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Meeting a 'maiko'

By LEE MEI LI
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OHAYO gozaimasu (good morning), Chiharu Yabe calls out by the doorway. From within the service suite, a shy face peeks out for a second and is gone the next. Yabe, the general manager of Kampachi Restaurant, ushers us into the room, beyond which stands a small-framed woman clad in a terry cloth bathrobe.

Her skin is porcelain clear, freshly scrubbed clean of sleep and make-up. A pair of close-set eyes stares back at us intently, inviting conversation.

For the likes of us, it is a rare privilege to meet Miegiku, a 19-year-old *maiko* (apprentice geisha) from Kyoto, Japan. Exuding a maturity beyond her years, Miegiku has been an apprentice *geiko* for the past four years; in the Gion district in Kyoto, the *geisha* are referred to as *geiko*, which translates into "a woman of art".

Like most of the women in her trade, Miegiku uses only a single professional name. She was accepted into an *okiya* (boarding house) at the age of 15. Since then, her days have been filled with training sessions that stretch for hours, during which she works hard to master the art of *ikebana* (flower arranging) and *sado* (tea ceremony), playing the shamisen and learning the *odori* dance.

When night falls, she is the epitome of grace: a *sake*-pouring entertainer-performer, highly regarded in the eyes of her male clients, during feasts.

Miegiku still has about a year to go before she graduates as a *geiko*; at present, she reports to the head of the *okiya*, Okamura Kazue, 66, who is respectfully addressed as *okaasan* (mother).

With a head full of silvery hair cropped short, Okamura pops out from the bedroom to welcome us. A string of Japanese greetings roll off her tongue, and like Miegiku, she speaks little English. Our interpreter for the day is Yabe, who hails from Nihonbashi in Tokyo.

Miegiku, accompanied by Okamura and a talent manager, is here in Kuala Lumpur to grace the opening ceremony of the flagship Kampachi outlet, the signature Japanese restaurant of the Hotel Equatorial group, in The Troika, Kuala Lumpur.

Now, a good few hours before the event, the metamorphosis begins as Okamura sets out to transform her bare-faced *maiko*

Forget *Memoirs Of A Geisha*. Here is an exclusive glimpse into what goes on behind the scenes for a 21st century apprentice geisha from Kyoto, Japan.



As head of the *okiya* (boarding house), Okamura Kazue pays for Miegiku's formal training and board as a *maiko*.

into a refined beauty, steeped in Japanese tradition.

The *okaasan* is quick to set the record straight: the *maiko* and *geiko* are performers of Japanese art, not women with sexual services for sale, as common misconceptions go. Not just anyone can be in the company of a *maiko*; when it comes to clients, the *okiya* only accepts referrals.

Miegiku, wrapped in only a towel and chiffon scarf, takes her place in the centre of the room where a chair is laid out for her. Her expression is serene – a *maiko* almost never gets the *okaasan* to fuss over her looks. Make-up is a self-mastering art, but today is an exception because both are outside their comfort zones.

The massage comes first; an oily wax-like substance known as *bintsuke-abura* is buttered over Miegiku's face, neck and chest, to help the foundation stay on.

"Performers in the Kabuki theatre use a similar oil, but more. So it's more stinky," quips Okamura, referring to the classical Japanese dance drama.

Miegiku's shoulder-length hair is not spared the grease. Okamura grabs a wooden comb from a nearby table which is covered with wigs, cotton buds and cosmetics, including a tiny Hello Kitty case

filled with a powdery essence.

The *maiko* winces as her *okaasan* runs the comb through her hair, yanking firmly at the roots to gather up a handful. After more tugging, she ties a string of wire-like paper to hold them in place, tightening it with her teeth. Normally, this task would require the services of a *keppatsu-shi*, a professional *geisha* hairdresser, who can charge up to ¥20,000 (RM680) each time.

"A lot of girls give up being a *maiko* because of the pain," Okamura reveals, patting the top of Miegiku's head. Apparently, all *geiko* acquire a bald spot after a few years of rough styling. Back in Kyoto, Miegiku sleeps on holed pillows to maintain the pristine condition of her hairdo, which can last for up to seven days.

Today, her locks are being styled into the *ofuku mage*: a bouffant hairstyle patched with balls of wig, absorbent Japanese paper and silk ribbons. Thirty minutes later, Okamura slots in the finishing touches – *kanzashi* (hair ornaments) – and stands back to admire her masterpiece.

"The biggest challenge of being a *maiko* is in the dancing. *Maiko* means dancing girl – so if she can't dance, she can't be a *maiko*."

Young *maikos* are observed over a three-week probationary period for their dancing skills. Those who make it will be assigned to an *oneesan* (big sister), an older *maiko*, who would show them the ropes for the next three months.

"An *oneesan* wakes up at eight in the morning; a *maiko* will wake up half an hour earlier. Training starts at 10am all the way until lunch and continues after that. At 3pm, the girls will start getting themselves ready for work at night. They will go off to the restaurants in the evening and return home by midnight every day," Okamura says. Clients who want their *maiko* to stay longer must seek the prior permission of the *okiya* – though nothing goes on later than 2am.

