

## Classroom Connection

### History versus Hollywood: *Memoirs of a Geisha*: A Lesson for 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>-Grade Social Studies Students

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Many Americans are first introduced to foreign cultures and historical time periods through film and literature. How should students of history approach popular film? In the case of understanding Meiji-era Japan, how helpful is the popular book and movie *Memoirs of a Geisha*?

### Historical Background:

The novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* was written by American Arthur Golden and published to wide acclaim in 1997. The book has sold over four million copies and spent over two years on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Golden was American born but did have an M.A. in Japanese history from Columbia University. He wrote the book over a ten-year period and based much of the plot off interviews he conducted with several Geisha. One of the Geisha, Mineko Iwasaki, later sued Golden for defamation of character, claiming that he violated a confidentiality agreement, since Geisha have a code of silence they are honor bound to uphold. Iwasaki later published her own memoir which challenged several assertions about the life of Geisha that Golden described in his book.

In 2005, the book was adapted for a film, directed by Rob Marshall. Most of the sets for the film were built in California, with only a few scenes near the end of the movie filmed on set in Kyoto. The film was also subject to a controversy due to Marshall's decision to cast Chinese actresses for the three leading roles. The film grossed over \$165,000,000 suggesting that it reached a wide audience and likely shaped western perceptions of the Geisha and of Meiji-era Japan.

### Suggested Classroom Lessons

#### I. Comparing Hollywood Representations of the Geisha to the Actual Daily Lives of Geisha

Begin by asking students to journal on what they have heard or know about Geisha. Have them share this information with a partner or in a small group setting.

Assure students who have no prior knowledge about Geisha that they will be learning today about whom the Geisha are and were. Next, explain to students that you will be showing them a brief clip of a Hollywood film about Geisha. Ask students to journal about what they think the role of a Geisha is based on the film clip. Show the trailer for the film *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

This can be found either at YouTube or imbd.com. A link to one such trailer is at:  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i\\_TXEEgNiWE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_TXEEgNiWE).

After students have shared their hypothesis about the role of a Geisha based on this trailer, tell them that you will now show them a film clip showing an actual Geisha. Ask them to reevaluate their assumptions about the role of the Geisha after watching this final clip. A lengthy film clip of a Geisha putting on makeup and performing for an audience can be found at: [www.brovision.com](http://www.brovision.com) (on the side menu, scroll down until you get to the film clip entitled *Geisha: Sakurako*. Click on this clip and the video will begin. The film clip is about 15 minutes, but showing the first 7-8 minutes should suffice).

Return to the question of what a Geisha's role is. Conduct a discussion of how the film version of Geisha may mislead viewers into adopting inaccurate perceptions about Geisha.

## II. Discussion Questions

After completing the comparison activity, lead the class in a discussion of the following questions:

1. In what ways can movies be a useful way of teaching about historical events?

Possible responses include:

- a. People are more likely to watch a film about a historical event than to read a book about it.
- b. Films can often be more entertaining and less boring than reading about an event.
- c. Films can call attention to historical events that have been largely ignored.
- d. Films can reach a wider audience than history textbooks.
- e. Films can impact the viewer on an emotional level.

2. What are some limitations of using films to teach about history?

Possible responses include:

- a. Filmmakers only have a limited time to tell their story, and so often must leave out relevant contextual information.
- b. Films show only the perspective of the director.
- c. Filmmakers are often more concerned about selling tickets than being faithful to history.
- d. Viewers sometimes accept as fact what they watch in theaters rather than thinking critically.

3. Do we watch films differently in an academic setting than we might in an informal setting (at home, with friends, on a Saturday night)? If so, how?

Possible responses include:

- a. In an academic setting, students approach the film with a specific frame of reference; for example, they may be watching to consider how lighting is used, or how the director uses camera angles or music to manipulate the viewer into liking or disliking certain characters.
- b. A student is more likely to think analytically and critically about a film in an academic setting.

c. The purpose of watching a film informally is often primarily to have fun; while this purpose is certainly important to academic settings, consideration of how a film was made and received is also important.

4. What questions should we ask ourselves before watching a film about a historical event?

Possible responses include:

a. Who is the director of this film? How well do they know the subject they are making a film about?

b. Who did the director consult with in the making of this film? Were historians consulted? What kinds of historians?

c. What was going on in the nation and the world at the time this film was released? In what ways does the film give us insight into this time period?

5. Thinking specifically about the film *Memoirs of a Geisha* – what are the possible advantages of using this movie as a teaching tool? What are the potential drawbacks? How might the teacher use the film in an effective manner?

Possible responses include:

a. The film can be used to give insights into the dominant cultural values of Meiji-era Japan.

b. The film can be used to show the style of dress of Meiji-era Japan.

c. The film may give viewers inaccurate ideas about the lives of Geisha.

d. The film could be best used by providing students with background context first, and explaining that this is a film about Japan that was based off a book written by an American, turned into a film directed by an American, and starring Chinese actresses.