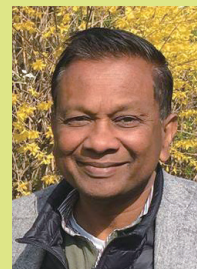


Megumi: the Elegance & Grace of the Japanese Geisha

By Mukesh Williams



Author Mukesh Williams

Geisha Megumi's life is dedicated to spreading the pleasures of geisha *omotenashi* (hospitality) in Hachioji Nakacho, an area of Tokyo, and revealing the world of *karyukai* (the geisha world — literally, “The Flower and Willow World”) in everyday life. Born in 1962, she joined the profession in 1983 at the insistence of her mentor Taiko, who was the chairperson of the Hachioji Geigi Kumiai union of 19 geisha houses. Geisha Megumi initiated the reconstruction of the Hachioji *karyukai* in 2002 and since then has made it popular and lively. During the last decade many geisha trained by her have become independent and opened their own *okiya* (a lodging house for geisha owned by the woman paying for their training). In 2016, the NHK television program *Hangyoku Tanjo* (roughly, “The Birth of Geisha Trainees”) highlighted Hachioji's *karyukai*, drawing attention to the avant-garde work of Geisha Megumi. She embodies the finest tradition of Japanese *omotenashi*. Today she is more of a teacher of *hangyoku* (geisha trainees) and an *okami* (hostess/owner) in the delicate world of *karyukai*. She is now learning English to connect with the Anglophonic world in a new way.

The Geisha World

Reviving the geisha tradition in a postmodern world of digital technology, pop music, social disbelief and economic transformation is rather difficult but not impossible. The avant-garde and innovative ideas of Geisha Megumi represent a new wave of geisha tradition that may soon become one of the national brands of Japan. The over 400-year-old geisha tradition begins in the Edo Period (1603-1868) and is epitomized in important *karyukai* like Kyoto's Gion and Tokyo's Asakusa districts, but Hachioji also once boasted a robust geisha culture: in 1935 there were 200 *okiya* and 40

ryotei (Japanese-style luxury restaurants) in the area. Up until 1955, Hachioji Nakacho, with its willow trees and black walls, was a symbol of *karyukai*. Passersby would often hear the music of shamisen (three-stringed lute) and taiko (barrel-shaped drum) coming from the *okiya*. But as Geisha Megumi has pointed out, by 2016 there were only 19 geisha and four *ryotei*, while the last *machiai* (tea house) was closed in 2015.

Reviving the almost dying tradition of the geisha as entertainers, with *okiya* and *ryotei*, seems a stupendous task, but Geisha Megumi is putting new life into it and reviving some of the vanishing glories of comfortable conversation, koto and shamisen music, and social greetings and gatherings, such as serving tea. Today the global customer is eager to learn about and experience the daily life and the world of shadows that *karyukai* traverses. Such a revival will require generating a new interest among well-to-do male and female clients in conversation, poetry, and dance, as well as inducting new female talent into the profession. If a rediscovered interest in the profession of geisha emerges, new *okiya* and the sight of geisha and *hangyoku* on the streets of Hachioji could create a fresh ambience for the tradition in public life and revive the almost lost art of entertainment and social engagement.

Connecting the World of Special Occasions & Daily Life

Geisha connected two different worlds and created an atmosphere of business and well-being. Sumi Asahara, author of *Geishashu ni Hanataba wo: Hachioji Karyukai, Fukkatsu* (Fuuseisha, 2017), believes that geisha inhabited an extraordinary world within the modalities of daily life. They lived in a world of art and entertainment, respected by neighbors who did not cross the boundaries of courtesy or intimacy. They inhabited the space between a special occasion and daily life — or *hare* to *ke*. Scholar and folklorist Kunio Yanagita defined *ke* as ordinary day and *hare* as a special occasion represented by the way one dressed, the way one behaved and the language one spoke. The geisha brought the *hare* to those who

Photo: Author



Geisha Megumi's okiya Yukinoe in Hachioji

resided in the *ke*. Traditional society respected the boundary between interaction and intimacy and interaction and business.