"The price of hiring a *maiko* depends on the girl's popularity and experience. Every *okiya* has a different system," Okamura continues, stating that the fee for a two-hour sitting could very well start at ¥25,000 (RM850) and go up to ¥100,000 (RM3,397).



Passion for tradition: Miegiku, 19, started her training as an apprentice geisha at the age of 15. – Photos by ONG SOON HIN/The Star

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Make-up is a self-mastering art for a *maiko*, and a daily affair.



Wearing the kimono is an art as Okamura drapes layer upon layer of cloth over Miegiku, twirling the girl this way and that to smoothen every fold, in preparation for the elegant black kimono that is to take centre stage.

The money earned goes back to the *okiya*, of course, since every *maiko* is indebted to her *okaasan*, who has been paying for all her formal lessons and board.

"We do give them some pocket money to buy toiletries from the pharmacy. But if they get drunk, we won't give them any."

Okamura hints that while the legal drinking age in Japan is 20, the *maiko* are given an exception – at 18, they're allowed to wine and dine with their clients.

"The young ones usually get drunk very easily. They just have to watch and learn from their *oneesan*, how to handle the alcohol and their clients."



Apart from wearing heavy layers of clothes underneath their kimono, a *maiko* has to shuffle around the streets of Kyoto in a pair of 10cm high wooden sandals.

Upholding tradition

With a faint smile, Miegiku readies herself for the next stage as her *okaasan*, armed with a wide bamboo brush, begins slathering an opaque white paste, derived from mixing powder and water, onto her cheeks and throat until the skin above her décolletage is completely white-washed.

With light fluttering movements, Okamura pats down the foundation with a large sponge, before tinting the corners of Miegiku's eyes red. From within the fridge, a cube of ice – a secret weapon of sorts – is retrieved and rubbed over the *maiko*'s powdered skin, to ensure that the make-up lasts through the 31°C heat in Kuala Lumpur.

"It can get very hot during summer in Kyoto. A chilled face will prevent the foundation from melting in the heat," Okamura explains, while Miegiku shudders slightly as the icy blast hits her face.

After another coat of powdering, Miegiku shuffles into the bedroom, emerging a moment later, swathed in a red and white *hadajuban*, a traditional undergarment worn beneath a kimono.

In the next 45 minutes, we learn that wearing the kimono is an art in itself as Okamura drapes layer after layer of cloth over Miegiku, twirling the girl this way and that to smoothen every fold, in preparation for the elegant black kimono that is to take centre stage.

No air pockets escape unnoticed. "The kimono must be wrapped tightly, otherwise its form changes. The shape must closely follow the curves of her body," Okamura points out.

The kimono itself is worth RM40,000, a hefty price to pay, especially for a struggling *geiko* who can no longer depend on the *okiya* to fork out the necessities; at age 20, a *maiko* is given the opportunity to band out on her own as a full-fledged *geiko*.

"A *geiko* can have a *danna* (sugar

eyebrows are filled in, her eyes black kohl-lined. A shade of crimson red is applied to her bow-shaped pout.

With a swish of the kimono, she steps up to her full height, now 10cm taller with the help of wooden platform sandals.

"*Daijoubu* (I'm fine)," she assures, rejecting our kind offers to help her navigate through the slippery marbled floor of the room.

The woman who had earlier shied away from the camera, now poses confidently with a slight smile poised at the corner of her lips.

Life is hard as a *maiko* – she only has Sunday to herself, and returning home to her family is all but impossible, except for a few days a year, during New Year in January.

Miegiku does not have a mobile phone or a music player, which is the first thing she wants to buy when she starts earning her own money as a *geiko*.

Western meals and fast food, like burgers, are out as it is against the *maiko* culture. For them, it's only Japanese food.

So what could have made a teenager of the 21st century aspire to be a figure of the past?

Miegiku shrugs. "As a little girl, I saw many *maiko* walking up and down the streets of Kyoto in their beautiful make-up and kimonos. I've always wanted to be like them."

daddy) who looks after her, money-wise, but that does not mean that she is in a relationship with him. These days, many men don't have money to spend, so many *geiko* are still attached to an *okiya*. There is no age limit to being a *geiko*. You can be 50 and still be a *geiko*. You can even get married and have a baby and still work as a *geiko*," Okamura quips.

The number of young girls wanting to be *maiko* has dipped over the years. In Kyoto, the tradition is being passed on to only 40 new faces at the moment.

From a hard-shell luggage nearby, Okamura retrieves the last piece of item that completes the outfit – a cascading silken sash, the *obi*.

"Here, see how heavy this is." Okamura lets us weigh the *obi* in our hands. Indeed, the brocade piece, delicately embroidered with Japanese *momiji* (maple) leaves, amounts to a few kilos at least.

"This is the most difficult part," Okamura points out, as she force-wraps the *obi* snugly around Miegiku's padded kimono bodice – an act not unlike the torturous tightening of the corset. Men are often on standby to help out since it is easier for muscled arms to tuck the *obi* into place.

Okamura beckons to our resident male photographer for help. He steps forward and heaves up the *obi* as the *okaasan* attempts to gather the last corner of the sash into a tight fold.

"Thank you!" says Okamura with a smile, when the feat is accomplished.

Throughout it all, Miegiku maintains her composure, showing no sign that she would break out in sweat at any time. She remains serene as her

