

**Geisha in the Wild, Wild West:  
How the Companions of the ‘Verse are Influenced by Geisha Culture**

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[1] To the average viewer, one of the more foreign aspects of the ‘Verse in both *Firefly* and *Serenity*, is the role of Inara as a Companion. The Companion as a role is, in itself, a strange concept. Someone who was not really paying attention could easily dismiss it as a common prostitute, especially for a western viewer. The role of Companion is far more intricate than just that of a prostitute. The rules, which one must dig to find through the minimal episodes, seem varied and odd compared to the notion of the courtesan. To the typical viewer, the Companion is a total shift from the western notion of a call girl, the Companion is an idea outside perception. It is then vaguely Asian, exoticized, to be lumped in with the casual Chinese-English bilingualism of the series and left alone. But there is more to the Companion than meets the eye. They are based on the idea of the Geisha from Japanese culture. The Companions live in the *karyukai*, the “flower and willow world” of Geisha society (Dalby xiv). The idea of Geisha and the Companion are inextricably connected. The important difference between the Companion as a sex worker and the Companion as a Geisha is the role of power. The Companion is a figure to be ruled over. In contrast, the Geisha is the artist and the art in the real world, someone educated and powerful in her own right. If the Companions were just modeled after the Eastern notion of the courtesan, they would be Orientalist. Rather, if they fall in the established realm of the Geisha, instead of all courtesans, then they refute the idea that *Firefly* is inherently Orientalist. If they are Geisha, then the show has picked aspects of different Asian cultures, using them individually to create a world

where the United States and China were the dominant powers, but pulled influences from all over in their new, massive culture. This notion negates the idea that there is a patronizing aspect to *Firefly's* depiction of characteristics of Asian cultures.

[2] The first thing that needs to be established is *what* Inara and the Companions really do. Through some fleeting glances during the show, the viewer is given an idea of what the Companions do. They are allowed to choose their patrons (“Shindig” F1004), they are mandated by a Guild on Sihnon, which sets all sorts of rules from yearly physical examinations to which patrons can be attended to, keeping a roster of both good and bad clients (“Shindig”). This Guild also teaches them their arts; it is where the Companions learn the play instruments; learn the art of speaking and eloquence. They also learn things like traditional tea ceremonies and how to administer a type of therapy to their patrons. To be a Companion, as seen by most of the characters’ deference to Inara, is a well-respected role, quite the juxtaposition to the “traditional” role of call girl.

[3] The second thing that needs to be addressed is exactly what a Geisha is and what she is not. There are several varied perceptions that the West has taken on. One, the Geisha (read: Geesha) Girl, seems to be the most prevalent. This notion stems from the time during World War II when the Allied Forces were occupying Japan. These women, prostitutes, who pretended to be real Geisha, were instead sex workers who entertained the men from the States. True Geisha were of a different calling entirely.

[4] Geisha stem from the tradition of *saburuko* girls, which later became Oiran. The *saburuko* girls came about around 600 AD. These women, depending on education, either sold sexual services or worked in high-class gatherings as entertainers. This evolved into the Oiran, who were courtesans much in the way of the Greek Hetaera

(Aberdein 64). Oiran, unlike Geisha, were not technically of high society. Instead, they were considered prostitutes, and they lived with the other prostitutes (*yujo*), but because of their skills outside of their sexual services, many of these women went on to be famous. Oiran were mostly noted for their skill as actors, before female actors were banned in Japanese culture. We do not know much about the transition from Oiran to Geisha. The major distinction between the two, beyond time period, lies in the accessibility of their talents. Rather than just trained in acting, Geisha embraced several forms of high art: calligraphy, dancing, singing, and playing music. The term Geisha can be translated in one of two ways: “artist” or “entertainer” (Dalby 54-55) neither of these denotes the sexual aspect of their careers, which is important because it helps distinguish every other aspect of their teachings, not just their capability of sex. That the emphasis lies in their ability to entertain sets them apart from the *yujo* or Oiran.

[5] To become a Geisha, one was committed to a house through various means. A woman, who acted as a madame of sorts as well as a maternal, guiding figure, ran these Geisha houses, *okiya*. A girl joined an *okiya* as a child and began training in the arts. While modern Geisha usually come from prestigious or at least white-collar families, like the Companions (Whedon 11), in the past they could be brought in from poorer regions. The Geisha society was one run exclusively by women. At a certain point, a young Geisha (*maiko*) will be given an older sister (*onee-san*) who will teach her the things she does not learn in school. Once old enough, and finished training, a *maiko* will be given a new name.

