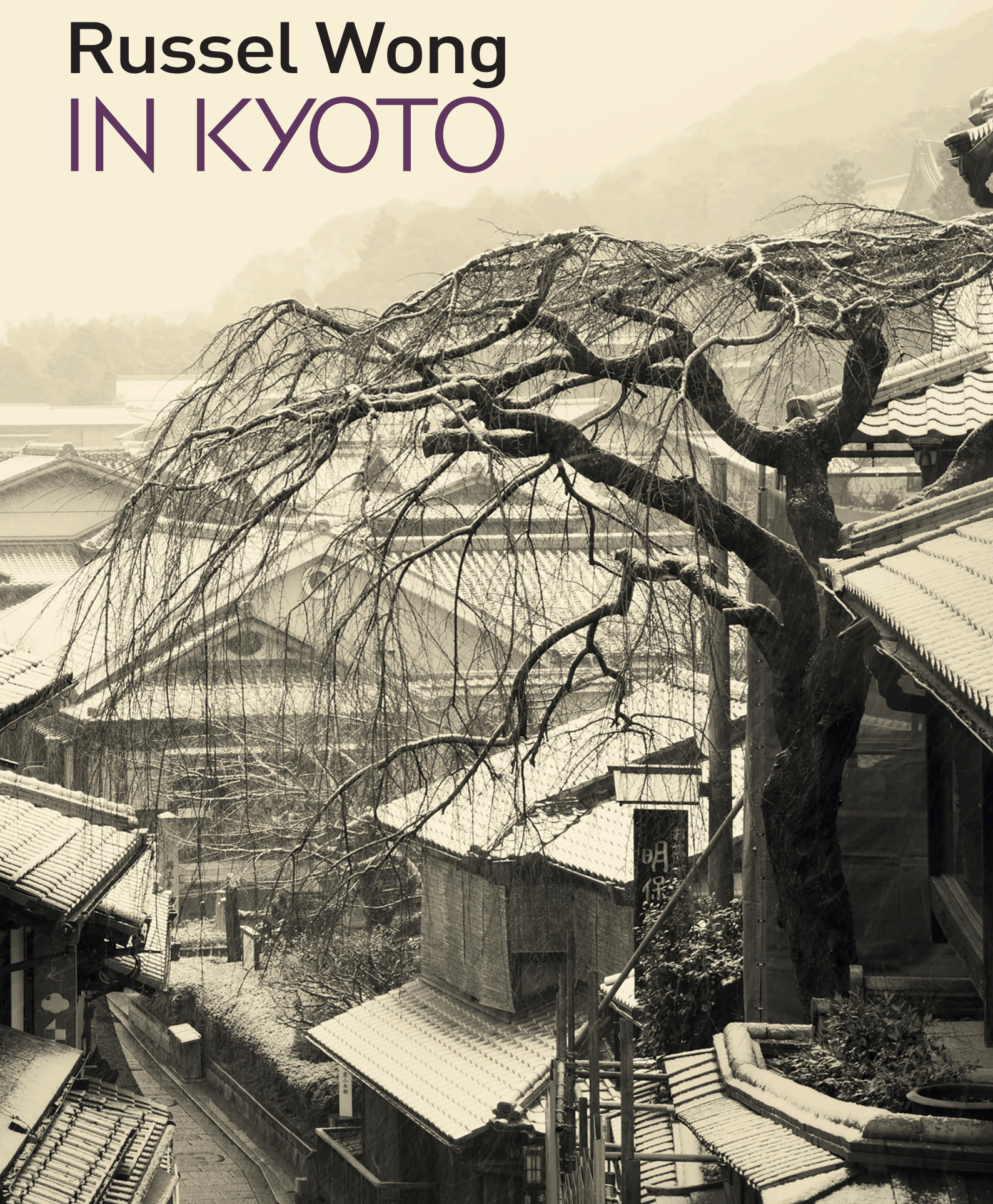
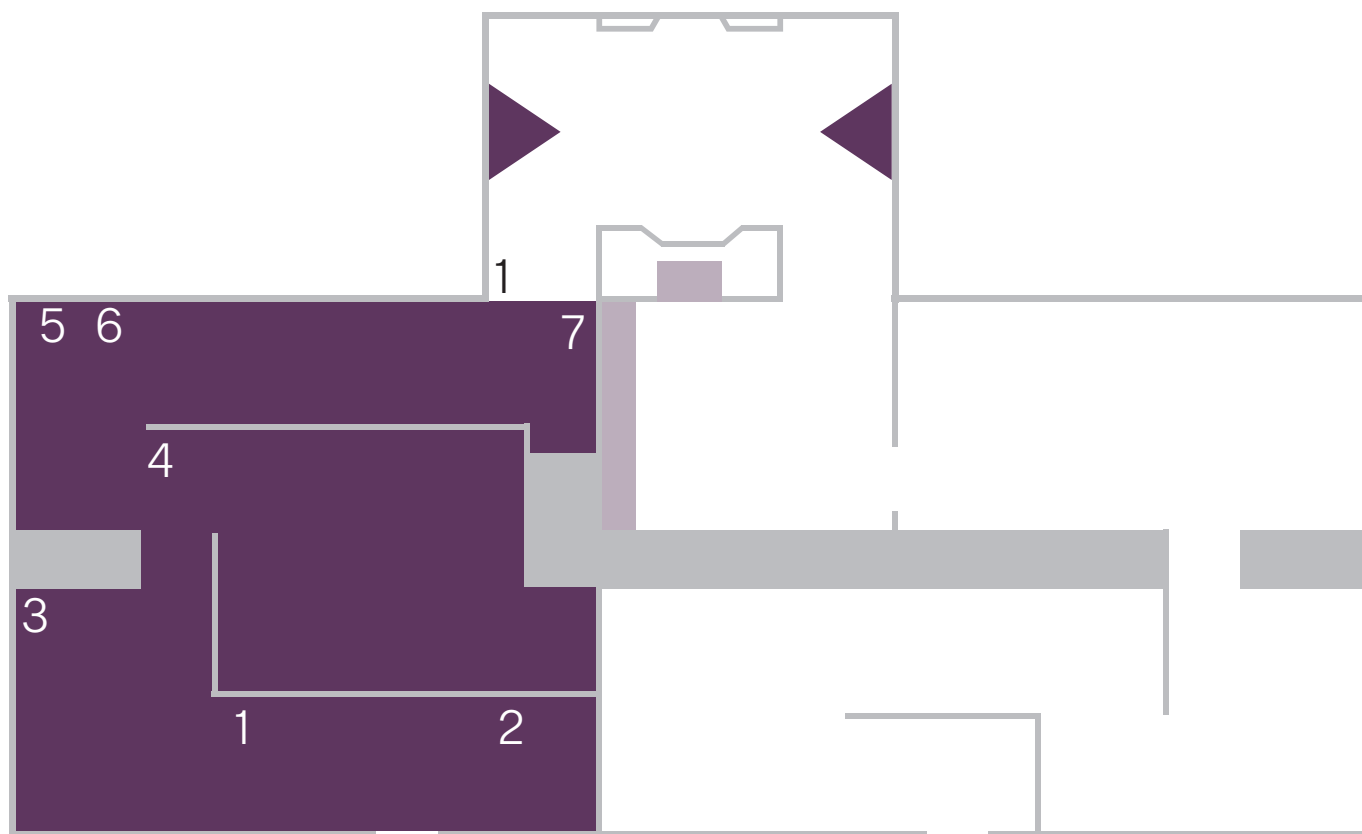


