

# Meet Sayuki, first foreign geisha

**Anthropologist admitted into secretive society,  
plans documentary on 'flower and willow world'**

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An Australian woman with a Master of Business Administration degree and a doctorate in social anthropology from the University of Oxford made her debut as a geisha last December in Tokyo's Asakusa district. The appearance of the first-ever foreign geisha, whose professional name is Sayuki, was widely reported by an array of overseas media, including the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) and CBS Inc. of the U.S.

"The Japanese word 'geisha' is as well-known as 'Toyota' and 'Sony' abroad," Sayuki explained in fluent Japanese. Her dream is to "contribute to the 'flower and willow world' by taking advantage of my marketing knowledge."

She first came to Japan at the age of 15 on a high-school student exchange program. After graduating from the Faculty of Letters at Keio University in Tokyo, she worked for a financial institution in Japan.

#### Busy life

Sayuki, whose real name and age are not disclosed in accordance with the customs of the geisha community, is busying herself with daily training together with her senior geisha to master skills, such as dance,

tea ceremony, drum and Japanese bamboo flute. One who wants to be entertained by her can nominate her through an upscale *ryotei* Japanese restaurant.

Behind her decision to become a geisha is her plan to produce a TV documentary to introduce the real geisha society to the world, she said. In the field of social anthropology, her specialty, actually living in a target society is a basic approach to study, she said. She keeps a record of her daily life, and hopes to take the log public in some form someday.

She was admitted to the geisha society in spring of last year thanks to an introduction by an acquaintance, a Keio University alumnus. Stating that she is grateful to the Asakusa geisha community for accepting her, she plans to continue with the profession even after completing the documentary.

Despite the high-profile debut of the foreign geisha, the Asakusa flower and willow society has remained relatively cool. Some even cast a rather critical eye at her, saying, "She has no track record so far" or "I wonder how long she will last."

Asakusa is one neighborhood of old Tokyo that retains the atmosphere of the Edo period (1603-1867). However, the number of geisha has plummeted to less than 10% of the peak level in the late



The Asakusa geisha community hopes Australian Sayuki will help breathe life into their dwindling profession.

1950s and existing geisha are rapidly aging, stoking a sense of crisis in the geisha community there.

"From the anthropological viewpoint, a culture that refuses to change declines," she said. "The fact that the Asakusa flower and willow society has embraced a foreigner like me attests to the fact that they acutely feel the pinch and are willing to change."

She finds foreigners accounting for about 10% of customers in her engagements, and expects the number to increase steadily in future.

"I believe I can be helpful in dealing with foreign customers," she said. Not many foreign tourists could afford to call geisha to *ryotei* restaurants, which can be extremely costly, but they might want to take a photo with exotic geisha,

she explained.

Before becoming a geisha, Sayuki had made a documentary on her former colleagues at a now-defunct financial institution which she joined immediately after graduating from Keio University. By tracking the lives of former fellow workers after the company was closed, she exposed to view a cross section of the contemporary Japanese society.

"Because I'm a foreigner, I can look at Japanese society objectively," she said. "Many Japanese do not appear to be fully aware of the strong brand power of 'geisha' overseas." The rush by foreign media to cover her debut in the geisha world underscores the strength of the geisha brand outside Japan, Sayuki said, encouraging the Japanese to take more pride in geisha culture.

In Kyoto, where geisha are called *geiko*, the number of *maiko*, or geiko apprentices, surpassed 100 in March, partly backed by the recent trend of young people taking renewed interest in traditional aspects of Japanese culture. Geiko and *maiko* are now playing an essential role in events held overseas by the local government to attract tourists to the ancient capital.

Choosing her words carefully, Sayuki is poised to bring a breath of fresh air into the flower and willow world while observing the traditional conventions. Details about Sayuki can be found on her Web site ([www.sayuki.net](http://www.sayuki.net)).

## Tours give taste of geisha entertainment

Being entertained by geisha at luxurious and exclusive *ryotei* Japanese restaurants — which usually refuse service to customers without an introduction — is nearly as unthinkable for the average Japanese as it is for foreign tourists. But many people who would like to sample this difficult-to-access form of entertainment, and for them, travel agencies and others are offering tours at reasonable prices.

Hato Bus Co. six years ago started a tour that visits the long-established Sakura-Chaya *ryotei* in Tokyo's Mukojima district. The 80-minute tour, held three or four times a month, is so popular that sometimes two large buses are required to carry all the patrons. The participants can watch the geisha dance and are taught party games at a cost of ¥9,900, including a traditional meal.

Kinryu, a *ryotei* in Akasaka that had been favored by big-name politicians until it was shuttered in the spring of 2006, is due to reopen in September as a club with live music. In the former banquet room on the second floor of the building, which was built in 1953 in the style of a tea-ceremony pavilion, geisha dance performances will also be held. The room can accommodate 50



Hato Bus is offering a popular tour that visits long-established *ryotei* in Tokyo.

people. The first floor will be converted into a Japanese-style *izakaya* pub, where dinner will cost ¥6,000 or so per customer.

Engaging geisha at Kinryu once cost at least ¥50,000 for one customer, but as customers drifted away, the *ryotei* was

forced to close. According to Kinryu officials, however, they wanted to preserve the geisha culture of Akasaka. Akasaka ACT Theater in the Akasaka Sacas commercial complex, which opened in March this year, also held a geisha dance performance on May 9.