

feature

THE MYSTERY OF SAYUKI

by Marie Teather

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When I first met Sayuki, she slipped me a tiny and decorative piece of card, telling me: "This is a geisha business card." The card was tiny, much slimmer than your average business card, and had no contact number; no address. Simply a name printed in Japanese writing offset against a traditional Japanese floral pattern.

In today's busy society, one does wonder what the purpose of a contact card is when it doesn't make it any easier to contact you, but that, you see, is the world of the geisha. It's mysterious, it's opaque, and trying to find clear explanations is like trying to read your fortune in a bowl of miso soup.

Sayuki herself adds an additional twist to this already elusive demeanour. She is not Japanese. She is Australian and her real name is Fiona Graham. In a culture steeped in tradition,

where young Japanese girls are often born into the institution by following their mothers and grandmothers before them, or else they undertake up to five years of intensive training, Fiona has done the unthinkable; she is Japan's first foreign geisha to be formally accepted to the geisha world and, moreover, she did it in one year.

Her formal debut into the Flower and Willow World was made on December 19th, 2007 and to mark the occasion Fiona—who would now be known officially as Sayuki—wore a ¥2,000,000 kimono that had previously belonged to her geisha 'mother'. Wearing a wig and with her face heavily painted in the style unique to the geisha tradition, she visited up to one hundred teahouses and establishments connected with senior geisha. For part of her journey around Asakusa, one of Tokyo's most culturally significant districts, she

rode on a rickshaw, attracting attention from locals and tourists alike. Most certainly, the first question on everyone's minds was how an Oxford graduate and former insurance company employee wound up as a geisha in one of the world's most culturally biased traditions.

Fiona actually grew up here in Japan. After first attending Japanese high school on a language exchange, she then attended Keio University and it was here that she became acquainted with the seniors (as she describes them), who were well enough connected to introduce her to the geisha world. "Without personal introductions it would have been very difficult," she explains. I ask her what kind of people from Keio would be of the social prestige to arrange this kind of meeting and I am told, "senior people have connections."

To be on the inside of the geisha world, it seems, is to be concealed by a veil of mystique. Of the people encountered through the transformation from Fiona to Sayuki, there are the nameless patrons—the businessmen who perhaps romanticise the presence of a demure traditional woman; a 'mother'—whose personality remains cloaked by her 'daughter' and, of course, the other geishas—their faces concealed by makeup and with whom Sayuki seems to work neither intimately with, nor independently from. If the world of the geisha seems shrouded to outsiders, you can bet those peeping out from paper-walled teahouses want to keep it this way. And today more than ever, when Japanese people are reported to not wholly understand the profession and when numbers of geisha have dropped from 80,000 in the 1920s heyday to under 2,000 today, its secrets are, ironically, its saving grace.

After being accepted to a geisha house, there were naturally some 'concerns' and Sayuki admits she had to invest a whole year of her time and money to prove she was serious. The year involved learning how to wear kimono, how to meet and greet people, how to sit and stand, and even now, three months after her official debut, the lessons still continue everyday. "A geisha is an art person by definition," Sayuki explains, (the 'gei' of geisha means 'art' and the 'sha' means 'person') "geisha study all of their lives." Some geisha are, apparently, still corrected on their mistakes well into their 60s or 70s.

Everyday, each geisha studies in all four of the arts (dance, flower arranging, an instrument, and the tea ceremony), but each should also have a main art. Sayuki plays the Japanese flute, an instrument she was able to master after playing it both at school and professionally. Surprisingly, the most difficult skill for her to learn was the ability to kneel down in the traditional Japanese style.

Contrary to her expectations, sitting for hours on wooden floors and without a cushion left her in excruciating pain and eventually she had to lose weight just to ease some of the pressure.

It's at times like these, the little confessions of weight loss, the recommendations of a hairstylist, the jokes about who did "great things to her beauty," that the softly spoken Sayuki takes a back seat and Fiona emerges—an educated Australian woman with very precise expectations and with clear directions for her meetings. Before

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me sits a businesswoman telling me which of her sponsors she'd like me to mention and that her website should be printed for those who need to make contact with her (www.sayuki.net made by Pikkles). Just as I am beginning to understand her dedication to Japanese culture and the path she has trodden in order to become a geisha more extraordinary than even any other, I am faced with another confusing dimension to the puzzle of Sayuki. Here we have a woman who graduated first from Keio university and then with a doctorate from Oxford; a woman who claims to have been the first foreigner in a Japanese insurance company (and even the insurance industry as a whole); the author of two books; a lecturer; and a TV documenter. How can all this fit and why would her next role be as a demure apprentice of a teahouse? The answer, and for this Fiona sings it loud: "I'm an anthropologist."

