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## Mac on Tokyo: Rachel Leng

On September 23, Rachel Leng will become the first ever non-Japanese to participate as an Oiran in the 27th Annual Shinagawa Shukuba Festival. Rachel graduated with scholarships from Harvard and Duke Universities. She is a multi-award winning writer and is regularly invited to speak at top universities and professional organizations. She is also a 2013 Miss Singapore titleholder, and has been internationally profiled for leadership, cultural perspectives, beauty and lifestyle. Now working in Private Equity in Tokyo, Rachel talks to Mac, Founder of Maction Planet, about her training for the parade and her journey to The World's Greatest Metropolis.

**Maction Planet:** Hi Rachel. Welcome to Maction Planet. Thank you for joining us, and congratulations on this great honour!

Rachel Leng: Thank you. Yes, it is very exciting to be selected as one of five Oiran for the festival, where the "Oiran Dochu" parade is the highlight of the 2-day event. To be the first foreigner participating is also a great honor and experience. I personally did not know anything about Oiran or the history and culture behind them, and so I have already been learning a lot from my involvement in this event.

**MP: How did this all come about?**

RL: Actually, I have not been in Japan for very long – I only moved here in January 2017. I had the impression that festivals were quite popular and unique in Japan, and was keen on finding out more about them and what they meant to the Japanese people. My colleague then told me about the Shinagawa Shukuba Festival that promotes the history of Shinagawa during the Edo period, and also described the Oiran Dochu parade as a rather elaborate procession. He suggested that I might be a good fit for the Oiran role. I then looked it up and noticed that they were accepting casting applications, and so submitted my entry. To be honest, given that there were many applicants for the limited number of roles and also being non-Japanese, I was pretty surprised to be cast in this key role in a popular local festival.

**MP: I am really happy you were selected. Tokyo is increasingly becoming more international, and steps like these are part of our move to get there.**

**So, you applied and got selected. What happened then?**

RL: Well, in mid-July I received the notice of selection, and then details about information sessions and workshops. All of the Oiran cast have started a series of workshops, held about once every two weeks, to learn about the Oiran role, and especially to learn the special way they walk – 外八文字. There are also fitting appointments (e.g.: wig, shoes) to prepare for the parade. Another unique requirement is that I have to choose a name for myself as a *tayū* Oiran. All of the women will also be interviewed by Shinagawa cable television to be featured in a local TV program.



**MP: You must have learnt a lot since being selected. What aspects of the history of the Oiran really appeal to you?**

RL: As I mentioned earlier, I really did not know anything about the Oiran before my colleague told me about this festival. I think foreigners who know a bit about Japanese culture generally will know about Geisha and Maiko, but not of Oiran. Hence, I found it fascinating to learn that Oiran were essentially high status Edo Period courtesans, with the highest rank being a *tayū* (太夫). Unlike common prostitutes, they were also extremely talented entertainers – supposedly even more spectacular than the Geisha. To become an Oiran, a woman was expected to be well-read and converse with elegance and wit in addition to being beautiful, of course. They had to be educated in many traditional arts (such as Japanese tea ceremony, calligraphy, *ikebana* flower arrangement) and musical instruments. Many of them became celebrities, similar to Western pin-up girls, setting art and fashion trends. They wore expensive and elaborate costumes, and had sufficient prestige to refuse clients. Hiring them for an evening would cost an average laborer's annual wage! They do not exist now, but cultural aspects of Oiran traditions are still preserved for historical and artistic value, especially as festival attractions.

**MP: Has the preparation been intensive?**

RL: Not particularly intensive for the most part, except for the walking (we have to learn the Sotohachimonji 外八文字 – a special walk used by the *tayū*). If you look up videos of the Oiran Dochu walk, you will notice that most of the time the *tayū* have to be bending their legs and pretty much doing squat movements repeatedly, while moving their feet in a number 8 pattern on very high traditional Japanese sandals (takageta 高下駄). It does take a lot of core and leg strength, not to mention balance. We have to walk around 2 km over 3 hours on the day of the parade itself with costumes weighing in total around 15kg (the Oiran wig itself is already 3kg, and we will have many layers of clothing), so all of the women will probably have to work on our walking endurance a little before then. For the last workshop, we had a professional teacher come to talk to us about Tayu history and customs, and also to teach us the *tayū* Sotohachimonji walk. After about 3 hours of practicing, we were all pretty tired. The next day, my legs were really sore! Thankfully, we do not have to do the special walk the entire time.



**MP: Have you decided on your name as a Tayu?**

My Oiran name will be Esaki-Tayu (恵穎太夫). I simply used the Japanese reading of the Kanji in my Chinese name. The first character is commonly still used in Japanese, meaning graceful and blessed. The second character is not used in the modern Japanese language much anymore, but is still a popular Chinese name for girls and refers to intellect, virtue, and beauty.

