

Changing of the geisha guard

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A tiny bar serving potent green tea cocktails in the backstreets of Kanazawa seems the oddest setting for my first encounter with a geisha.

She enters in a plain white kimono, trailing a respectful entourage who seat her at a private table in the restaurant next door, separated from us by a lattice screen. She looks to be in her 60s, and is the real thing in a town full of young women playing geisha dress-up in flamboyant makeup and rented kimono.

It is a tantalising, unexpected peek into Japan's so-called *karyukai* or "flower and willow world". Immortalised in woodblock prints, kabuki plays and poems, the country's geisha culture dates back to the Edo period (1603-1868). The first geisha were, in fact, men; performers who entertained at the courtesans' quarters. Women took over, and *hanamachi* (geisha venues) suddenly began blooming all over Japan, with geisha numbers reaching their peak in the early Showa era (1926-1989), when between 40,000 and 80,000 geisha operated nationwide.

Today, the artform faces a mixed fate. Geisha culture may be hipper than ever on the streets of Kanazawa and Kyoto, where tourists pay high prices for slick "geisha transformation" services, but the real thing is under siege. Numbers have dwindled to fewer than 1000 across Japan, with observers blaming everything from the artform's tough, archaic training culture to declining numbers of *ryotei* or *ochaya* (members-only tea houses).

Even in Kyoto, geisha ground zero and home to the famed Kamogawa Odori dance performance, ancient art traditions are with-



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ering on the vine, with one older geisha lamenting the shortage of those who can play the shamisen, a traditional three-stringed instrument, telling *Newsweek* magazine that "most of today's geisha don't have *gei*, or artistic skills".

The geisha (or *geiko* as they're called in Kyoto) and *maiko*, or trainees, I watch engaged in the slow, graceful, stylised ballet that is the tea ceremony in Pontocho would be highly offended by this, one presumes. They

are like two figures straight out of a woodblock print with their traditional *shimada* hairstyles and *sanbon-ashi*, the erotic three-pronged make-up design on their necks.

But geisha culture does have a recruiting and relevancy issue, much like the plight faced by the country's other venerable cultural tradition, sumo (in January this year, injury-plagued Kisenosato, Japan's sole grand champion, hung up his loincloth to much national angst).

Still, there are signs of renewal. Enterprises such as Ryuto Shinko, set up in 1987, train new geisha in Furumachi, the old town of Niigata City.

A boost to geisha culture has also emerged from an unexpected quarter — Japan's record numbers of unmarried, highly educated young women armed with a strong sense of financial autonomy and agency when it comes to plotting career paths.

For the modern young aspiring *maiko* who willingly enters an apprenticeship, it is all about choice and financial independence, not servitude, says Peter Macintosh, a former Canadian professional soccer player. He came to Japan in 1993, married a geisha (they're divorced) and now runs a geisha-culture tour company in Kyoto. Increasingly, it is female clients, not beer-fuelled businessmen and politicians, who are the main audience for geisha shows.

Geisha culture as an emblem of feminist empowerment? His ex-wife, now running a pub in Kyoto, can testify to this, Macintosh says with a grin.

Still, it shouldn't be a surprise. From the start of 1751, the geisha who emerged were fashionable, influential and highly skilled artisans with wealth and power. Being a geisha was one of the few ways a woman could achieve status and fame in her own right.

It's a far cry, says Macintosh, from the passive, eroticised Asian doll image seeded by the likes of the *New York Times* bestseller *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden.

"There's been a backlash overseas against geisha culture in some quarters because of the #metoo movement but here, no way," says Macintosh. "These women? Besides being brilliant and dedicated artists, they are tough, smart and in charge."

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