TEXT TRANSLATIONS

Russel Wong IN KYOTO





PLAN OF THE GALLERY

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1 Russel Wong in Kyoto

Japan, particularly Kyoto, has always drawn and inspired local and international photographers. Russel Wong's interest in photographing Kyoto and its geisha community began during a visit to Tokyo in 2005 to shoot publicity photographs for Watanabe Ken when he was starring in Memoirs of a Geisha (2005). Kyoto came up during their conversation and this rekindled Wong's passion to dig deeper.

The film received mixed reviews; mostly disapproval and disdain from the geisha community in Kyoto. Despite its controversies, the film has contributed in recent years to public perceptions of and curiosity about Japanese geisha (Kyoto dialect, geiko).

Wong feels that perhaps his photographs can give the geiko community – which hardly speaks and is seldom seen – a voice for an international audience.

Geiko community

The geiko community in Kyoto is a closed group and the traditional system of ichigen-san okotowari, “turning away first-timers” still rules in most teahouses today. It took Wong five years to gain access to the geiko communities in all five kagai (geisha districts, also known as hanamachi) in Kyoto.

Inspired by woodblock prints

In making this body of work, Wong was inspired by Edo-period woodblock prints by Kitagawa Utamaro, Katsushika Hokusai, and Utagawa Hiroshige. He was particularly drawn to the compositions, how the elements of the image work together, and by the silhouettes and portraits of the women depicted in them. Wong’s photographs are infused with his own sense of nostalgia. He compares the actual streets and teahouses in Kyoto to those built to scale on a movie set. This familiarity and his experience working with celebrities on film sets enable him to create a dramatic cinematic quality in these photographs.

Russel Wong

Russel Wong (born 1961) is an internationally renowned, Singaporean, fashion and portrait photographer with 25 years of experience working with Oscar-winning directors and Hollywood celebrities, including Richard Gere, Jackie Chan, Michelle Yeoh, Zhang Ziyi, and Isabella Rossellini. Russel is one of an elite group assigned to photograph covers for Time magazine. In addition to his portrait photography, his body of work includes still-life compositions, architecture, landscapes, and more.