Social anthropology, to be more specific, is the study of social or cultural groups in a specific society. Anthropologists will undertake intensive field research, which usually requires living and working in the culture they are studying, often for extensive periods of time. Japan has long been the focus of such studies and everything from life in a sumo stable, rural village communities, second generation Japanese-Brazilians, to mobile phone usage that is unique to Japan has all been debated and scrutinised. For Fiona to be able to get herself so close to the inner workings of the geisha world is a remarkable feat and certainly those who try to discredit her clearly do not understand the initiations she has worked through. Indeed, her own confidence in the accomplishment leads her to say "this will never happen again." But yet again, there's one more interesting revelation to add to the story; Fiona is not the first anthropologist to grace the tatami of a geisha's teahouse.

In 1975–76 Liz Dalby was an American

anthropologist who lived alongside the geisha in Kyoto's Pontocho district. Similar to Fiona, she was fluent in Japanese following schooling in Japan and also could play an instrument—Liz played the shamisen for ten years prior to her fieldwork. After interviewing the geisha of the region for six months, she was invited by them to entertain clients and attend events, which she did for about a year-and-a-half. Many internet sites still tout Liz as the 'first foreign geisha,' something Fiona is very quick to dismiss. "Liz

Dalby was an anthropologist....She participated as a geisha, but she never became a geisha inside and out."

So what does that mean for Fiona? Or perhaps I mean Sayuki? She may well be the first foreign geisha to have been formally accepted, but is she as much a geisha on the inside as her counterparts, or is everything she has undertaken part of a larger project; a study where all will eventually be revealed later?

Liz Dalby said that if she had continued in the geisha world for longer than she did "it would make it a lie. They had let me in because I was writing about it, not as a free pass. I had a responsibility to go home and write my dissertation."

Fiona, on the other hand, says only that: "To become a geisha is an exceptional experience,"

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and that she has no end date in sight.

Still, with her book *Sayuki: Inside the Flower and Willow World* published by Pan Macmillan to be released later this year and her TV documentary, which had complete camera access throughout, also scheduled to be aired in 2008, her roles as a geisha, a businesswoman, and an anthropologist seem to merge together before breaking apart again, like clouds in a windy sky.

One thing is clear and that's the bridge that has been made between the mysteries of the geisha world and the rest of us looking in. "I want to make the Flower and Willow world accessible to foreigners and I encourage people to contact me through www.sayuki.net." Fiona explains that one of the misconceptions about a trip to a teahouse is the cost. If the price of an evening's entertainment is split between a group of people, it can be as little as ¥15,000 each. "Going to a

teahouse is a unique Japanese experience. You see the best of Japanese architecture, beautiful Japanese women, see exquisite kimonos, eat the best of Japanese cuisine, and get the best of entertainment. It is a great thing to show a foreign guest," she adds.

In some teahouses foreign customers make for up to 10–15 percent of the clientele and recent reports have even suggested that foreign interest in the tradition is what will keep the practise from totally disappearing. So, what can you expect from an evening with a geisha?

Usually the customers will reserve a table at the teahouse—for this Fiona is able to help as some teahouses require introductions. After being seated, the geisha will arrive (geisha have to enter the room on their knees so expect an unconventional entrance) and she will then entertain, "whatever that entails." At some point in the evening the geisha will perform—either a dance or a performance of the shamisen or Japanese flute. To the untrained eye it will be hard to notice 'mistakes,' such a kimono worn out of season from the one it was designed for, but for Fiona, each mistake reflects on her geisha house and any wrongdoings would cause her geisha mother to lose face. "We have a mother-daughter relationship and at times it is very strict."

The aesthetics of a geisha are equally important to the arts she performs. To look at a geisha; from her makeup, her hair, and of course the kimono, is indeed like looking at a piece of art. Meeting with Fiona in busy Shibuya coffee shop,

it's almost hard to imagine the transformation she will undertake as she becomes Sayuki that evening. She credits YS Park Hairdresser with creating styles that suit her hair and her kimono. Geisha hairstyles are very round, she explains, and so finding a style to suit her was not easy.

Yet again, the ever-morphing story of Fiona's endeavour to be Sayuki of Asakusa changes shape. The second I stop to ponder the ambiguities of an evening with a geisha, we are soon talking about hair and the problems us foreign woman have at the salon.

I say goodbye to Fiona as she walks into the crowds of Shibuya and wonder if she'll emerge on the other side as a businesswoman, an anthropologist, or Sayuki. The geisha world, even with an English-speaking window to ask questions through, seems as appealingly mysterious as ever. **BAB**