met all his criteria for Sayuri. (Okamoto says Marshall never called her. "I auditioned for it again, of course," she says. Her videotape was rejected.)

"I said, 'Guys, we need to cast a wider net,' " Marshall recalls. Back in New York, he met and auditioned Zhang. "I had seen her in 'Crouching Tiger' and thought she was beautiful," he says, adding with a laugh that Spielberg had rejected Zhang for a part in "Memoirs" years earlier because the only English words she knew at the time were "hire me."

But the new director was taken by Zhang's athleticism and her dancer's training. "It was the fit," he says. "It was the slipper."

The decision to cast Chinese actresses in the main roles was widely debated at Sony Pictures — a Japanese company, after all — and by the movie's producers, including Spielberg. In a movie without a big-name male lead, Zhang's rising star power in the West had appeal. She is already a superstar in Asia and is well-known in Japan.

She even does a Japanese shampoo commercial, although she doesn't try to pass herself off as Japanese. The product is called Asiasense, and the marketing promises to give Japanese women a pan-Asian look.

"We talked about it at length and we said, 'What about this [or that] Japanese actress, would she work?' " Marshall recalls of the casting discussions. "And I said: 'Yes, but you know what? She's not as good.' And everybody agreed."

Unlike "The Last Samurai," which was well received in Japan and used Japanese extras, casting calls for extras in "Memoirs" asked only for "light-skinned Asians." Asked if there were any limits to nontraditional casting, Marshall replies: "None." Asked if there were any roles that might be sacred to a culture, making nontraditional casting inappropriate — such as hiring a Palestinian actor to play an Israeli political hero — he again responds that he isn't a political person. "That's another world for me," he says.

Some of his cast members had doubts, however. Marshall says he could tell that Japan's Ken Watanabe, who plays the leading male role of the Chairman, was "reticent" about the casting. He says Watanabe was won over seeing rushes of Zhang's performance.

At least one Asian actor balked at taking part.

"Since it is a film by Steven Spielberg and Rob Marshall, I first thought maybe I should just close my eyes tight and just do it," said Kim Yoon-Jin, a Korean American actress now starring in the U.S. TV drama "Lost," who says she was offered — but turned down — a supporting role in "Memoirs."

"Even if it is Hollywood, I don't want to start by playing a Japanese Geisha," she told the Korean media. "It's a matter of pride."

Marshall says he was encouraged by the reaction of the Japanese media to the movie after he and some of the cast gave a news conference in Tokyo at the conclusion of filming. He showed a few clips from the movie and described the reaction as "unbelievably supportive."

But there was some grumbling about the preview clips in Japan's combative large-circulation weekly magazines, whose reviewers picked apart "mistakes" they said damaged the film's authenticity. In particular, they complained about a scene where a young girl is whipped by a Geisha, something experts say never happened during that period.

"Well, I'm doing a version of the book," Marshall says. "And in Arthur's book, they were whipped."

Even so, there is little indication that the movie is about to cause riots in Japan. Most Japanese seem prepared to discount any distortions or insensitivities as inevitable in another Americanized view of their culture.

It is a long list, including such entries as Bugs Bunny's appearance in Geisha drag whacking a sumo wrestler over the head with a mallet in 1944's "Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips."

"The Geisha movies of the 1960s and '70s seem so clichéd," Marshall says. "Little Japanese dolls, rubbing men's backs. In fact, the Geishas of the '20s, '30s and '40s were the supermodels of their time."

**Younger audience**

Zhang is also an extremely appealing actor, who could very well draw younger Japanese fans who have admired her dazzling work in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "House of Flying Daggers." Japanese actress Kaori Momoi, who is cast as the mistress of the Geisha teahouse, told reporters in Tokyo she believes Marshall's



approach will appeal to younger Japanese. Though she said she was initially shocked by the casting of Chinese actresses, she came to realize "that the book is told through the eyes of an American and for the film, further filtered through an American director's lens."

"I wanted to play up my nationality," she said. "There were some details that were wrong, such as the makeup wasn't thick enough on the Geisha. But in the end, I think this modern twist on Geishas will appeal to younger audiences."

In Kyoto, the Geishas (known here as geikos) and maikos, their apprentices, are accustomed to being portrayed as a living cliché. "When I look at Geishas on TV or in the movies — even Japanese movies — I shouldn't laugh, but it is totally different from our lives," Koito says from behind the bar of her okiya.

Kneeling across from her, Komomo nods. She is 19, Tokyo-born but spent her high school years living in China, where her businessman father was based. She loved historical novels of Kyoto as a young girl and from the time she was 12 longed to become a Geisha. She sees it as an assertion of her Japanese identity.

"When I lived in China I had Chinese friends, and my impression was they had a totally different kind of awareness and essence," Komomo says in the soft song of her adopted Kyoto accent. "So even though they are actresses, I don't know how they will play a Japanese Geisha in a movie.

"When we watch Japanese films about Geishas, it usually leaves us unsatisfied," she says. "This movie will be made by a non-Japanese, with non-Japanese actresses. So we'll see."

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