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# MIZOGUCHI

## Two "Late" Films: A Geisha & Princess Yang Kwei Fei

By David Courson

Although a film-maker as well-known and generally admired as Kenji Mizoguchi hardly qualifies as a candidate for "discovery" in the usual sense, it remains true that much of the director's finest work — even from his great late period — is not yet fully appreciated. Perhaps because the familiar masterworks, *Ugetsu*, *Sansho Dayu*, *The Life Of Oharu*, et al, are so widely known, other films have been relatively neglected. Perhaps the most conspicuous example of this is *A Geisha* (Gionbayashi, 1953) a film so appallingly obscure that, until recently, no American film company even saw fit to distribute it. New Yorker Films's 1978 release of *A Geisha*, cause for celebration in its own right, is also a fitting occasion for a brief discussion of Mizoguchi, focusing on both the "new" film and on another, long available but occasionally overlooked work, *Princess Yang Kwei Fei* (Yokichi, 1955).

Mizoguchi's world is rich, complex, and, for his characters — trapped among conflicting needs and goals — often confusing. After early training as a painter, Mizoguchi, still in his mid-twenties, got a chance to direct his first film in 1922 when most of the staff at Nikkatsu Studio walked out to protest the hiring of women to play female roles. These biographical details are interesting since Mizoguchi's beautiful, precisely composed images provide a setting for some of the most fully developed female characters ever to emerge from the world's (male-dominated) film industry.

Most of Mizoguchi's films have either historical settings (often adapted from Japanese folk tales) or deal with contemporary women forced by social constraints into various forms of prostitution. *A Geisha* is a masterly summation of the contemporary strand of the director's work. It examines two women, Miyoharu, a veteran geisha, and Miyoe, orphaned at sixteen and anxious to become a geisha to escape the sexual demands of a gentleman "protector." The profession of geisha,

or hostess, is early described as part of Japan's cultural heritage, a "national treasure." One lengthy sequence recreates some of the training a woman must go through before she has mastered the profession that is also an art.

Against the elaborate formality of the geisha's rituals, costumes, and behavior, is the sordid reality that her foremost obligation is to satisfy her customers. In several early scenes, the conflicting obligations of the job are implied in the contrast between the professional dignity of the experienced geishas and the drunken crudity (stylized almost to the point of caricature) of the men they must serve. There is a peculiarly joyless quality to the revelry of the customers, no matter how skilled the hostesses.

From the film's beginning, Miyoharu's actions are constrained by personal obligations, of loyalty, friendship, and favors owed, as much as by professional obligations. In one strikingly evocative sequence, at a religious shrine, she is definitively caught in a vast network of formal obligations as her ostentatiously reverent boss asks her to repay a favor and orders her to do her duty. For Miyoe, less bound to the traditional ways, the sense of obligation is not so strong. With the uncompromising idealism of youth, she refuses to be reconciled to her pathetic father because of his early refusal to help her. Later, in the film's most powerful sequence, Miyoe violently struggles with a customer as he tries to rape her. But the violence in this scene — she is battered and bloodied, he knocked unconscious and sent to a hospital — is only a metaphor for the infinitely more decorous and ritualized, but equally brutal assault on the selfhood of Miyoharu taking place simultaneously as she refuses to accept a well-mannered but unappealing customer as her "patron."

The real force of these parallel sequences comes in the oddity of their aftermaths. Fighting off a customer/rapist is treated as a novice's professional indiscretion; the rapist remains a

