

WW | exclusive

# home grown geisha

A Melbourne woman is the first foreigner to become a geisha in Japan. Here, **Lee Tulloch** speaks to Fiona Graham, known as Sayuki, and gets a rare insight into the mysterious world of the geisha.



**THE NEWEST GEISHA** on the block in Tokyo's historical Asakusa district has pale green eyes, white skin and grew up in Mount Waverley in Melbourne. As she shuffles along the narrow market streets in her pink kimono, even the polite Japanese frankly stare. Young Japanese women in Tokyo are taking to wearing traditional costume again, but no one ever sees a white woman in a kimono, let alone a white woman taking tiny geisha steps, eyes downcast and bowing in greeting to shopkeepers.

Sayuki, as she is known, is also Dr Fiona Graham, a social anthropologist with degrees from Japan's prestigious Keio University and Britain's Oxford, who is a documentary film-maker, author and a former financial journalist. Fiona came to Japan from Australia at 15 as an exchange student and returned, after finishing school, to attend university in Tokyo. She has lived on and off in Japan for 15 years.

About a year ago, she became interested in making a documentary about geisha. Deciding to be a participant rather than an observer, she found a contact who gave her an introduction to a geisha house and an older geisha who was prepared to sponsor her. A year of rigorous training in the tea ceremony, dance, etiquette and music followed. In late December, with the approval of the Geisha Association, which acts as a kind of union and mothership for the Asakusa district's more than 100 geisha, she made her debut. She is the first foreigner ever to do so.

To understand how a highly educated, forthright and opinionated woman from the West broke into such a closed society, which has remained unchanged in its rituals for centuries, and, more intriguingly, what attraction the disciplined geisha life might hold for her, it's necessary to first spend some time in the geisha world.

For many Western women, our view of geisha society is formed by the novel >>>



Melbourne academic, Dr Fiona Graham, known as Sayuki, has crossed a cultural divide with her initiation into the life of a geisha.





Left: Fiona Graham relaxes in a Tokyo bar, without the costume and make-up she wears as a geisha (opposite), that includes black contact lenses to hide her pale eyes.

messy office on a street corner, not unlike a model booking agency. When people ask Sayuki what she does, she says, "I am an entertainer". What began as a project for her has become a life and she is sometimes prickly in her defence of it.

The Melbourne schoolgirl is long gone, replaced by a young woman who has "gone native," as she calls it – Japanese in every sense, including a certain inscrutability. While it was inevitable that a girl bursting with curiosity might leave the "flat" suburbs of our southern capital for more exotic locations, her total immersion in such a traditional culture must be rare. She hardly ever visits Australia, although she says, every few years, she does have pangs and thinks about coming home.

Geisha means "artist" and the geisha's primary role is to attend banquets at teahouses and entertain customers with the ritual tea ceremony and other arts, such as dancing, singing or playing a musical instrument.

In this sense, the tradition is the same as it was hundreds of years ago. A geisha who is highly prized for her artistic skills might receive invitations to many banquets in one night. She can earn anywhere between \$300 and \$600 per customer with a two-hour minimum, so a corporate function, for instance, can prove very lucrative. (Geisha entertain women as well as men.) She takes the entire fee herself. The teahouse makes money from the cost of the meal and drinks.

In the past, new geisha such as Sayuki were called "half geisha" because they charged half the fee, but these days, they all receive the same flat fee. Most of the teahouses are part of the umbrella Geisha Association (a committee which administers the geisha, made up of official teahouse proprietors and the owners of *okiya*, the geisha houses.) Geisha may attend banquets at unofficial teahouses, but demand a higher fee. All this activity is co-ordinated through the central office, where geisha names are written on plastic chips and placed against the names of teahouses when a booking is made, either through the teahouse itself or a customer directly.

The geisha's most important relationship is with her "geisha mother" or *okamisan*. A potential geisha needs to be sponsored by an older geisha who owns a geisha house. (After five years of being attached to a geisha house, a geisha may go independent and set up her own house.) She generally lives in the house and pays her *okamisan* a monthly fee. At the office today, Sayuki's geisha mother, Yukiko, is there to see >>>

and film *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Sayuki dismisses the film as "ridiculous" and "nothing to do with real geisha life". The fictional world of girls sold in slavery to geisha houses, intense geisha rivalry and submissive sex with rich men is a fantasy, she says. "Geisha are not subservient. They are working women who are in control of their own income. They're far more independent than the average housewife in Japan."

