

## TimeOut | The future of geisha



Above: Geisha Megumi (center, back) poses with other geisha in Hachioji. Left: Geisha Megumi. Above left: Kikuno (center), her maiko apprentice and three other geisha pose for a photo alongside members of the Hanaakari orchestra in New York. Far left: A former tomesode of Ryuto Shinko (center) and two furisode make waves with towels in Niigata Prefecture. COURTESY OF GEISHA MEGUMI AND DAIICHI PRINTING CO., KOTARO OHASHI (ABOVE LEFT)

come up with its own way to revitalize the culture," Asahara says. "It is very difficult to re-create a culture once it is gone, so it is important to do something about it while it still exists in order to hand it down to the next generation."

### Passing the baton

Back in Nara, Kikuno is also trying new strategies. Using the internet, Kikuno has begun to reach out to geisha from other parts of Japan that are also struggling to attract a new generation. Traditionally, geisha don't collaborate with groups outside their geographical areas, but Kikuno understands that it's time for her to take a different approach.

Kikuno also has a more personal reason for launching the Ganrinin project: She wishes to avoid dying alone. She has watched several geisha who don't have an apprentice grow old without anyone to look after them.

She pauses at length, eyes welling with tears, when recalling the plight of her shamisen teacher of 15 years, who passed away surrounded by just a few of her students.

"Luckily, we were able to hold a funeral for my teacher, but there are geisha out there who can't organize this on their own," Kikuno says. "Elderly geisha end up dying in solitude, and I do think that could happen to me someday. That's why I want to connect with other geisha."

In February 2016, she hosted the inaugural Naramachi Hanaakari event and invited geisha from eight districts to perform their local dances. The event also included a symposium that featured experts discussing the rich history of geisha culture.

Just last month in October, she was joined by one of her maiko and three other geisha from Kochi and Ehime prefectures on a trip to New York to perform at the first Hanaakari project abroad.

Kikuno stresses the importance of preserving the good parts of the geisha culture but also the need to evolve, enter new territory and try various things.

Because of her determination and creativity, three maiko and one trainee are now working in Nara. What's more, one of her maiko, an apprentice named Kikukame, is set to become a geisha in January. Kikuno will finally have another geisha with whom she can work together side by side.

"Like many other traditional arts and occupations, the world of geisha needs someone to pass the baton to the next generation," Kikuno says. "As someone who has chosen to be a part of this world, I believe it is my fate as well as my duty to do so."

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### 'Seeking someone cheerful'

In the west Tokyo city of Hachioji, meanwhile, another group of businesses came together to support the local geisha community — in particular, an entertainer named Megumi.

Megumi was born into a family that had no ties to geisha culture. However, she was asked if she was interested in becoming a geisha after meeting her future mentor at a Japanese restaurant where Megumi worked as a waitress. She was 22 years old.

"Everything was new to me, so everything was wonderful," Megumi says. "I didn't even know that such a world existed. Everyone took care of me and welcomed me into this world ... and I felt that I had finally found a place where I belonged."

In the years between the Meiji and early Showa eras, Hachioji thrived on its textile industry. And as the city flourished, so too did its Nakacho geisha district, with more than 200 female entertainers operating in the neighborhood at its peak.

After World War II, however, women increasingly stopped wearing kimono and began dressing in Western-style clothing.

Hachioji's geisha population faced certain extinction, with only 10 entertainers working in the industry in 1999, writes Asahara in "Geishashu ni Hanataba O: Hachioji Karyukai, Fukkatsu" ("Flowers for Geisha: The Revitalization of Hachioji's Geisha District"), which was published by Fuuseisha Corp. in June this year.

"The relationship between garment shops and geisha was so intimate that the district's prosperity was directly affected," Asahara writes in her book, which details the manner in which Hachioji's geisha district has made a comeback. The book documents Asahara's decade-long reporting in the district.

Megumi continued to be the youngest geisha in Hachioji's Nakacho district despite being well into her 30s at the time.

In 1999, she decided that she needed to find some new recruits and created an advertisement seeking candidates.

### Writer Sumi Asahara's tips on terms, manners

- Geisha are female entertainers trained in traditional Japanese performance arts, including dance and shamisen. They are sometimes also called *geigi* or *geiko*.
- Maiko are geisha apprentices, although the term is mainly used in Kyoto and surrounding areas. In Tokyo, they are called *hangyoku*.
- *Karyukai* and *kagai* are both words used to describe geisha districts nationwide. They both begin with the kanji for "flower."
- Call them by their stage names such as "Megumi-san" or "onee-san" ("older ma'am"). Even if the geisha is 100 years old, never refer to her as "obasan" ("middle-aged lady" or "old lady").
- Always wear socks or stockings. Never stand on a tatami mat with bare feet.
- Dress code should be business casual or more formal.
- Don't forget to offer some sake to the geisha.

"Seeking someone cheerful who likes kimono," the poster said. "Age up to around 30 years old; no experience necessary; an hourly wage of ¥3,000 or more; and free kimono rental. Part time OK."

"I felt that many girls out there, like me, didn't know about this world," Megumi says. "To be honest, I didn't start out on a mission to revitalize the geisha community or anything like that. Rather, I just wanted other women of my generation to know about geisha ... and to attract a colleague, because everyone else around me was my mentor's age."

By coincidence, Hachioji Kurobei ni Shitashimu Kai, which was named after the Kurobei (Black Wall) street district where geisha once flourished, was also founded by local businesses in 1999 for the purpose of preserving geisha culture, says Shingo Fukuyama, current chairman of the group. Like the corporation in Niigata, businesses in Hachioji were also concerned with the

decline of geisha culture in the city and decided to do something about it.

Fukuyama, owner of local liquor shop Tsuruya, says there are currently about 150 active members of the supporters' group, including some women.

"To be honest, there's nothing in it for us," Fukuyama says. "We are not doing this to get something in return. We just want to support traditional Japanese culture and the geisha who have devoted themselves to doing something unique in this area."

Megumi opened her own *okiya* boarding house for geisha in 2001, the first such establishment to open in Hachioji in 20 years. Three geisha at the lodging have since gone on to open their own boarding houses and in the 18 years since Megumi first put up the advertisement, Hachioji has seen its geisha population almost double. And last year, for the first time in more than half a century, a *hangyoku* apprentice called Kurumi made her debut.

In 2014, Megumi started Hachioji Odori, a dance performance featuring geisha, which played on stage to a full house at Hachioji Icho Hall. The second performance was held in May this year.

Her activities have even helped take geisha in Hachioji overseas to such locations as Australia's Cowra, Hawaii and Shanghai. They've also performed in the lobby of a hospital, as well as at elementary schools.

Megumi even appeared in the German film "Fukushima, Mon Amour," a fictional story inspired by her actions following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Tohoku. After the disaster, Megumi had taken a shamisen to a geisha in northeastern Japan who had lost everything.

"It is important to learn the traditions of a culture, but it is also important to continue evolving with the times," Megumi says. "Through change, I think we are able to continue this culture."

Asahara says the geisha district in Hachioji has recovered to some extent but the things that have worked there won't help everyone, adding that change is also difficult to bring about if many active older geisha prefer to do things in a traditional manner. "Each geisha district needs to