

INTERNET REVIVES ANCIENT SKILLS OF GEISHA GIRLS

They seemed to be an endangered species, relics of an era of delicacy and refinement **doomed** to extinction in the modern world. But now the geisha, the traditional female entertainers of Japan, have found new job opportunities through the internet. Geisha houses in the ancient capital Kyoto are flourishing once more after going online to recruit a new generation of apprentices.

Geisha numbers have been in decline since before the Second World War, and recently it has become more and more difficult to recruit the *maiko*, or apprentice geisha, who spend at least five years studying the arts of music, dance and **witty** conversation. In the mid-19th century, the “flower and willow world” of Kyoto’s riverside teahouses was home to about 1,000 *maiko* and *geiko*, as fully qualified geisha are known in the local dialect. A hundred years later, the number had decreased to 500, including 200 *maiko*. Two years ago there were only 58 apprentices left. In desperation, several of the geisha houses established websites in an attempt to recruit newcomers. Now there are 80 *maiko* in training and teahouses are turning applicants away.

In the old days, the geisha houses were a means for poor families to ensure a **livelihood** for daughters whom they could no longer support or marry off. Later, *maiko* were recruited locally by word of mouth. Nowadays girls hear about it through the internet from all over Japan. The website of the Ichi Geisha House includes photographs of young *maiko* in their white make-up and a web log by an 18-year-old named Mame, describing her daily life.

Despite the **allure** of their white make-up and exquisite kimono, the life of a trainee geisha is far from glamorous. Recruited at the age of 15, they must live in the *okiya*, or geisha house, sharing rooms with fellow *maiko*, and sleeping on futon mattresses and tatami mats — a **hardship** to modern teenagers used to western-style beds in their own rooms. They rise early and spend the morning mastering the traditional accomplishments of the geisha — dance, singing, the playing of the stringed *shamisen* and the bamboo *shakuhachi* flute, and the art of make-up and the kimono. Basic English conversation is also required for foreign guests who are sometimes brought to parties. In the afternoons they visit the teahouses where the parties are held, networking with the owners. Accompanied by an older geisha “sister”, they attend parties from 6 pm until midnight.

But as well as online recruiting, the rise in *maiko* numbers is connected with a revived interest among young Japanese in traditional customs. On summer evenings, the streets of Japan’s cities are filled with women and men dressed in *yukata*, lightweight cotton kimonos. Japanese food and native drinks such as saké and *shochu* spirit are competing once again with foreign food, beer and whisky. “It’s cool to be Japanese again, and this is part of the **trend**. A lot of girls these days don’t want to work for boring companies. If you’re a *maiko*, people pay a lot of money to see you and talk to you; you get to meet movie stars, and wherever you go people are taking your picture. It’s a pretty good life,” said Peter Macintosh, a Canadian who organises geisha evenings for foreign visitors to Kyoto.

The Times. Adapted

doomed: destinat a desaparèixer / destinado a desaparecer

witty: enginyós / ingenioso

livelihood: vida, mitjà de subsistència / vida, sustento

allure: atractiu, encant / atractivo, encanto

hardship: tràngol, privació / pena, privación

trend: tendència, moda / tendencia, moda

Part 1: Reading comprehension

Choose the correct answer. Only ONE answer is possible.

[0.5 points each correct answer. Wrong answers will be penalized by deducting 0.16 points. There is no penalty for unanswered questions.]

1. Trainee geishas are named
 - a) maiko.
 - b) geiko.
 - c) okiya.
 - d) futon.
2. Geisha houses were also known as
 - a) a willow world.
 - b) a new lease of life.
 - c) teahouses.
 - d) Ichi (number “one” in Japanese).
3. According to the text, geisha houses used to be the home for
 - a) stepdaughters.
 - b) poor girls.
 - c) over 1,000 flourishing newcomers.
 - d) 18-year-old riverside women.
4. The training of a geisha girl does not include
 - a) making up their kimonos themselves.
 - b) learning some English.
 - c) playing traditional instruments.
 - d) mastering dancing and singing.
5. For a geisha girl witty conversation is
 - a) only possible with foreign guests.
 - b) a hard job that demands less than five years of studying.
 - c) a qualification when applying for the job.
 - d) an art.
6. How long can a geisha’s working day be?
 - a) Six hours.
 - b) From morning till 6 p.m.
 - c) All day from morning to midnight.
 - d) About eight long hours.
7. Today you can find geisha houses
 - a) in Tokyo only.
 - b) in Kyoto.
 - c) in worldwide web logs and websites.
 - d) only in summer.
8. Modern geisha girls seem to enjoy a pretty good life because
 - a) it’s more exciting than working in a company.
 - b) it’s part of the trend of online jobs, which are poorly paid.
 - c) they can spend all the money they make on *shochu*.
 - d) they all want to become movie stars.