Once the geisha world represented the world of night, something gone by, but today the old geisha world is reimagining itself as one of pleasure and *omotenashi*. In an interview with Cultural Studies think tank researcher Atsushi Miura, Geisha Megumi pointed out that *kagai* (geisha entertainment districts) had been “the world of night, the world of old days that outsiders don’t understand”. It was a part of a closed world, a secretive attraction, but it also carried the concept of *omotenashi* represented through the idea of cleanliness. Geisha Megumi continued that “*kagai* is part of the composite arts that combined architecture, ambience of rooms, the art of the tea ceremony, *kado* (flower arranging) and one’s behavior in addition to traditional singing and dance. It is wonderful that we have such a town.”

In the past geisha were at times sold by a family to pay off debts and many had a shadowy life as a second or third wife. Traditionally the geisha profession was considered as a career to entertain men at certain places, such as at a work party or banquet. Even today the residues of a dark world continue to haunt the image of geisha, but Geisha Megumi is creating a cleaner and more professional one.

The geisha world condenses all aspects of Japanese culture. In the hands of Geisha Megumi it is becoming a process to self-development and learning. Geisha Megumi and her trainees are using the geisha stage or *kaburenjo* (lesson studio for geisha) in their interactions with local people, such as when they join a performance at the hospital or conduct a history-sharing lecture at a local elementary school. She says that although geisha is a traditional culture, it needs to be represented in the modern world in a “creative manner”. Hachioji Digestive Disease Hospital, for example, invites the best musicians who perform in a lobby concert in Japan for patients and their families and Geisha Megumi together with other Hachioji geisha started to participate in the lobby concerts in 2002. Although there was initially some uncertainty about the patients, especially females, liking the idea of inviting geisha, the concert was successful and since then geisha have been invited for the New Year lobby concert each year.

Apart from hospitals they are also open and willing to join community events. One of Geisha Megumi’s trainees was called to perform and give a talk at Hachioji City Daisan Elementary School as part of a lecture series by local professionals. There were pupils and parents in the gymnasium where she performed Japanese dances, sang traditional songs for children and played the shamisen. The pupils asked why the geisha painted her face white, and she told them that in olden times there was no electricity and people lived by the light of candles, and customers could easily see the candle-lit faces of the women and found them feminine. So that was why

geisha started to paint their faces so brightly. Through such unconventional ways the Hachioji geisha are emerging as providers of comfort, representatives of the *omotenashi* spirit and ambassadors of Japanese culture.

Today the young are attracted by the delicate modesty of the geisha. Customers are also attracted by the “cleanliness and freshness” of attitude of the modern geisha. Geisha Megumi is working to create a new atmosphere in Hachioji where the young can participate in life creatively. Her *okiya* Yukinoe educates her young trainees based on the philosophy of *omotenashi* and spreading joy. She has trained about 20 *geiko* (students) under her *okiya*.

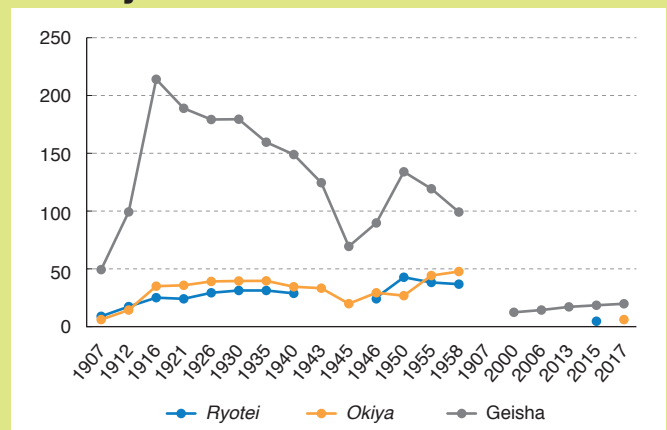
Silk Industry & Karyukai

There has long been a tight connection between the silk industry and *karyukai*, and so when the silk industry declined around the 1960s, geisha’s income also declined. Between 1890 and 1973 Hachioji was famous for silk textiles. The development of the geisha world in Hachioji coincided with the growth and decay of the silk trade. But after the oil shock in the 1970s people stopped going to the geisha world. Textiles, shipbuilding and the steel industry went into decline, while the service sector and IT rose to the top. With these changes in business the importance of geisha entertainment went down. After 1945 the number of geisha peaked in 1955 and then began to decline slowly (Chart).

