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Memoirs of a Chinese geisha wannabe in Japan – Japantoday.com

It takes Rinka at least two hours to apply her thick white makeup and get dressed in an elaborate kimono on formal occasions, as is typical of most trainee geisha.

But 29-year-old Rinka is different. She is a Chinese national hoping to take her place among the ranks of Japan's ancient but fading profession of female entertainers known for their beauty, skill at traditional arts and witty conversation.

Born in Shenyang, China, she grew up as Zhang Xue before moving to Japan at the age of 14, one of only a handful of foreigners to try to join the geisha ranks.

“When I first came to Japan, I had a neighbour who was a geisha. She played the shamisen (Japanese stringed instrument) daily and wore a traditional Japanese kimono,” Rinka said in the port town of Shimoda, 200 kilometers southwest of Tokyo.

“It was really pretty so I, too, wanted to wear a kimono.”

She took a series of part-time jobs for years before finally taking advantage in September of a special one-year subsidized training program offered by Shimoda city.

There are only seven geisha left in Shimoda, including Rinka, compared to nearly 300 in the 1950s. The ranks of geisha across all of Japan peaked at 80,000 in 1928, but now number roughly a thousand.

Though Shimoda geisha lack the fame of their sisters in the ancient capital of Kyoto, their training is no less rigorous. Rinka trains five days a week in traditional forms of singing, dance and music and more esoteric arts such as how to walk.

Shimoda is hoping that by paying to train geisha like Rinka, its tourism industry will get a boost. She receives 100,000 yen a month as a subsidy for her expenses, a program that will end in September.

Despite these efforts, business remains lackluster.

The Kanoya kenban, which manages Rinka and other geisha, has only one or two customers a month, with fees starting from 19,000 yen a performance. Even during peak year-end holiday seasons, the Kanoya gets fewer than 10 calls a month.

Kanoya, the former geisha who runs the kenban, said she is impressed by Rinka's drive, despite the lack of prospects.

"The practice of geisha arts uses a lot of terms from the traditional Kabuki theater, which is hard to understand even for Japanese girls," she said. "In that, I think Rinka had to face even bigger challenges."

Rinka herself still has many years of apprenticeship to go. Her ultimate goal is to take her geisha skills back to China.

"Now, I have to practise hard so in the future I can realize my dream of opening a fine Japanese inn in China to help Chinese people better understand Japanese tradition," she said.

"I want to try out things I have never attempted before. I'm young enough for that."

Questions

1. Why do you think the decline in the number of geisha in Japan has been so dramatic?
2. Considering the lack of interest in geisha, and the declining numbers of young people in Japan, it seems likely that the geisha arts will finally die out. Is this a problem? Or just normal progress and development?
3. Why do you think there is so little interest in geisha performances (10 calls a month)?
4. Have you ever seen a geisha performance? If so, how was it?
5. Are you interested in seeing a geisha performance? Why? Why not?
6. What do you think about foreign interest in traditional Japanese culture? Is this a good thing?
7. Do you see any parallels between sumo and geisha? Are these aspects of Japanese culture dying?
8. Why do you think that interest in tea ceremony, flower arranging, kendo, judo, archery, kabuki, matsuri and other aspects of traditional Japanese culture remains high, while sumo and geisha are declining?

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