I FIRST MEET SAYUKI at the Foreign Correspondents' Club in the Ginza district. It takes me a while to work out which of the many women at the bar she is, but the Korean film crew following her around is the giveaway. Upon making her debut on December 19, she did a very modern, media-savvy act and sent out a press release announcing it, which has caused something of a media feeding frenzy.

She is holding court at a table, talking to a British journalist, dressed in a cardigan, white shirt and skirt, her long hair falling in an unruly way on her shoulders. She has a turned up nose and a crooked smile, and it would be good casting to have Nicole Kidman play her in the movie of her life. Her age is not discussed, but she may be in her late 30s or 40s.

I am surprised she is not in kimono. She tells me later that geisha are not required to wear traditional costume and make-up all the time. Indeed, the next morning, when I am with her in Asakusa at the Geisha Association, where geisha drop in to take music classes and check their bookings for banquets at night, most of the geisha, young and elderly alike, are wearing the sort of casual clothing modern women universally wear – T-shirts, jeans, parkas and sneakers – and talking on mobile phones. Most are not made-up, or particularly well groomed, or slender, or, to my eyes, head-turning.

Sayuki is dressed in a kimono, with natural make-up, when I meet her outside the Senso-ji temple in Asakusa. As we walk to the office, a young woman stops me to tell me in English that Sayuki's obi (her wide cloth belt) is tied incorrectly. When I explain to the woman that Sayuki is a geisha, her eyes widen for a moment, before she smiles and says, "But I am Japanese and I know it is wrong". Later, the Korean film crew will ask an elderly Japanese man in the street what he thinks of a Western geisha and he tells them it's sad because Japanese culture should remain Japanese.

The geisha headquarters is a narrow,





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A geisha is taken from one engagement to another in the Asakusa district of Tokyo, the hub of the city's geisha teahouses.

how her daughter's lessons in traditional bamboo flute are going. Sayuki's name, which means "Transparent Happiness", is taken from a character in Yukiko's name to show she "belongs" to that geisha house.

It's an auspicious day because Sayuki has been accepted as a pupil of the master, Mochizuki Chojiro of the prestigious Mochizuki Music School, where there have been 12 generations of teachers. They sit in a tatami-matted room while Sayuki plays for Mochizuki-san. Yukiko looks on benignly. She is a plumpish woman, possibly in her late 60s, dressed in a sweater and stretch pants, a brace on her knee. I find out later that Yukiko's mother and grandmother were geisha and she was apprenticed at five. "It was her choice," Sayuki tells me sternly when I raise an eyebrow, although I'm not sure how much choice a five-year-old has.

Sayuki is Yukiko's only daughter and she must be an extraordinary woman to have taken on the world's first official white geisha. "My geisha mother is very strict," Sayuki says, explaining that she is constantly criticised for all kinds of misdemeanours. "But, sometimes, I catch the end of a conversation she is having with another person and she's boasting about me."

Back home in Melbourne, Sayuki's real mother, Margaret Graham, is also proud of her daughter, Fiona. "Obviously, it's quite an achievement what she's done," she says. "It's a different world for us. It's all very intriguing and something very special she's done, so we're very proud of her."

Sayuki is the lowest geisha on the totem pole, so she has to sit in on the classes the other geisha are taking before it is her turn.

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"Most young Japanese would not be able to adapt. It's very hard to be in that hierarchical world and to be the newest member." Geisha take classes in dancing and music all their lives, and for the new geisha, it's very labour-intensive. Sayuki jokes about her lack of skills. "I'm a very *bad* geisha." Yet when I later ask a Japanese customer at a teahouse what is attractive about Sayuki, his response is translated as, "She is sexier and more sensual than a Japanese girl".

Today's classes go for four hours. Sayuki does seem on tenterhooks in her deference to the others. When I ask her what has been the hardest thing about learning to be a geisha, she says sitting for hours on her knees (she has had to lose several kilos to ease the pressure) and wearing black contact lenses. "The black wig looks wrong with pale eyes," she says. In effect, with the thick white make-up, wig and contact lenses, you would not know she was Western. Except, she says, for her Japanese. She speaks in the small, little girl voice of the Japanese, but even though it is excellent for everyday life, it's not perfect enough for geisha.

I am invited to visit Yukiko at the geisha house, a short walk from the office. Most of a geisha's life is spent within this district. The house is modern, on three levels with

an inclinator. Yukiko is disabled and her electric scooter is parked outside. It's simple and full of boxes and trunks. Yukiko watches television in her bedroom while Sayuki shows me her kimonos.

