

Geisha culture in Anjo



1. Introduction

“Why does geisha culture still continue in Anjo? ”

Not only people from other cities, but also researchers, have asked this question. In Aichi Prefecture, geisha culture remains only in Anjo and Nagoya, so it is natural to wonder why Anjo, apart from Nagoya, has preserved this tradition.

With this question in mind, we will trace the history and development of Anjo.

◎ What is a geisha?

A geisha is a woman who makes a living entertaining guests and creating a refined atmosphere at banquets by performing traditional Japanese music and arts. Each geisha belongs to a specific *okiya* (geisha house) and works under its affiliation.

◎ Meaning of geisha culture

The restaurants where geisha entertain guests are built in traditional Japanese style. Banquets are then held in tatami rooms. Geisha wear kimono and perform artistic entertainments using traditional Japanese musical instruments such as the shamisen, drums, and flutes. In other words, geisha culture can be described as a cultural form that embodies many aspects of traditional Japanese arts and customs.

◎ Nationwide trends

Geisha culture has a history spanning several centuries and reached its height approximately one hundred years ago. At its peak, geisha could be found in cities throughout Japan, and their numbers are estimated to have reached around 80,000 nationwide. During World War II, geisha were forced to suspend their activities. However, in the postwar period, the tradition experienced a revival in many regions. Over time, though, the rise of Western-style entertainment industries, such as cafes and cabarets, contributed to a gradual decline in geisha culture. By around 40 years ago, geisha communities had disappeared in many cities. Today, the total number of geisha across the country is estimated to be approximately 1,000.

2. Tracing Anjo's History

The era that came to be called “Japan-Denmark”

Anjo, which had been engaged in advanced agriculture since around 1900, followed the path of prosperity by being introduced to the country.

(1) Introduced as “Japan-Denmark”

In the May 1926 issue of “Agricultural Policy Research,” Anjo was introduced as “Japan’s Denmark.” Anjo’s agricultural practices are similar to those of Denmark, an advanced agricultural country. This led to a rapid increase in the number of visitors to Anjo. It has reached 12,000 people a year, and if you simply divide it by 365 days, it will be about 33 people. However, since the number of days that could be accepted would have been limited, it seems that the number of visitors per day was quite large.

The demand for geisha increased as entertainment for these visitors.

(2) "Geisha Guidebook" from 1933

In 1933, the "Anjo Geisha Handbook" on the right was published. In modern layman's terms, it is the "Anjo Geisha Guidebook."

Supported by many advertisers, each geisha is introduced with a photo.

The total number of geisha is 70.



Post-war reconstruction

Post-war reconstruction progressed quite quickly. It seems that the outbreak of the Korean War led to a significant increase in Japan's economy.

(3) Anjo Geisha Training Hall

In 1955, 10 years after the end of the war, the Anjo Geisha Training Hall on the right was completed at a huge cost. It is a place where geisha traditional Japanese music and dance. In the commemorative photo, you can see about 70 geisha.



Maintenance and Improvement

After 1955, geisha culture was maintained, but there were times when geisha disappeared from public records or fell into critical situations, such as a decrease in geisha. However, while working to improve the system and receiving support from the political and business circles, it took root as part of Anjo's culture.

(4) Existential crisis

Around 1980, Anjo's geisha culture, like other parts of the country, was facing a crisis. The training hall that was equipped with a large stage made of cypress was also disposed of, and the geisha culture was finally coming to the point of disappearing.

However, the proprietress of the *okiya* decided to reform the old system and start over.

- The geisha paid for all the kimonos, accessories, and cleaning costs, but *okiya* decided to bear a lot of the costs.
- Stop the system that had previously bound geisha to board at the *okiya*.
- Sunday was given as a day of rest for the geisha.

Through these reforms, they transformed the workplace to a comfortable atmosphere that suits modern sensibilities.

The restaurants where the geisha performed also showed understanding and did not hesitate to cooperate. They agreed not to bring in competing hostesses (companions) to the establishments, and when the *hanadai* (geisha performance fee) was raised, they ensured that the geisha's share of the payment was increased.