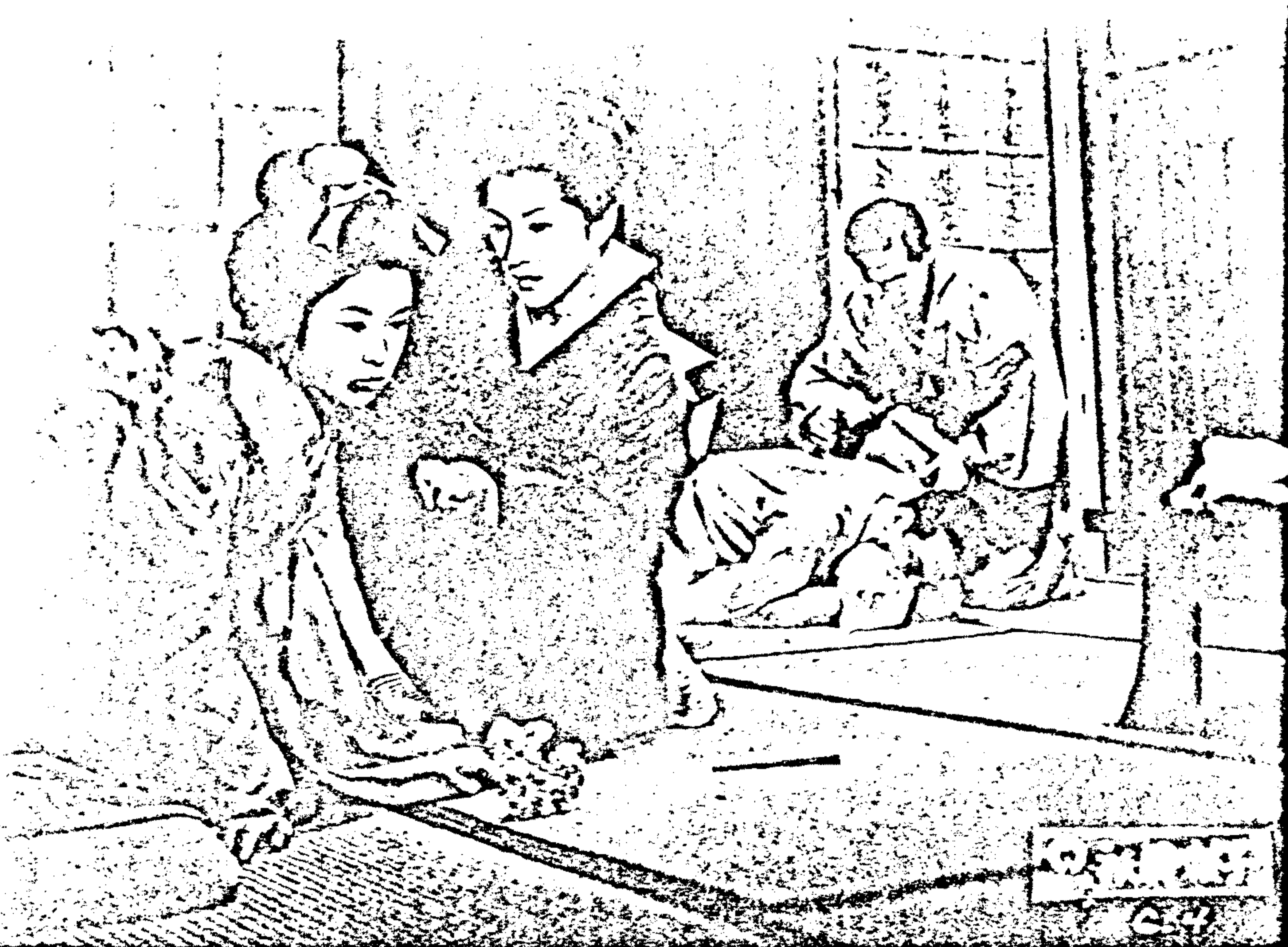
valued customer and the incident itself is even drunkenly re-created as a "joke" to the obligatory delight of several geishas. However, rejecting a patron, particularly one who might provide the wherewithal to repay old debts, is cause for ostracism and professional ruin.

Eventually, a series of maneuvers induces Miyoharu to accept the spurned patron, to do her duty and resume her subservience. Ironically, it is her very human feelings that make her susceptible to manipulation, by forcing her to place others' needs above her own. It is Miyoharu's tragedy that the very qualities that make her admirable also make her vulnerable.

The conflict between obligations is timeless and irreconcilable. It is in the nature of social institutions that they distort and ultimately defeat spontaneous human feelings. The things that make people most human are precisely the things that doom them to be victims. Suggesting that oppression is all-encompassing, that a society offers its members — particularly its women — only the alternatives of being dehumanized or victimized, is the truest form of social protest. Mizoguchi draws the lines of the conflict with clear and relentless logic, even as he sketches Miyoharu with warmth and compassion. He invests his film with the cruel complexity of life and the transcendent simplicity of art.

*Princess Yang Kwei Fei* is another of Mizoguchi's richest, most fully realized films. With his early training as a painter, he must have long anticipated this first chance to work in color. Not surprisingly, he utilizes color brilliantly; the film consists almost entirely of pastels whose textures evoke Japanese painting. In fact, the stylization of the color suggests that the film was deliberately constructed as a meditation not only on a popular legend and on the nature of beauty, but on the function of art itself. It is an art object, a statue, that introduces the story, drawing the old man to the contemplation of his lost past. This concern with art is echoed early in the story itself in the emperor's obsession with a painting of his dead wife that is clearly both art object and icon. And the fact that he himself prefers the pleasures of composing and listening to music to the burdens of state is central to the film's narrative development. In any case, the colors are clearly more artistic than natural-





Mizoguchi's *A Geisha* in release in the U.S. after 25 years.

istic, they are no more "realistic," no closer to the literal truth than is the story, clearly derived from legend rather than history.

