

Investing in History

– Japan's First Foreign Geisha on Preserving Cultural Traditions

By Alanna Cole-Baker



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Out with the New and In with the Old

Traditional Japanese arts are beginning to enjoy a revival in the 21st century, thanks to the “retro boom” which blossomed at the turn of the millennium and continues to flourish. The massive financial expansion of the 1980s appeared to be fostering a society obsessed with the modern, the new, the future; with things as shiny and neoteric as the skyscrapers it begat. Perhaps it has been the subsequent slump in Japan's economic fortunes which has led to a renewed interest in aspects of traditional culture. Across Tokyo, historic districts such as Taito city and Asakusa are experiencing a growth in popularity – the latter recently having been voted one of the most fashionable date destinations in the city. Young couples out for a romantic stroll along Nakamise-dori are even likely to be wearing *kimono* – a resurgence in the traditional dress which, 20 years ago, seemed on its way out.

The Geisha Tradition

One of the most iconic representations of the beauty and allure that the country's traditional heritage has to offer is the geisha. The intricately coiffed ladies in white makeup and silk are an image as evocative of Japan as *sushi* and cherry blossom, and they are hoping that the current movement for the revival of historic Japanese culture will encourage people to take a renewed interest in their most fascinating and mysterious world.

The term “geisha” (literally “artist”) as we understand it today has been in existence since the 18th century, but the convention of the female entertainer dates far back into Japanese history. The *saburuko* girls of the late 600s, acting as servers and entertainers at high society gatherings, represented the commencement of a long tradition of female performance artists in Japan.

In their pre-war heyday of the early 20th century, geisha enjoyed an immensely popular role in mainstream Japanese culture. Individual geisha acquired national fame and appeared as the faces of cosmetics brands and drinks corporations, with a status similar to that of Hollywood actresses in the West. World War II and the ensuing occupation saw the geisha community driven out of the public sphere somewhat, due to a distrust about potential mistreatment at the hands of

the American authorities. During the 1950s and 1960s, the geisha world became characterized by a new guardedness and exclusivity, opening its doors only to a select, trusted clientele comprising Japan's most wealthy and well-connected. This element of elitism prevails today; in order to meet a geisha one needs to be able to afford the prohibitively expensive fees they charge for gracing an event with their presence, as well as have the social advantages necessary to obtain an official introduction into the teahouse where the geisha traditionally ply their trade.

Photo: Ben Robins



Sayuki officially debuted as Japan's first foreign geisha in 2007.

Re-connecting with the Public

Sayuki, an Australian, Oxford-educated anthropologist who became the world's first non-Japanese geisha when she made her official debut in 2007, believes that now is the ideal time to try and recapture some of the public interest once enjoyed by these experts in the arts of entertainment. “Most Japanese people today have never met a geisha, and have absolutely no idea how to go about doing so,” she says. “Nevertheless the interest is there. People are fascinated by geisha because of their beauty and inscrutability, and their unconventional lifestyle. There is a huge potential client base within the Japanese public – and visitors to the country – but many of these people never get to meet a geisha because the traditional geisha way of operating commercially doesn't really correspond with contemporary mores. Every week I receive emails from young female geisha fans, from tourists, from teachers organizing school trips, all wanting to meet geisha but with no chance of finding an official introduction.

The reason that I have continued as a geisha

is because I can do something to help mediate between the customers wanting to meet geisha and the geisha who are happy to get more work.”

New Business Strategy

Sayuki, who attended the prestigious Keio University and was employed at a Japanese company before training as an anthropologist, is in a unique position for a geisha not only because of her nationality, but due also to her business background. She is the only geisha ever to possess an MBA, and having previously worked in both broadcasting and journalism, she is well qualified to suggest ways forward for the geisha world that won't dilute the beauty of its traditions. “Any culture



Foreign visitors looking for an authentic traditional Japanese experience often comprise Sayuki's clientele.

constantly innovates and changes through history," she argues, posing a possible opportunity to be harnessing the promotional potential contained within corporate sponsorship. "Traditionally, geisha derived a lot of their income from individual sponsors, but in the current economic climate, financial backing from individuals can be hard to find. I think that one option for geisha is to obtain sponsorship from non-traditional sources. We could hook up with private companies. I would be happy to represent a product as long as it was not unsuited to the geisha image."

