

[MJHW \(Online Meeting\) on Geisha and Interwar Popular Entertainment - Thursday, December 8th](#)

Discussion published by Joelle Nazzicone on Tuesday, November 29, 2022

Please join us for the next meeting of the Modern Japan History Workshop on **Thursday, December 8th at 19:00 JST**. Our presenter this month will be Gavin Campbell (Doshisha University), who will present his work on geisha and interwar popular entertainment (details below).

This month's session will be held online through Zoom, and can be accessed using the following sign-in information:

Meeting link: <https://u-tokyo-ac-jp.zoom.us/j/82336610079>

The password for the meeting will be posted at the top of the [MJHW website](#) from December 5th onwards.

The workshop is open to all, and no prior registration is required.

Please direct any questions to Joelle Nazzicone at joelle.nazzicone@gmail.com. We hope to see you there!

Modern Girl, Modern Geisha: Interwar Popular Entertainment and the Geisha of Kyoto

Gavin Campbell (Doshisha University)

In 1927 a new building cast long shadows over the tiled roofs and narrow alleys of Kyoto's Pontocho geisha district. Four stories framed by steel girders and clad with fashionable yellow bricks, the building dwarfed tea houses of wood, tile and paper. Inspecting it from across the river, an observer would have quite naturally wondered how much longer Pontocho's narrow streets would echo the shamisen's twang, the geisha's song, and the quiet rustling of kimono over candle-lit tatami mats.

But in fact Pontocho geisha were thrilled. After all, they were the ones who had built this startlingly modern *kaburenjo* as a multi-purpose entertainment hall. It housed a large theater to showcase their district's annual "Kamogawa *odori*," it gave geisha and their maiko apprentices space for classrooms, and it boasted a large hall the public could rent out for dances, banquets or other fun. This new *kaburenjo*, then, was one prominent way Pontocho's geisha adapted to a rapidly changing popular entertainment landscape.

Scholars of interwar Japanese culture have largely overlooked geisha in favor of department stores, cafes, and movie palaces, and the cabaret dancers, actresses and "modern girls" that all seemed to be making the geisha obsolete. Focusing on Kyoto's Pontocho geisha district, this paper instead argues that geisha creatively adapted to new forms of mass spectacle and popular entertainment. Geisha

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are, in short, a fascinating and overlooked constituent in the emergence of “the modern.”