The "plot" of *Princess Yang Kwei Fei* (an emperor falls in love with a woman who reminds him of his dead wife; the couple is happy together, but her family's intoxication with power ultimately causes the emperor's fall) is so simple that the story seems to tell itself. Most of the screen time is used to develop tones and moods rather than to expand the narration or develop characterization. In fact, in the literal sense, nothing "happens" in the film, since all the action takes place within the memory of the old man. Because the story is so simple, Mizoguchi is able to sketch it impressionistically with a few vignettes rather than a precise and comprehensive recounting of the "facts." This effect is amplified by the form of the transitions from one sequence to another; as the action fades, the screen gradually becomes blank before the next block of action begins. Even with this deliberate fragmentation, the film is remarkably lucid; Mizoguchi sketches important details with clarity and economy. A few scenes tell us everything we need to know about the Yang family: Chao can conceive of no better reason for gaining power than to become wealthy by accepting bribes; the sisters offer themselves to the Emperor with the specific hope of improving their social status. We do not need to see such people actually abusing power to recognize that the people of the Empire

are perfectly right to be outraged by the rise of such scoundrels. It is typical of Mizoguchi's economy of expression that the one scene where we do see a Yang abusing power is more resonant than a simple piece of exposition. One of the sisters rides through the marketplace and her retainers arrogantly attack the merchants; in the previous sequence in this setting, the Princess and the Emperor took delight, not in insisting on imperial prerogatives but in overlooking them, in sharing the lives of the common people (and, by so doing, escaping the pressures of politics). This previous sequence makes the later one doubly revealing, expressive in its context as well as its content.

What we see in the film is a couple whose personal satisfactions are constricted by external obligations. Our first two introductions to the Emperor, first as an old man, and then as the reigning Emperor, show him receiving instructions from subordinates, being requested — that is to say, required — to act against his own wishes. These scenes, particularly the one in which his music-making is interrupted by the call of duty, suggest the force with which political obligations can intrude on the quest for personal satisfactions. The Emperor is continually frustrated by such intrusions, yet he fails to confront the fact that they are inherent in his situation, that his own temperament is artistic rather than political. At the crucial moment he fails the Princess, by making a wrong, futile choice, not so much out

of a personal moral failure as from an inability to conceive of alternatives, to recognize that the quest for political power is inherently life-destroying. Similarly, he has chosen not to see the impossibility of "using" the Yang family for his own purposes. (Specifically, when he tells the Princess not to be alarmed by the popular resentment against her family, he shows such cataclysmically bad judgment that it is hard not to question his fitness to rule.)

The film consistently presents personal satisfaction in opposition to the pursuit of wealth or power. The only way the lovers can find private moments together is by escaping from the court. At the end of their private interlude, the couple are shown eating and drinking; the screen goes dark and the next image is of eating and drinking, this time at a royal banquet. Thus, quite literally, the political supersedes the personal.

The Princess, too, is caught between conflicting obligations, but her situation leaves her incapable of choice. She recognizes, from the beginning, that her actions are being controlled and manipulated, that she is not free. The comparison she makes is to a puppet, but, from the beginning, the pervasive metaphor is of invisibility. Her presence in the story is first registered, not by the sight of a person but by the sound of a disembodied voice performing menial chores. When she does appear directly, her face is obscured, first by shadows and then by a layer of grime. Later, when she is introduced to the Emperor, he fails even to notice her, and when he does finally see her, she is behind a metal grill, with her face in shadow. Her relationship between the Emperor may develop from the inner beauty he finds in her words, but he only finds that inner beauty because of her external resemblance to his dead wife. From her statue at the film's opening, to the presentation of her death, the Princess is consistently linked to images of objects.

*Princess Yang Kwei Fei* seems to consist largely of surface beauties, of precise compositions and expressive colors. In fact, the film's formal perfection is merely the vehicle to express another kind of beauty, a rich, compelling, and deeply-felt vision of the inexorable conflict between the quest for personal satisfactions on the one hand and the constraints of political and social environments on the other.