[6] After all the training, a girl has transformed into a woman and that woman into a work of art. These are women who have carefully trained in traditional Japanese

instruments and music, dancing, calligraphy, literature, poetry, and the tea ceremony. In history, these women would work inside their *okiya*, or, given the chance, could have *danna*. These *danna* would be patrons who paid for the Geisha's living expenses at the cost of the Geisha maintaining only the relationship with her *danna*. (Iwasaki 56).

Mineko Iwasaki stresses in her book *Geisha, A Life* that the sexual aspect of the Geisha life is not necessary or even imperative. The importance of the Geisha lies in the ability to entertain, their ability as living works of art.

[7] With all that in mind, it becomes evident that Companions were at least influenced by the idea of Geisha, as noted by Joss Whedon.

“Inara’s character originally was a whore, something very *Deadwood*. My wife said, ‘Why not do something more in the style of a Geisha and make her the most educated person on the ship, instead of just an oppressed pathetic creature?’ And then, of course, people [said], ‘What a typical boy fantasy.’ And I thought, ‘Yeah, that’s my wife!’” (Whedon, *Serenity: The Visual Companion II*)

While little is ever explained in the show, the viewer can start to see the similarities. For the Geisha, sex seemed almost like an afterthought, but for Inara, the Guild, and the Companions, it is the foundation on which their practice thrives. An obvious similarity between the two is the role of the Companion in terms of men. Inara Serra is shown to have gentlemen callers that bring her to high-class events, such as Atherton Wing. As told in “Shindig,” Atherton is a repeat caller (Mal: ‘Atherton Wing’. He’s a regular, ain’t he?”), and hopes to become her patron of sorts: “I’m trying to offer you something you know, a life. ... You can live here on Persephone, as my personal Companion.” Inara, at first, does not agree or disagree to the proposal. The issue with a Companion taking a

patron is a major distinction from the Geisha's *danna* in terms of similarities. If Inara were to say yes to Atherton, it is implied that she would no longer have the freedom to do as she pleases and would be stuck on Persephone. A Geisha taking a *danna* just allowed her expenses to be transferred to a man, someone she would generally visit, but she also had free reign to do as she wished outside that relationship, something Atherton would not allow Inara to do (Dalby 111). It is a strange juxtaposition made by the show. The viewer follows a group of ragtag space cowboys who operate mostly outside the boundaries of the law. Inara, on the other hand, is bound to the Guild and their rules. One would think, in the 'Verse, that freedom would be of the utmost importance, but compared to a Geisha from the 1900's, Inara is decidedly less free. Her patron effectively becomes her master, rather than her Guild. That was not the case for the Geisha. Outside patronage, men who find themselves enamored of a Geisha or Companion can give gifts. In Geisha culture, these could be things like beautiful hair combs, and the same is true of the *Firefly* Companions. As Kaylee states, "Well, sure. Sometimes the customers buy her things" ("Shindig"). The similarity in gift giving emphasizes the role of appreciation in the client, as opposed to things like money as a gift. These carefully selected, well thought-out presents represent gratitude towards the women as works of art rather than simply as sex workers.

[8] The role of the Guild is important to the Companion society, just as the *okiya* is a staple of Geisha society. Much like the Geisha, the Companions do not need to advertise. A would-be client of a Companion must reach out to the Guild in the same way would-be clients of Geisha sought out the *okiya*. "... Geisha communities do not advertise...they find their way into more prestigious *hanamachi* [tea houses] through

personal or family connections” (Dalby 262). Dalby is speaking of the potential clients to the Geisha. Rather than setting out an ad, they had to be sought after in established tea houses. They had to be worthy of the Geisha, much in the same way that a potential client must first pass the Guild’s rigorous standards.

[9] The relationship between Mal and Inara solidifies the distinction between sex worker and Companion and helps diminish the Western perceptions of the Geisha. Mal willfully disparages Inara’s career as a Companion. There are several instances of his ignorance, such as in “Shindig” when he says “They teach you that in whore academy?” in regards to her knowledge of fencing. Mal’s viewpoint stems from his lack of understanding about Companions, to more likely his apparent feelings about Inara. It appears similar to the mean-because-he-likes-you elementary school crush. Not to diminish Mal’s adulthood, but the space cowboy does not seem all too in touch with his emotions. As a viewer, one begins to see that despite the apparent sexual nature of the Companions, there is so much more to being a Companion than sex. Of her career, Inara states “On Sihnon we started training at twelve. Years of discipline and preparation before the physical act of pleasure was even mentioned. Most of these girls...Control. Was the first lesson. And the last...” (*Serenity*). Inara demonstrates skills and relationships that allow her to exist in both Serenity’s little family and the world outside of the criminal realm. She can succeed in any situation based on the training she gains from the Companion career.