A geisha's major expense is her wardrobe – it is not unusual for a geisha to have 1000 kimonos. Kimonos that are suitable for banquets might cost upwards of \$20,500 and novice geisha often hire their costumes from their *okamisan*. Yukiko's kimono collection is impressive. There are trunks full – much of it inherited from her mother and grandmother – in the attic. Sayuki says a wealthy friend bought her five expensive kimonos and obis when she began her apprenticeship a year ago. She unwraps the neat paper parcels that enclose them and displays them for me. They're comfortable, she insists. The wide obi supports your back through all those hours of sitting.

"I think it can be a beautiful lifestyle," she says. "You're dressed in absolutely exquisite clothing. Some of my geisha mother's kimonos you wouldn't be able to buy these days, they're beautiful antiques handed down. All girls like dress-ups, don't they? I'm getting to dress up in 2 million yen worth of clothes."

I have a rare chance to sit in on two banquets and see geisha and their customers interact. The first is to celebrate the new year, sponsored by the Tokyo Regional Taxation Bureau and held in a large upstairs function room at its headquarters. Company executives, most of them chain smoking, sit at low tables, accompanied by geisha, while other geisha perform. The older geisha play *shamisen*, a traditional three-stringed >>>





Left: Sayuki practises her traditional bamboo flute. She learned flute at school in Australia and is now a pupil with a Japanese master at his Tokyo music school.

lute and sing, while the younger women dance. The girls in jeans and sneakers are transformed under thick white greasepaint, stiff wigs and layers of kimono and obi wraps. The beauty in geisha life is all about artifice, the art of performance and costume. The only glimpses of the woman underneath are her hands and patterns on the back of her neck where the greasepaint reveals skin.

That evening, I am invited to sit in on a banquet at the Hisagoan teahouse, which is across the road from the Geisha Association. It's an elegant modern building with several floors of banquet rooms. All the teahouses are within walking distance of each other, which is convenient, as popular geisha may go to four or five banquets a night. If you stand on any street corner in the district, you will see these exquisite creatures trotting from teahouse to teahouse, their wooden sandals clacking on the pavement.

As Sayuki and I enter the teahouse, a

group of merry businessmen, smelling of beer, stop Sayuki to take her photograph. Inside, there are more slightly inebriated men at reception. Yet there's nothing tawdry about it. It's an elegant, even chic, teahouse and the men are well dressed and respectful.

One myth that still prevails is that geisha are prostitutes. Geisha *do not* sell sexual favours. In the past, a geisha might have been sponsored by a *danna* or wealthy

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male patron, who bought her expensive kimonos and other gifts in return for a discreet sexual relationship. These days, some geisha still take *danna*, but it is much more rare. A geisha must be single, but it is permitted for her to have been married and divorced before she enters the world.

When I ask Sayuki if it is possible for a geisha to have a boyfriend she says, "I suppose so, but he'd have to be very understanding of the life". I think of the girls in the geisha office, some as young as 18, and I wonder what motivates a modern girl to become a geisha, although they can and often do leave the profession to get married. It's reasonably common for young girls to fall in love with their customers.

Upstairs, the three gentlemen who are Sayuki's customers are shown to a banquet room, where they sit at a table on tatami mats and are served beer and food by a waitress. Sayuki has invited two other young geisha, Azuha and Kozue, to join her. These, she says, are girls who have been nice to her (suggesting that some of them have not) and she wants to show her thanks by introducing them to customers. The teahouse owner is very friendly. It's good for a new geisha such as Sayuki to show she can bring customers of her own.

The girls kneel with the men and engage them in lively conversation – they are expected to know all about current affairs and politics. Then the girls dance and Sayuki plays her flute. They are enchanting and, at last, I can see the attraction of having these amazing creatures for companions. When Azuha is dancing, Kozue waits behind the screen doing her own dance, for herself, wrapped up in the beauty of self-expression.

Sayuki has a book deal and a production deal for her documentary. She could probably leave the geisha life now and make a fortune out of her story. Yet it's evident that she is quite seduced by the life and comfortable with its hierarchical structure. "I became more interested and more invested as last year went on," she says.

"I've become much more aware of how deep it is and how important some of these traditions are, and how beautiful they are. I went past the point very quickly where it could have been a short television documentary to when it became a personal challenge and a personal journey."

Sayuki says she would love to be invited to perform with some of her "sisters" for an Australian audience and promote traditional Japanese culture abroad. "When I arrive, I can see the cartoonists drawing a picture of a geisha with the words, 'G'day mate' coming out of her mouth!" ■