It is possible to see that both *ryotei* and *okiya* remained somewhat stable but the number of geisha in Hachioji joining the trade declined from 215 in 1916 to 100 in 1958. In 1985 there were still 40

CHART

Number of *ryotei*, *okiya* and geisha in Hachioji 1907-2017



Source: Hachioji Shishi Joukan (*Hachioji City History Volume Jou*) accessed by Sumi Asahara in her book *Geishashu ni Hanataba wo* (2017), pp. 68, 100-101, 155.

geisha but Geisha Megumi, at 30, was the youngest in Hachioji. Even as the geisha population aged, Geisha Megumi continued to be the youngest geisha in the area. It shows how decline in trade had a deep effect on the aspirations of the young to join the profession.

Interview with Geisha Megumi

Williams: What are the difficulties you face today working as a geisha? What is your strategy to overcome them?

Megumi: Today the first problem is to get social insurance. Working as a geisha is an unstable business. Many young people are worried about irregular income and insuring their future when they grow old. When I started working as a geisha in 1985, if I was not called for a job I did not get any money. Rather my income went into minus as I had to pay for the kimono, make-up and other things. Now we have a system perhaps like a pension system through which we pay a regular basic salary to *hangyoku*. However, this system varies from one *okiya* to another. Today we traverse two opposite worlds — the ideal world of *omotenashi* which brings out the best traditions of Japan and the practical world of finding insurance.

Williams: Explain briefly the dynamics of a training session? How long does it last? How do you select persons to undergo training? What is your philosophy of training?

Megumi: Firstly we train them how to enter the room, how to bow and how to pour tea in a cup. In order to train them how to dance, they have to learn how to sing, and in order to sing they have to be trained how to play the *tsuzumi* (a hand drum) to know how to beat a rhythm. Everything is connected. We do a variety of genres of music and song. We also conduct the tea ceremony, which is a generalized art form. The tea ceremony is integrated with basic behavior and showing respect for others. For the beginners, we train them first

how to dance and then how to perform the tea ceremony. Today I finished a training session with a teacher at midnight. A usual training session is primarily preparation and review. We need time to learn and acquire the skills. So every day we conduct a training session. But it is fun to learn new things even at this age. Even what I am teaching are basic and traditional skills, but there are always new skills to learn. I enjoy learning new things. I would like to do training sessions for my whole life. It is not like I have to do it, but I want to.

Williams: How about sleeping and eating and other daily aspects of the tradition? When do you wake up and go to bed?

Megumi: I usually wake up at 6:30 a.m., and after finishing house work by 9 a.m. I go to get my hair set. From 10 a.m. we have a training session. After lunch, we have another training session, and other meetings and rehearsals. From 4:00 to 4:30 p.m. we change yukata into kimono and go to work around 6 p.m., and continue until 11:30 p.m. or midnight. Then around 1:30 a.m. I go to bed.

Williams: What advice do you give to *hangyoku* who find the training hard or life difficult? How do you manage them?

Megumi: Usually young people don't wake up early. There is not so much variety in training sessions for them. I try to take them to a little higher level than they can reach. I would like them to put more pressure on themselves rather than keep things as they are. I sometimes know what they can do and how much they can do. Young people should feel joy and happiness in practice, otherwise practice becomes suffering. For young people, I want them to take enough rest and value their private life. When they enjoy practicing dances and songs and see improvement in their skills they find an inner dynamic balance. When they make a mistake, they reflect upon it by themselves and try to do their best next time. I too practice more and more in order not to repeat the same mistake again. Some people feel that I do many training sessions, but these training sessions connect to my sense of happiness and contribution to my profession.

Then learning to be aware is also important. Even if some customers complain about our performance we should take it positively and make it a source of energy to improve. I think, next time I should change in this way, or do the work differently. When you are scolded by your teacher, you can take it positively by thinking "It is better to be scolded than to have nothing said." Such an attitude lets you notice something important in your training and helps you do more.