[10] Another slight distinction between the Companions and the Geisha is the role of the Guild and the *okiya*. The Guild, it seems, is predominantly run by women, much like the *okiya*. The major distinction is in size, though, as Nandi states in “House of

Gold” there are Companion houses. These houses are both home and school to the Companions who reside there. They also act as a safe haven for life after leaving school. They represent a wide network. Nandi states both she and Inara hail from the Madrassa Companion house, though Nandi leaves abruptly one day while trying to learn the dulcimer (“Heart of Gold” F1013). Another similarity is the leader of the house/*okiya*. While Companions have “priestesses,” they perform the same sort of function the “mothers” of the *okiya* do. There are also rules in place that state that the head of a house can never be a man, despite Companions being both male and female. While this may *seem* like a major change from the idea of the Geisha, there have been male Geisha. It started as a unisex trade, but by the 1800’s became solely female. (Dalby 56). The opposite is true for the Companions, which started solely female and began to incorporate men later. (Whedon, *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion*)

[11] This religious tie-in for the Companions is important. They call their leaders “priestess.” Religion is a part of Inara’s lifestyle, as seen by her Buddhist habits. Joss Whedon has even said she is “almost a religious figure” (*Serenity* DVD Commentary). She is also one of the only characters on the show depicted with religious beliefs, specifically Buddhist. In *Serenity*, one can see Inara praying to Buddha, which Mal jokes about as they attempt to rescue her. This is a direct tie to Geisha. As Dalby discusses in her book, many Geisha live without marrying and in old-age move to Buddhist convents (Dalby 173). This sexual and religious dichotomy only emphasizes the complexity of the role of Geisha. It also emphasizes the idea that the Companion and the Geisha are much more than courtesans. She is refuge, able to offer service beyond a comforting conversation or bed. Just like the extensive education given to Companions, this religious

aspect gives her a power that most do not have. Inara Serra offers this type of refuge to Shepherd Book at the end of the pilot episode “Serenity.” Book comes to Inara with his problems, and she comforts him. She places a hand on his head as he kneels before her. She offers him a sort of benediction. Like a Geisha, the Companion fulfills many different roles.

[12] The idea that the Companion Guild is matriarchal, much like the world of Geisha, reflects the original foundation of the Geisha culture. While the Companions are a government system for the 'Verse, the stress that it is run by women as a way to give women power is apparent in how the woman use their power. Inara is beneficial to the team in many ways, from another fighter to teacher to friend. This power is also seen in the women who start as Companions but do not finish. “Saffron” is able to dupe even the best of them with her skills learned as a Companion. Nandi is a strong leader to a large group of women. The Guild gives them the power to be, in some cases, independent. The Companions are free to choose their own clients (“Serenity” F1001), clients who mistreat a Companion are black-listed and forbidden from ever seeking another Companion’s company (“Shindig”). While the Geisha system was set in smaller organized areas, rather than one large government organization, the concepts were similar in terms of protecting their own.

[13] Like Geisha, Companions are trained in the finer things: music, languages, psychology, fencing (apparently, as seen in “Shindig”), as well as a tea ceremony. Some of these do not match the Geisha lifestyle, but several seem like obvious parallels. While the instrument of choice for Geisha is the *shamisen*, as Nandi states, it is the dulcimer for Companions (“Heart of Gold”). These instruments, despite coming from different parts of

the world, are similar in idea, as both have approximately three strings and are strummed in a similar fashion to a guitar. In “Heart of Gold” Nandi recalls an instructor who said of her playing: ““You're playing it, not feeling it,” which causes her to break the dulcimer and quit Companion training on the spot. This idea, that one should feel the art, rather than just regurgitate it, is prevalent in the idea of the Geisha as an artist. It is easy to copy something; it is not easy to put oneself into it. Geisha live a life as both the artist and the art. That Nandi could not feel the song separates her from the true Companion and the true Geisha. Like many of the would-be Geisha who could not make it through the training, Nandi sets out to begin her own brothel as a means of following her own rules.