These efforts bore fruit, and the number of geisha recovered from 19 in 1980 to 60 in 1986. However, after that, it decreased steadily.



(5) Demand fluctuates throughout the year

The following table summarizes the records of a geisha in 1988. "hanadai" is the fee, and "hanadai percentage" indicates the fee for their work (%) relative to the total annual amount.

Month	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Count
Working days	23	24	25	26	19	20	24	16	18	22	19	25	261
The number of banquet seats	28	24	27	28	21	23	31	21	20	27	22	29	301
Percentage of hanadai	9.7	8.0	10.0	8.4	7.7	7.0	9.7	6.0	6.6	9.0	7.3	10.3	100

According to this, there are considerable differences from month to month. From December to April, there are a lot of sales. The timing of year-end parties, New Year's parties, and welcome and farewell parties is probably the same as in the past. However, August and September are significantly less. In other words, if there are too many regular geisha who are active all the time, they will be in competition with each other.

(6) Geisha support association

In 2002, a group to maintain and preserve geisha culture was established, the "Ebisukai". It shows the understanding and support of the people of Anjo for geisha culture.

As for specific activities, various support is being developed, including subsidies for tutoring fees for performing arts such as dances and music. Among them, during the Coronavirus pandemic, geisha jobs almost disappeared, and the survival of geisha culture itself was in jeopardy. Therefore, the Geisha Support Association collected more than 8 million yen to give to the geisha.

3. Summary

(1) Changes in Geisha culture in Anjo

A. turning point

The development and stagnation of geisha culture were due to the following external factors.

- ① Publication of "Agricultural Policy Studies" (1926) ... It came to be called "Japan-Denmark," and the number of visitors flooded in. The demand for geisha increased greatly.
- ② World War II (1941~1945)... Frugality was required, and geisha culture was considered non-essential.
- ③ Jinmu economy (around 1955)... The economy booms, and geisha culture regains momentum.
- ④ Bubble economy (1987~1990)... The restaurant seats are filled day and night.
- ⑤ Anjo Geisha Culture Promotion Association was established (2002)... A support system of the entire political and business circles will be established.
- ⑥ Lehman shock (2008) and the Great East Japan Earthquake (2011)... The foot traffic stops.
- ⑦ Coronavirus pandemic (2020~2023)... social distancing closed and temporarily shut down all communal dining and banquets.



B. Number of geisha

The following table illustrates the number of geisha in Anjo.

Year	1933	1955	1957	1986	1988	1994	2000	2003	2013	2023	2026
Geisha	70	70	55	60	40	36	33	29	17	12	14

"There were 100 people around 1952." However, it would be more natural to think that the number of regular geisha was 70 in 1933, and it rebounded to the same level after the war, and although there was a temporary increase after that, it gradually declined.

However, if there were 20 or 30 temporary geisha in December ~ April, which is the busy season, it might have temporarily increased to 100.

(2) Why Anjo's geisha culture continues

As geisha culture disappears nationwide, why does Anjo continue to exist?

- As an active geisha says, "I am sometimes invited to celebrations," there is still a part of the population that views geisha culture positively.
- Strengthened cooperation between the restaurants and the *okiya* (geisha houses).
- Created a standardized pricing list for restaurants to promote transparency and approachability.
- The *okiya* themselves worked on improving their systems, enhancing the geisha's working conditions and ease of employment.
- Anjo geisha traditionally do not wear white face makeup or wigs, which makes them feel less formal and more approachable.
- The Anjo Geisha Culture Promotion Association was established.
- Various organizations—including the agricultural cooperative and the city hall—have continued to actively utilize their services.

It may be that the overlapping of these multiple factors has contributed to the continued survival of geisha culture in Anjo.



4. Conclusion

While adapting to the flow of the times, the local environment, and human relationships, Anjo's geisha culture has managed to survive. However, many geisha traditions across Japan have disappeared. In this context, Anjo—continuing to exist alongside major metropolitan areas—is a rare presence. Its very existence can be considered a source of pride for the city.

Anjo's geisha culture is the result of choices made by Anjo itself, and it is important to recognize it as an integral part of Anjo's own cultural identity.