2 Kyoto

Kyoto is Japan's third largest city, and one of its oldest. By 794, it was the capital of Japan. Like Nara, a previous capital, the city was laid out in a grid pattern modelled on the Chinese Tang dynasty capital Chang'an (today's Xi'an). Although Kyoto was the capital and served as home to the Japanese imperial family from 794

to 1869, the city was not always the focus of Japanese political power.

Emperors of Japan

From the 9th century onwards, the imperial family became more and more isolated, and from the 12th century, the country was ruled by military families called “shogunates”. While Kyoto remained the imperial capital and the centre of national culture, the business of running state affairs was carried out by the shogunates. In 1603, the Tokugawa Shogunate was established, and they managed the country from Edo City until their defeat by forces loyal to the emperor. The Meiji government was established in 1868 and the emperor and imperial family moved to Tokyo. In 1947, after World War II, a new constitution of Japan was enacted, and the role of the emperor became symbolic once again.

Kyoto survives and thrives

Just as imperial fortunes waxed and waned, fortunes of the city itself fluctuated dramatically. During the Ōnin War (1466–67), the Kyoto Gosho (imperial palace) and most of the city were destroyed. Much of today's Kyoto dates from the Edo period. Although political power resided in Edo, Kyoto flourished as a cultural, religious, and economic centre. Fortunately, Kyoto was spared the aerial bombing that razed other Japanese urban centres in the closing months of World War II. Today, there are more than 20 museums and over 30 universities and colleges scattered throughout the city.

3 *Geiko and maiko*

Geisha – called “geiko” in Kyoto – and maiko (geisha in training) in kagai (geisha districts, also known as hanamachi) within Kyoto are world-famous icons of Japanese culture. Professional training of geiko and maiko takes

place in schools for these artist-entertainers called nyokōba, which were established around 130 years ago. Basic training includes classical dance, playing traditional Japanese instruments such as shamisen, drum, and koto, as well as tea ceremony, singing, calligraphy, and flower arrangement.

Kyoto kagai 花街

There are five kagai in Kyoto: Gion Kobu, Miyagawacho, Pontocho, Kamishichiken, and Gion Higashi. Strictly regulated, exclusive teahouses, called “ochaya”, operate in these districts. They accept new clients only through introduction from a regular customer. They arrange regulars-only banquets, with dishes appropriate for the occasion, guest list, and season, with entertainment from geiko and maiko they believe will meet the tastes of customers.

Seasonal activities and other rituals

The yearly calendar of each kagai revolves around seasonal changes, local history, and religious rituals and ceremonies. Some events express gratitude to teachers or honour historic figures. Kagai are intimately linked with local shrines and festivals. Gion Kobu, Miyagawacho, Pontocho, and Gion Higashi have a strong connection with Yasaka Shrine and the Gion Matsuri (held in July). Kamishichiken, said to be the oldest kagai, is affiliated with Kitano Tenmangu Shrine, which hosts both the Plum Festival (Feb) and Zuiki Festival (Oct). Geiko and maiko from each kagai join the annual Jidai Matsuri (22 Oct, one of Kyoto's most important festivals, along with Gion Matsuri) on a rotating basis.

4 Gokagai – the five kagai of Kyoto

Areas officially designated for geisha services

Miyagawachō

The Miyagawachō district was constructed in 1666. In 1751, it received official permission to do business as a kagai. It soon became the centre of performing arts in Kyoto. Minami-za, the primary kabuki theatre in Kyoto, is located in Miyagawachō. Some teahouses in the area are named after famous kabuki actors. Today, part of Miyagawachō is designated as a historical scenery preservation area.

Gion Kobu and Gion Higashi

In the early Edo period, many teashops opened to welcome visitors to Yasaka Shrine and Kiyomizu Temple. Gradually, the shops transformed into teahouses and waitresses became geiko. By the early 19th century, there were 700 teahouses and more than 3000 geiko and maiko.

When a huge samurai estate in the area was taken down in 1870, teahouses were built in its place, expanding the kagai area. In 1881, the area was separated into Gion Kobu and Gion Otsubu (today Gion Higashi). Part of the kagai is now designated as a traditional buildings preservation area, and another as a historical scenery preservation area.

Pontochō

A large-scale public project around the Kamo River was undertaken in 1670. Teashops and accommodations were built along a new street, welcoming tourists and boatman who transported goods along the Takasegawa Canal. The area gradually developed and received official permission to do business as a kagai in 1712.

Kamishichiken

When part of Kitano Shrine (today Kitano Tenmangu Shrine) burnt down in the mid-15th century, it was repaired, and seven teashops were built in the area. These seven shops were the origin of Kamishichiken. In 1587, Toyotomi Hideyoshi had a large tea party at the shrine, and the merchants and businessmen gave Hideyoshi a grand welcome. It is said that Hideyoshi returned the hospitality by granting them exclusive right to do business as teahouses.