[14] Another parallel between the Companion’s arts and the Geisha’s is the use of the tea ceremony. In Geisha culture, the tea ceremony is a skill meant to entertain, as it is complex, but it is also meant to highlight the *sabi* and *wabi* of a person, that is the material side of their life as well as the spiritual aspect of the human life. (Urasenke) For the Companions, the act is a form of meeting, of beginning. In “Jaynestown,” Inara is shown with Fess Higgins at their first meeting, pouring tea and talking. Rather than just a moment of sharing tea, this action signifies the calming nature of Inara’s role as Companion, a moment where she is just a kind, open person listening to another (“Jaynestown” F1007). It shows she is there to serve him, but also that this aspect of Companion culture is important. This also ties into the lack of use of the Japanese Geisha aesthetic in *Firefly* and *Serenity*. While the ideas are there, the visuals are not. “While the narrative of Inara's creation as a character invokes the trope of the Geisha (Rowley, 321), Inara's shuttle includes very few Japanese elements and her dress and makeup diverge

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significantly from Geisha-  
inspired culture” (Brown

19). In her article

“Orientalism in *Firefly* and

*Serenity*,” Brown also states:



Her dress and home/work space suggest a combination of Chinese, South Asian, and Middle Eastern courtesan culture. While these cultures are certainly comparable to the Geisha cultures of Edo and Kyoto in the valuing of musicianship, calligraphy, arts, bearing, and manner, the aesthetic range of the shuttle and Inara's costuming/activities echo instead a broader courtesan context.

(Brown 19)

While the difference in aesthetic is true, that does not inherently dismiss the idea that the Geisha is the predominant influence. If the viewer is left to believe that the United States and China were the world powers and that their cultures mixed, then the use of visuals from these cultures would make sense. This does not eliminate the idea that the Geisha culture of Japan was brought into the government sanctioned Companions. While courtesans do exist in some capacities in Chinese, South Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures, they do not have the organization that both Geisha and Companions do.

[15] An interesting aspect of the Geisha lifestyle is their ability to capture attention. Beyond their beauty and precise aesthetics, their personality and mannerism were meant to make them alluring, entrancing. In the film *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), based on the book by Arthur Golden, which he modeled after renowned Geisha Mineko Iwasaki, the character Sayuri (Ziyi Zhang) is taught how to stop a man with just a look.

Just by gazing at a boy on a bicycle, she causes him to falter and crash. This sort of talent is present in the Companions, or people apparently trained by Companions. In the episode “Our Mrs. Reynolds,” Saffron or Bridget or Yolanda Haymer demonstrates this manipulation and uses it to exploit Mal and Wash and even tries to use it on Inara.

“Saffron: You would... you would lie with me? Inara: I guess we've lied enough. Saffron: You're good. Inara: You're amazing. Who are you?” (“Our Mrs. Reynolds” F1006).

Later, Inara admits that Saffron has undoubtedly had Companion training: “But, no... I mean seduction. Body language, signals. She's had training. As in Companion. As in academy” (“Our Mrs. Reynolds”). These women, Companions, much like Geisha, are trained to read men (or women) and react in a way that renders the client pliant and much more open to suggestion. The only reason it does not work on Inara is because “you don't play a player” (“Our Mrs. Reynolds”). Because she possesses these skills, Saffron could never dupe her, though she does play along for a short time. As Cynthia Masson notes in her article “‘But She was Naked! And All Articulate!’ The Rhetoric of Seduction in *Firefly*,” the Companions are educated women. They understand that not only their bodies, but their minds and actions must be able to manipulate. “Traditional rhetorical artifice, along with its inherent power, is part of the culture of seduction in *Firefly*” (Masson 19). Beyond just being beautiful and talented, these Companions are trained to be able to use spoken language to guide their clients to a more open state. The Companions are women educated to manipulate in several different manners.

“...Companions are skilled rhetoricians but also that they're working women use their rhetorical skills to maintain a degree of control within the power struggles of this final frontier” (Masson 19). Much like the Geisha, the Companions use their skills to give

them power where there would usually be none. Because of their education, their ability to interact and speak with others outside their regular social standing, the Companions have power others do not. Inara's ability to walk with both men like Atherton Wing and men like Malcolm Reynolds affords her power women like Zoe and Kaylee do not have. She can blend with the upper crust of society, with men like Atherton Wing, but she can also play tough and blend with the group on Serenity. While used in different capacities, this ability to subtly control clients helps both the Companions and the Geisha succeed as friends, lovers and artists.