Should geisha begin to adopt such sponsorship, they would be following in the footsteps of a number of groups involved in traditional cultural industries who have recently begun hooking up with commercial interests. Sumo wrestlers have been involved in adverts for everything from Pepsi to Beechams; Kabuki actors have appeared in a McDonalds commercial in the last decade. Even Kyoto *maiko* (trainee or apprentice geisha) have starred in KFC advertisements. It seems that throughout Japan, industries are capitalizing on the public appeal of the nation's varied and colourful heritage icons. Sayuki hopes that the Japanese government can also be brought to recognise the potential that lies in the cultivation of the country's traditional arts. "Because of the financial downturn, more and more emphasis is being placed upon the tourist industry as a means of generating economic revenue. And money is getting poured into aspects of Japanese pop culture like *anime* and music groups, because of popularity abroad. But what seems to have been forgotten is that inside the *anime* are stories of samurai and geisha, and it is the contrast of old and new that makes *anime* so unique. Old Japan is a vital element of the country's attraction; and if you let it disappear then so will the tourists."

Sayuki is doing her bit to attract foreign visitors by going into partnership with HIS to pioneer a scheme wherein, for the first time in history, people with no contacts within the geisha community can meet geisha, at a price tailored to their budget. "People can book through the HIS site, or contact me through my website, and I become the introduction," she explains. "There are all kinds of customers with all kinds of budgets. I ask customers to tell me how many they are and what their maximum budget is per person. And then I can give them some options to suit them. I have single businessmen alone on business trips, or tourist couples. I have high school groups in afternoon banquets and groups of snowboarders on their way to Hakuba. One popular thing lately is expats inviting geisha to parties in their homes. Some customers just want to have drinks with geisha rather than a full multi-course dinner and that is a lot cheaper too. And of course, it is not just for foreigners. The bulk of my customers are Japanese, and I have a lot of Japanese customers who are coming to banquets and meeting geisha for the very first time."



Geisha entertain their guests with performances of traditional music, singing and dance.

Falling for the Flower & Willow World

An Australian-born Oxford graduate may seem an unlikely person to be beating the drum for Japanese heritage preservation, but Sayuki, who first came to live in Japan at the age of 15, has embraced wholeheartedly the culture with which, as a teenager, she fell in love. Working as a freelance television director for international broadcasters, she stumbled into the geisha world quite by chance, after pitching a documentary about it in which she ended up appearing, in her capacity as an anthropologist. "I was admitted into a geisha house in the Asakusa district of Tokyo to train as a geisha for one year," she says. "That's how long it takes just to debut, so after it had passed I had only got started – and by that time I had decided it was something I really wanted to commit myself to. So I got permission to continue practising as an official geisha."

Now working independently, but frequently alongside her geisha sisters from Asakusa, Sayuki is pouring all of her energies into preserving the tradition that she feels so privileged to be a part of. The "flower and willow world" or *karyūkai* – the "separate reality" which geisha are said to inhabit – is the ultimate expression of Old Japan: redolent of beauty, ornamentation and formal ritual. Although geisha numbers have been on the decline since the war, Sayuki is certain that the fascinating attraction of the geisha world will prove enduring, and that the present sentiment of nostalgia pervading Japanese society makes this the perfect time to invest in a culture which encapsulates so much of the country's capacity for idiosyncratic beauty.

Her methods may seem anachronistically modern, but Sayuki is not the first geisha by any means to have a website, or to liaise with customers through email. Nevertheless her attempts to expand the range of the geisha customer base are part of a new movement in the geisha world which, steeped in conservative tradition, is slowly adapting to the times. "Geisha have always been very strong, independent businesswomen," says Sayuki. "It's merely a matter of altering the business model so it is more appropriate to the 21st century."

Sayuki's website can be found at www.sayuki.net

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