Another origin story involves sacred maidens at the shrine. When these young girls grew older, they worked as waitresses in teashops. Thus the origin of geiko in Kamishichiken.

The area became popular with people visiting Kitano Tenmangu Shrine and with wealthy merchants in the Nishijin textile district.

Today it is designed as an important scenery maintenance area, and Kaburenjo Theatre as a historically important building.

5 Hazy origins of geisha

To many people, Japan's geisha, with their powdered faces and traditional outfits, seem exotic and spark curiosity. During the Edo period, a heterogeneous group of entertainers – not all of them women – were closely associated with the brothels and teahouses of the pleasure quarters (yūkaku). The first geisha were men who entertained customers before their meetings with courtesans. No females entered the geisha profession until 1751, but by 1800 women had claimed the profession for themselves.

Yoshiwara – Shimabara – Shinmachi:

Pleasure quarters of the past

The most famous pleasure quarter was the Yoshiwara, in Edo City. It was one of three set up and licensed by the Tokugawa Shogunate, along with Shimabara in Kyoto, and Shinmachi in Osaka. Entertainment businesses – brothels, kabuki theatres, teahouses, sumo arenas, comedy acts, music and dance performances – opened in pleasure quarters

to draw customers. These areas soon became known as places to see the best in fashion, music, and theatre. Together with courtesans and kabuki actors, geisha were Japan's fashion trend-setters.

Geisha of today, keepers of tradition

The geisha is an elusive, often problematic, figure in the history of modern Japan. In popular culture, her image is sometimes used as a symbol of the country, tradition, and “Oriental” femininity. But geisha in the Edo period were not always so easily categorised. As Japan began to open to the wider world and more Japanese started following Western styles during the 1920s, geisha became the custodians of traditional Japanese arts and culture.

Today, geisha are professional artists who entertain with classical Japanese dance, music, and other performing arts at banquets held at the teahouses.

6 Career as maiko and geiko

Both geiko and maiko are registered occupations allowed only in kagai areas. After graduation from junior high, a girl can debut as a maiko at the age of 15 or 16. To join the profession, girls must have an elder “sister” (onesan), with whom they pledge sisterhood over a cup of sake. These sisters exercise great influence over maiko and new geiko when they debut on the kagai scene. A maiko is promoted to geiko when she is over the age of twenty, in an erikae ceremony. After her term of service ends (usually 6–7 years, including time as maiko), she can quit whenever she chooses.

Like a family

Candidates for maiko and geiko must join to an okiya, a lodging house or establishment to which a maiko or geiko is affiliated during her career in the industry. They establish a kind of parent-child relationship with the

manager (okāsan). The onesan also serves as a foster mother for their “younger sister”, and this relationship lasts for as long as they are in the business. Elders take constant care of their younger sisters at ozashiki banquets (traditional Japanese dinner in a tatami room) and in the kagai community. These relationships form part of the hierarchy of the world of geiko and maiko.

Leaving the profession

There is no mandatory retirement age for geiko. When they decided to end their career, they hand out hiki-iwai (greeting gift upon retirement) to those within the kagai community to announce how they will continue relations with the community. Reasons for discontinuation are usually marriage or simply a desire to enter a new profession.

7 **Etiquette in the kagai**

With widespread fascination with geiko and maiko and the huge influx of international tourists to Kyoto, encounters with these artist-entertainers have become increasingly troublesome. International tourists have chased, stopped, swarmed, and even pulled on the kimono of geiko and maiko – usually just to snap a picture with them.

Curb your enthusiasm – don't stalk

Geiko and maiko are not allowed to stop for photos while working. When they commute between the teahouses, the clock is ticking. Out of respect for paying customers, they cannot be late for banquets. It is extremely difficult to navigate the narrow streets of kagai while wearing a traditional outfit and trying to avoid tourists.

Please do not swarm around these women, invade their private space, or stalk them at night just to get a blurry photograph for your social media account.

Not a playground or theme park

Some guidebooks promote “geisha hunting”; that’s why some tourists want to chase them on the streets. Some visitors misguidedly treat Gion, the most well-known kagai in Kyoto, as a kind of historic theme park. But Gion and the other kagai are parts of the city – admittedly scenic – inhabited by ordinary Kyoto people who need to live and do business peacefully.

Respect privacy

The city of Kyoto recently enacted a ban on photography in the private alleys along Hanamikōji, the main street in Gion. Fines of up to ¥10,000 (\$125 SGD) are now given for photography without permit. If you do encounter geisha, it is respectful to first ask if it’s okay to take a photograph. They’re usually in a hurry to their next appointment, so don’t be surprised if they politely refuse; and don’t follow them.