[16] Much of the scholarship on Companions works to establish that Companions are *not* Geisha, or skirts over the idea that the Companions may be more than sex workers. Andrew Aberdein sets a precedent with the idea that the Companions may be based on the Greek hetaera, in his article "The Companions and Socrates: Is Inara a Hetaera?" Rather than prostitutes these hetaera were educated women who could rise to power. Aberdein argues the similarities between the Companions and the Geisha are "ornamental." (Aberdein 64) Labeling the similarities as ornamental takes away from the meaning behind them. If the ornamental similarities include the important tea ceremony between Inara and Fess Higgins, then the issue becomes the perception of the tea ceremony, not its relation to Geisha culture. The tea ceremony is a practical art form implemented by the Geisha community as a whole. It was meant to make an everyday task something appointed, to appreciate the smallest moment. Another issue with his argument is that he calls on the hetaera as fundamental to the founding of Western society. (Aberdien 64) To lean on the idea that a western invention must have been used ignores the obvious dual culture that exists in the *Firefly* 'Verse. The world they live in is

one ruled by a melding of Eastern and Western traditions and ideas, and the Geisha, with their rules and organized society, fit far better in the role of Companion than the hetaera do. To ignore the Asian influences on the culture of the 'Verse is a tricky position to take. It either attempts to minimize the influence of Eastern cultures on the present culture in *Firefly* or the Asian influences are brushed away to avoid the idea the show might be Orientalist, holding aspects of different Asian cultures up for spectacle. Either way, the worst thing one can do is ignore the influence of Asian cultures, specifically the Geisha, as parts of the 'Verse.

[17] Another issue that many scholars have with the role of Inara is her status as a feminist icon. Dee Amy-Chinn, in her article "Tis a Pity She's a Whore: Postfeminist Prostitution in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*?" believes that, because of her role as a Companion and Amy-Chinn's own interpretation of the Companions, that Inara is somehow not in power. To reject the idea that Inara has power is to reject that the Geisha had power. These are women pulled from a multitude of backgrounds, educated and enriched, then sent into the world to do art. In terms of the Companions, either because of the government involvement, or the role of the client, Amy-Chinn believes the power is taken from Inara. Something not readily remembered is the Companion's ability to pick or reject any client. Their ability to have a say in their activity, to dictate their activities, gives an individual Companion power. The role of the matriarchy also lends to the feminist ideology of the Companion. With women giving power to women, rather than having the Guild run by a group of men, the Companions embody feminist ideas. And while women are entirely capable of exploiting other women, the established nature of the Guild leads one to believe that it is much more reputable than that. Within the lens of

Geisha, the viewer can see Inara and the Companions as a much more positive incarnation than Amy-Chinn believes. She argues, “Whedon re-writes whoredom to circumvent any challenge the profession might offer to the traditional pre-feminist representation of femininity.” (Amy-Chinn 8) It is not so much a rewriting of “whoredom” to hide the aspect of sex worker, as it is an attempt to introduce Geisha culture into the established poly-culture of *Firefly*. In an interview, Mineko Iwasaki said “the Geisha system was founded, actually, to promote the independence and economic self-sufficiency of women. And that was its stated purpose, and it actually accomplished that quite admirably in Japanese society, where there were very few routes for women to achieve that sort of independence.” (Wieder 2002). If the Companions are considered Geisha, then they can be looked upon as at least partially feminist. They do work to give more women access to power where they may not have found it otherwise.

[18] Based on cultural ties, the systematic nature of the Guild and the ritualistic nature of the Companions, the influence of the Japanese Geisha on *Firefly*'s Companions are clear. Despite the major cultures of *Firefly* and *Serenity* being Chinese and American, the Companions have heavily drawn on the Geisha for ideas. There are obvious ties, like the role of training in classical instruments whether it is the dulcimer or the shamisen, the role of the Guild as teachers to women. Beyond that of superficial things like tea or music, the Guild also offers eloquence and status to women who may not have had it otherwise. There are also much subtler connections, like the role of the Guild and the *okiya*, the importance of the power of delicate manipulation, and the role of religion. While there are notable differences, especially in aesthetics, these differences do not immediately negate the Companion's relationship to the Geisha. That the Geisha and

Companions are similar lends a much more diverse role to the otherwise misinterpreted Companions. A lot of scholarship has considered the Companions an idea that goes against Joss Whedon's usual feminist approach. Within the lens of Geisha, the Companions take on a much more typical version of the Whedonesque. They are a strong group of women, run by women, practiced in nearly every area from weapons to words. The overlaying of the idea of the Geisha solidifies the role of the Companions as not only courtesans, but as artists, as religious figures, and as women of power.

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