**MP: That is a great choice. The first character 恵 is the 'E' of 'Ebisu' – 恵比寿!**

**What kind of comments have you received on your participation in this event?**

RL: As I expected, most of my international friends do not really know anything about the festival or of Oiran, so it has been really great to be able to share the experience and knowledge with them.

All of my Japanese friends and colleagues generally knew about the Oiran already, and have been very excited and supportive – many will probably come out to the event to watch. It will be great fun to have (and share) a rare and unique experience rooted in traditional Edo history and culture with others, one even many Japanese themselves do not have. Actually, when I first received the offer to be casted as an Oiran, I did research and asked many people for their impressions as I was not sure what the image of an Oiran in modern Japanese society was, and was concerned it may still be seen as somewhat immoral (because of the historical sexual aspect). Ultimately, several Japanese friends and colleagues explained to me that it is now pretty equivalent to participating in a beauty pageant, as the Oiran tradition no longer holds any negative sexual implications, but are rather noted for high artistic and cultural value.

**MP: I see you were in the Miss Singapore contest before. In your opinion, is the preparation for the festival similar to being in a beauty pageant?**

RL: The funny thing is, there really are some similarities. In the preparation stage, there are auditions and applications. Then, you have lots of costume/outfit fittings. Both being an Oiran cast and pageant contestant, you have to learn special (i.e., not normal nor practical) ways of walking wearing very high shoes to flaunt various clothes and accessories. I'm sure that on the actual day of the parade itself, like at the finals of a pageant, there will be lots of people taking photos, and media too.

**MP: Let's talk about your journey to living in Tokyo. Why did you move to Japan?**

RL: I have always loved visiting Japan – my family used to take trips to Japan as I was growing up. The language, culture, cuisine, society, history all enthralled me, and as a child I made a promise to myself to spend more time in Japan. I am someone who generally enjoys traveling and exploring by living in different countries – I was born in Singapore, but grew up in Shanghai, China then attended university in the U.S. After being in the U.S. for around 7 years, I moved to Seoul, South Korea for work. It was in Seoul that I decided my next step was to try to live and work in Japan, and so now here I am!



**MP:** How have you found living in Tokyo so far?

RL: It has been an exciting adventure, always full of surprises. There have been a lot of funny cultural episodes, especially with (mis)communication and finding your way around. I absolutely love Japanese food – one of my favorite cuisines – so I am thoroughly enjoying discovering new eating spots, restaurants, cafes, bars... I feel like Tokyo never runs out of new establishments to explore. Recently, I visited the “first ever” hedgehog cafe in Roppongi and petted hedgehogs! If I had not wandered into that random cafe, I would never have learned that people can keep hedgehogs as pets in Japan. I have also been pleasantly surprised with the diversity in Japanese cuisine – the variety of Japanese food (and perhaps just all types of food, in general) in Tokyo is simply not available elsewhere. Learning about local customs and daily practices has also been really interesting, for example how to visit temples. Moreover, the mix of both futuristic modernity and deep-rooted tradition in Tokyo never ceases to fascinate me.

**MP: What are your favourite spots in The World's Greatest Metropolis?**

RL: Akihabara is always great fun – I love gawking at all the impossibly high-tech games available to Japanese players and checking out all the different themed store concepts. Azabu Juban is one of my favorite areas to meet friends and hang out, because of all the excellent choices (and potential for new discoveries) for food and drinks. One of the great things about Tokyo is that you can easily visit a nearby temple or park to take a break from the city when you need it – they are especially beautiful during the Spring and Fall seasons. Tsukiji market is another one of my favorite places to visit since I find the range of fresh seafood simply astonishing, in particular the tuna stalls with huge fish!



**MP: What's your favourite type of Japanese cuisine?**

Definitely sushi and sashimi! I love seafood and raw fish. Plus, sushi and sashimi are such an artform in Japanese cuisine – it is beautiful to watch the chefs work at a good sushi restaurant. The slicing of the fish, the preparation of the rice, the plating and presentation of the sushi/sashimi... It is all such a sensory experience and performance... on top of it all, the tasty meal uses only fresh ingredients and is so healthy! Preparing sushi is not at all easy though, despite how effortless sushi chefs may make it seem – I took a sushi-making class in Tokyo a few months ago and although it was a worthwhile experience, my homemade sushi rolls were not the most pretty, unfortunately!



**MP:** Thank you so much for joining us Rachel. Best of luck for the parade. I have taken guests to the festival before as part of their Tokyo Private Tour with us and I know it is going to be fantastic. Looking forward to talking to you after the event to find out about your experiences on the day and how it went!

**RL:** Thank you! I do hope it will be a spectacular and successful event. For those who may be in Tokyo on September 23rd, please come by to catch the Oiran Dochu parade in the afternoon!

You can follow Rachel Leng on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and on her [website](#).

**Maction Planet** can take you behind-the-scenes at events such as the Shinagawa Shukuba Festival. Don't just watch – become a part of local life in Tokyo. Whatever your interests are, contact us to begin your journey to your perfect, personalised time in The World's Greatest Metropolis.  
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