Williams: How do you wish to open the geisha tradition to foreigners?

Megumi: I think foreigners can help us realize our tradition once again. Most foreigners who visit us are interested in the geisha tradition and study beforehand. They bring with them lots of

Photo: Author



Geisha Megumi with shamisen

questions. Last time, some students from China and Taiwan visited the *okiya* on a trip supported by the Hachioji Visitors and Convention Association. They asked me lots of questions. International students research and prepare many questions prior to visiting. Their questions make me realize that some things we thought were normal were not and allow me to discover a new take on those things.

For example, in Japanese traditional dance, they use their neck movements on count 1 and 2 to emphasize the movement on count 3. This has become something natural to do for the dancers as well as Japanese people. In other words, it has become something that is difficult to ask about. However, when foreigners ask about it frankly, we are able to think about how to explain it in an understandable way and realize the meanings behind each movement. This can clarify skills and help others to understand such movements. People can enjoy dance even more when they understand the meaning behind it. This was something I was able to realize because of my encounter with people from foreign countries. I am taking English classes as my dream is to spread the Japanese tradition to foreign people because I love Japan.

Williams: Since we discussed once before that I would write a book on your life in English, what do you wish me to focus on? What can we achieve by such a book? What are the targets? I am also thinking to publish a manga based on the book. Do you think it is a good idea?

Megumi: That is interesting. Japanese tradition is sometimes misunderstood as being uncool and old-fashioned, but actually there are more attractive and beautiful things in it. As I experienced in *karyukai*, I would like more people to have a positive opinion about Japanese traditional culture. I would like you to write about beautiful

and new things in Japanese traditions rather than how difficult and troublesome it is to maintain them. I'd like people to read the book and realize the true and beautiful parts of Japanese culture.

Williams: Do you think it a good idea to make a manga or a movie on your life based on the book?

Megumi: I don't want the book to be read like a history book or say how difficult the profession is. I want people who read it

to realize the true and beautiful part of Japanese culture. After reading the manga people should feel that the *karyukai* is not uncool or old-fashioned. Manga are popular with young people today and using manga would be an easy way to learn about a culture which people usually don't have a chance to know. Your idea to do a manga based on the book is a good one.

Williams: What do you think about connecting the geisha tradition with the liberal university tradition and creating a new interest amongst the young?

Megumi: When you say it, it seems that it could come true.

Williams: Are you open to the idea of an online event with Japanese and foreign universities discussing the geisha tradition and the concept of *omotenashi*?

Megumi: Interaction with people always leads to a new start. A lot of misunderstanding is there about us. People understand geisha as part of the "world of shadows" and so on. But it is changing. I want to clear up misunderstandings about geisha and want young people to understand that there are people of the same age who are training every day to become a geisha. It would be wonderful if I could spread the true beauty of Japan and Japanese tradition to many people.

Williams: The geisha is an expert in the use of *omotenashi* and has wonderful communication skills to create and maintain a pleasant ambiance amongst guests. How do you teach these skills?

Megumi: There is no manual to teach *omotenashi*. I want to spread happiness to those I meet. The actual skill of *omotenashi* is also important but if there is no spirit of "making people happy" from dancing or playing the shamisen, it doesn't mean anything. The call of "Ganbatte ne" (Keep it up) from customers can be a source of energy for growth. The way of *omotenashi* differs from generation to generation. But the spirit of appreciation and wanting customers to feel happy is important.

Geisha Megumi is committed to leaving a legacy for future generations by reviving the *hangyoku* tradition. Though the future is uncertain, she is determined to work with "comrades to pursue the art, regardless of age" and use her lifelong experience as a senior geisha to preserve the tradition. Like many of her colleagues in other cities, she wants to talk less about the problems and more about the joy of the fine tradition of the geisha.

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Photo: Author

Welcoming at the entrance of Yukinoe

Mukesh Williams is a professor at Soka University, visiting faculty at Keio University, consultant/news analyst for the BBC World Service, and St. Stephen's College Alumni Representative and Academic Exchange Programs Coordinator in Japan.