

ARTS & IDEAS

Japan through Hollywood's distorting lens

The film that annoys everyone: 'Memoirs of a Geisha' has sparked uproar in China and Japan alike, Andrew Lee writes

One of the biggest films to come out over the holiday period will be the film version of Arthur Golden's novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Like the book, which spent two years on the New York Times bestseller list, the film – produced by Steven Spielberg – is set to be a huge success. The first big Hollywood movie to have an entirely Asian cast in the lead roles, it has all the ingredients of a blockbuster: big-name stars, an award-winning production crew and a wonderful Cinderella story. It is a beautiful-looking film and there is already talk of Oscars. But unfortunately the film has another classic Hollywood touch: a disturbing disregard for cultural accuracy.

What made the novel so successful was its apparent realism. People believed they were reading an actual memoir. The story of a young girl named Chiyo who is sold to a geisha house by her impoverished parents, *Memoirs* charts her troubled metamorphosis into the geisha Sayuri. It is so convincingly told that even today some readers believe Sayuri existed.

Yet although the novel is a believable read, it was still criticised by real geisha for what they saw as grave errors. Mineko Iwasaki, a geisha Golden interviewed while writing the book, tried to sue the author for what she saw as a betrayal of her trust – she eventually settled out of court. But if the book's inaccuracies upset geisha, then the film version, directed by *Chicago* director Rob Marshall, will only make things worse.

The first point of contention is Marshall's decision to cast Chinese actresses in the lead roles. In Japan geisha are seen as guardians of traditional Japanese arts and an integral symbol of Japanese culture. While geisha are a mystery to many modern Japanese, there is indignation that non-Japanese should be chosen to portray them. The decision is also looked upon unfavourably by many Chinese. If geisha were Israeli, it would be like casting a Palestinian to play the part: you could do it, but you would be certain to cause upset on both sides.

Marshall has defended his decision by claiming that he could not find Japanese actresses good enough to claim the title roles as their own. But there are many fine actresses in Japan. Indeed, there are some in *Memoirs* – Youki Kudoh (as Pumpkin) and Kaori Momoi (as Mother), for example. The trouble is that, unlike Zhang Ziyi (who

plays the part of Sayuri and is now being billed as Ziyi Zhang), Michelle Yeoh (as Mameha) and Gong Li (as Hastumomo), they are not big bankable names that will guarantee audiences for this \$85m (£48m) film.

It might have been a risk to cast unknown Japanese actors, but the film could then have been made in Japanese and have achieved a higher level of authenticity. *The Last Samurai*, with its extensive use of Japanese, shows the benefits of using languages appropriate to the setting. And indeed the first five minutes of *Memoirs* are the most convincing because they are in Japanese. But then the English narration begins and we are left with actors forced to speak English in a way reminiscent of the B-movies of a less politically correct time, with broken sentences and awkward pronunciation.

Questions of realism aside, the use of Chinese actresses also has unfortunate political implications. Relations between China and Japan are not especially warm, and *Memoirs* is set at a time when Japan was rampaging across east Asia. The leading male characters of the Chairman (played by Ken Watanabe) and Nobu (Kôji Yakusho) were both active during the second world war. Placing Chinese women in romantic roles opposite

By not portraying the geisha accurately, the film only adds to the Orientalist view of Asian women as exotic fantasy creatures

Japanese men has angered many in China, with disgruntled rumblings appearing on various websites. The fact that "geisha" is loosely translated in Chinese as "prostitute" raises memories of the Imperial Japanese Army's habit of procuring "comfort women" from occupied countries and forcing them to act as prostitutes for Japanese soldiers. The Korean actress Kim Yoon-Jin, who currently appears in the TV series *Lost*, is said to have turned down a role in the film as "a matter of pride" because she did not want her first Hollywood film role to be a Japanese geisha. The Chinese actresses who did not make the same decision have been labelled traitors in some quarters.



More 'Chicago' than Kyoto: Zhang Ziyi's dance is souped up with Hollywood razzamatazz

Sony Pictures

Perhaps the film's worst fault is the way it plays to western fantasies about the mysterious, exotic east – what the late scholar Edward Said labelled the Orientalist tendency in western thought.

Ever since Japan opened its doors to the outside world in 1854, the geisha has been seen in the west as a symbol of eastern eroticism. Foreign sailors who visited the pleasure quarters in the port cities of Yokohama and Nagasaki were unable to see the subtle distinctions between geisha, who are essentially entertainers, and tayu, who were licensed prostitutes. Both wore kimonos and had painted white faces

and elaborate hairstyles, but the tayu tied their obi (the belts used with kimono) with bows at the front – for easy access – while the geisha's kimono was tied at the back. Westerners overlooked this and simply labelled them all "geisha girls".

Tales such as Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthemum* and the opera it inspired, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, soon became popular in the west. Geisha became associated in the western mind with exotic sex, beauty and mystery. These prejudices persist today and even though the film version of *Memoirs of a Geisha* repeatedly tries to send the message that geisha are not

prostitutes, it contradicts itself by over-emphasising the auctioning off of Sayuri's virginity. By not portraying the geisha accurately, the film only adds to the Orientalist view of Asian women as exotic fantasy creatures.

Early on in the production of the film it was decided that the traditional white-face make-up of the geisha would be offputting for American audiences. Instead we are presented with a toned-down, westernised geisha – Sayuri even has blue eyes. Geisha hairstyles are lost too, and replaced with long loose hair and styles that are more reminiscent of those seen in Chinese films also starring Zhang, Li and Yeoh.

In one of the central scenes of the film, a dance starring Zhang, any pretensions to cultural accuracy go right out of the window. It was obviously decided that geisha dances – which in reality are slow, graceful affairs – were not visually interesting enough for audiences used to seeing Zhang flying among the bamboo. So what we end up with is a mish-mash of imagery, as the filmmakers opt to mix theatrical kabuki-style dancing with Hollywood razzamatazz. Wearing a wig of long, flowing black hair reminiscent of women in Chinese ghost stories, Zhang dances dramatically while balancing on eight-inch platform shoes and holding an umbrella in a blizzard of fake snow. A spotlight shines down and koto drummers dictate the frenetic beat – the effect is much closer to *Chicago* than anything in the geisha world. To make matters worse, the costume designer has dressed Zhang in shoes worn by a tayu for her coming-out ceremony, which will surely upset many geisha aficionados.

Marshall has said that he intended *Memoirs* as a fable. But this does not excuse the inaccuracies in the film. Geisha are real and the story is set in the real world during a particularly troublesome period of history. It is no fairy-tale.

In the end, all the cultures involved with this film come off badly. A Japanese cultural symbol has been thoroughly misrepresented – so much so that the film is simply titled *Sayuri* in Japan, shrewdly omitting the word "geisha". Chinese actresses are taking a beating from their own countrymen, accused of treachery. And the American production is grist to the mill of those who accuse the US of insensitivity to any culture but its own.

Until Hollywood starts to view Asia as a place of very diverse cultures and people, and not simply as a place of exotic fantasy, Asian actors, particularly women, will suffer under the burden of stereotyping. They will find it hard if not impossible to move beyond roles in Orientalist films such as this.

Of course, the filmmakers see things differently. Speaking to journalists in Tokyo before the film's premiere, Marshall said: "I think there is a misconception about what a geisha is across the world, certainly in the western world. One of the joys of this movie was to clarify what a geisha is."

But instead of clarity, we are left with a kind of McGeisha tweaked for western tastes. In *Memoirs* Marshall has assembled an image of oriental women that satisfies the mass market; ultimately, this kind of bland cinematic globalisation can only create more misconceptions.