



Survival **Test**

by Maria Bromley

Irwin Wong

As the number of geisha across Japan continues to fall, what is being done to ensure the survival of this cultural icon?

Surfacing from Asakusa Station, the smell of *dashi* (Japanese soup stock) and tempura fills the air. As dusk falls, the glowing lanterns of the area's tiny backstreet eateries beckon hungry diners. While separated by only a half-hour ride on the subway, the two ends of the Ginza Line—Shibuya and Asakusa—seem to represent two very different eras.

Jumping in a waiting cab, Club Member Shigeru Nishimura tells the driver the destination. It's a short ride away over the Sumida Bridge to Mukojima, but it's like traveling further back in time. As one of only six geisha districts remaining in Tokyo, Mukojima, which translates as "the island over there," offers a peek into a world that has largely disappeared in Japan.

As Nishimura, 62, strolls through the quarter's quiet streets, the owners of the local upscale *ryotei*, where geisha entertain, greet him by name. "I am a *Tokyojin* [Tokyoite]," he says. "Most people in Tokyo are not really from Tokyo. I grew up here and my father and uncle as well."

He heads to Mukojima's geisha association center, where local geisha are about to put on a special annual dance performance. Accompanied by traditional *shamisen* instruments, the geisha move elegantly before an audience of more than 100 people who are seated on cushions on a *tatami*-mat floor.

After the show, Nishimura mingles with the kimono-clad geisha, many of whom he has known since he, and they, were much younger. There are plenty of younger entertainers like Hazuki as well. She greets him warmly and poses for pictures.

She explains that her ambition in junior high school had been to design kimono. "I wanted to make kimono, but I didn't think I would be good enough, and I like to wear kimono, so I decided to become a geisha," she

says. "My grandmother taught me how to wear a kimono."

Hazuki is a natural. Sincere and gracious, she immediately makes those she meets feel at ease—a crucial skill for any geisha. Traditionally, they were regarded as the social lubricant of high-level business and political meetings at *ryotei*.

The number of geisha, however, is dwindling. Seventy years ago, there were around 1,000 geisha in Mukojima. There are now 120. The *ryotei*, meanwhile, have declined from 400 to just 55.

Nishimura, who organized a Club tour to Mukojima last month, smiles as he recounts those "glory days" of the bubble era in the 1980s. "After a dinner party, the geisha would change and yen bills would be falling out of their kimonos," he recalls. "Nowadays, the salarymen don't know how to go to a *ryotei*, how to come to Mukojima. They need someone to teach them how to use [the area]."

And there's the rub. How do you pass on this particular culture and its traditions to a new generation? Like foreigners, many younger Japanese are not familiar with the customs and etiquette of this rarefied, seemingly impenetrable world.

Sayuki, Japan's first full-fledged foreign geisha, says that only eight percent of Japanese women know how to tie an *obi* sash on a kimono. "I get stopped in the street every day and women say to me, 'I would love to wear a kimono, too, but I don't know how to,'" she says.

Walking through Asakusa, dressed in her autumn kimono, Sayuki attracts admiring looks and compliments from both men and women. "I am in the unique position of introducing the Japanese to the kimono. It's the only country that has very expensive national clothing that they don't know how to wear," she says. "But there is a retro boom

going on, [with] younger women wanting to learn how to wear kimono. Many women in their 50s have piles of kimonos in their homes, passed on from their mothers and grandmothers that they cannot wear."

The Australian, who has been a geisha for four years, says she is always looking for innovative ideas to make her profession more accessible. Through her bilingual website, she offers non-traditional parties at people's homes and offices.

While she has taken out some of the mystery of the elusive "flower and willow world," in doing so, she may have injected some much-needed life into a withering tradition. Sayuki says she finds inspiration in the centuries-old art form of Kabuki, which has faced similar problems of waning public interest. "But, because Kabuki has modernized, they've been able to stay traditional," she says.

With this in mind, Sayuki created a new kind of *obi* that can be tied in just three minutes. This time-saving device, she hopes, will help to turn around the fortunes of the kimono industry.

Nishimura says that adaptations and changes are already taking place in places like Mukojima. "The geisha sometimes do not wear the *shimada*, or wig, because it is very expensive," he explains. "They wear more natural cosmetics instead of the white face and their kimonos are shorter, so it is easier to move around in. But for festivals and special events, they will still wear the full traditional costume."

He says that the area needs a kind of ambassador to introduce its charms and traditions to the city's legions of salarymen and those unfamiliar with this exclusive pocket of Japanese society.

Reclining in his seat in the oldest *ryotei* in Mukojima, Nishimura chats with the geisha next to him. They catch up on one another's news since his last visit. The food is placed gently in front of the guest and old dishes are removed without a sound. His glass is never empty. This is the essence of true Japanese hospitality. But for how much longer? □

Bromley is a Tokyo-based freelance journalist.

Sayuki
www.sayuki.net