

BOOK REVIEW

## Ryokan: Mobilizing Hospitality in Rural Japan

By Chris McMorran. University of Hawai'i Press, 2022. 220 pages. Hardback, \$64.00 USD, ISBN: 9780824888978. Paperback, \$25.00, ISBN: 9780824892272.

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This book analyzes daily work and issues at Japan's *ryokan* (traditional inns) in relation to multiple power dynamics by exploring them back and front stage. With detailed descriptions of the *ryokan* using each of the five senses, McMorran's descriptive opening sections bring to mind the concept of hospitality which *ryokan* seek to emphasize. This book provides in-depth discussions of the Japanese labor market, gender, and sustainability studies.

### Working style

The latter part of this book explores workers' daily lives in *ryokan* and explains how the business is arranged. Chapters explain that staff work hard and more than regular hours, often having to negotiate and reduce their off time. Readers can easily imagine how this happens by the author's description: other *nakai* (maids/cleaners) could not come for work so the old *nakai* was washing dishes by herself and needs help.... The author explains that this working condition is closely related to the family business style. Many of the *ryokan* businesses started with family members, and the work such as cleaning the rooms, washing dishes, and welcoming guests were typically done only by family members. Because of this background, it became common to work without being paid. This unpaid family business issue seems to be also apparent in the farming business in Japan. There has been an issue that farmers' *oyome-san* (daughters-in-law) are not paid fairly, such that the Japanese Agricultural Corporation has started offering a family treaty system (*kazoku kyotei seido*), so that all family members can associate with their appropriate paid work. McMorran's book sheds light on this issue from workers', co-workers', and owner's point of view in relation with their power relationship.

In terms of power relationships, McMorran explains the position of *nakai*: most of them were single, divorced, or separated, and some of them escaped from abusive family members. Thus, most of the *nakai* are in vulnerable positions or do not have another option for work, and so work for *ryokan*, which provide income and a place to stay. It appears that *ryokan* have been used and recognized for a long time as secured shelter for women who need to evacuate from their family members in Japan. Further, the author discusses the significance of *on* (gratitude and debt) that most *nakai* feel toward the owner who helped them escape from danger. These complex circumstances seem to often create a clear power relationship between *nakai* and owner, which leads to less flexible working conditions.

The author comments that some *nakai* live on the side of the *ryokan* similarly to family members. This lifestyle also affects their working style; those *nakai* who live on site are expected to help even if they are off-duty. McMorran further comments that *nakai*'s income and their work position tends to remain the same as when they started their job. This could be said of many positions in the Japanese

labor market which are over-represented by women. This book presents the dilemma a *nakai* in her 20s who finds the *nakai* job liberating, without reliance on men, and that offering great hospitality to guests gives her a sense of self-worth, but who also finds her salary and working conditions less than satisfactory.

## Gender

The author translates *nakai* as maid or cleaner. *Nakai* also engage beyond the work of maid, including welcoming guests with appropriate manners sometimes on behalf of *okami*. Additionally, *nakai* are still associated with women only; thus, female *ryokan* staff or *ryokan* staff might be a more realistic option to translate. On the other hand, why do we have specific name for female workers such as *nakai* and *okami* but not for male workers? It seems *nakai* and *okami* are considered as integral parts of the concept of *ryokan* hospitality. Japanese people often comment that *ryokan* are places where the guest feels as though they are coming back to their mother welcoming her family members.

The author also illustrates the clear gender roles in *ryokan*. It was interesting to see that a male *ryokan* owner, *shacho* (company owner) is considered as fulfilling a *soto* (outside) role, and *okami* (female *ryokan* co-owner) an *uchi* (inside) role. The book explains that *okami* work at the *ryokan* looking after guests, while *shacho* tend to be outside dealing with other work: attending the local assembly, engaging in business meetings, and arranging sales. These gender roles also applies to other workers in *ryokan*. *Nakai* serve guests inside *ryokan*; men, while also engaging with some work inside including arranging futon in guest rooms, more commonly offer services outside including maintaining gardens, driving guests to the station, and parking guests' cars. Serving food to guests is considered a women's job. It appears that this gender role does not interrupt the gender roles that operate in wider Japanese society. In tea ceremony (Chiba 2010), too, the teacher's occupation has been socially accepted since they tend to work from their home and do not interrupt the social expectation of women as *inside* the home. However, these fieldworks were both conducted before 2010. It would be interesting to see how gender roles have changed (or not) in the intervening years.

McMorran further discusses how *nakai* are trained to have appropriate manners to welcome guests: how to wear *kimono*, how to bow, sit, walk on the *tatami* floor, open the sliding door, and serve tea, *sake*, and food. These manners and etiquette are seen to embody Japanese femininity, and particularly middle class femininity. Japanese middle class women learn these manners through engaging with tea, *ikebana*, and other traditional arts. On the other hand, *nakai*'s social or economic position is not necessarily associated with the middle class. As chapter 7 describes, most of them tend not to have social or financial support from their natal family and ended up working for *ryokan* out of necessity. However, this middle class femininity might somehow interrelate to *nakai*, as the author comments that *nakai* is the position to pass down *okami*'s hospitality and *okami*, as the wife of the *ryokan* owner, seems to be related with middle class in Japanese society.

The book further discusses that male workers are allowed to sweat and wipe their sweat with towels in front of their guests; it shows how they work hard to supporting guests. On the other hand, *nakai* are not encouraged to sweat and perform their "support to feel effortless." The author comments that *nakai* are encouraged to put make up on and, even though they have to work so hard as men, they are encouraged to serve or entertain guests as if nothing has happened. Deeply embedded perception of Japanese femininity – women are still encouraged to look beautiful and elegant – appears to be the significant reason to this phenomenon. While female workers who criticize of the requirement to wear high-heeled shoes at work established a "*ku too* movement," make up still tends to be assumed as the unspoken etiquette and manners for female workers.

The "support to feel effortless" phenomenon is also connected to the concept of *uchi/soto*. Although *nakai* have to work for guests behind the scenes, they always have to look calm and effortless in front of them. This aesthetics is also established in other fields in Japan including tea ceremony, in which practitioners are trained not to show effort or hard work, and to keep the practice only in the *uchi* domain. Other aspects and applications of the *uchi/soto* concept are also well described in the

book. *Soto*, or *omote* (front) is related to hospitality, while *uchi*, or *ura* (back) stage as the hard work. There is also a distinction between staff and customers. One *ryokan* worker comments that he should be clearly recognized as staff by wearing a specific uniform. This dual concept is not only elaborated in the content but also in the book cover.

### Non-metropolitan, succession issues

At the end of the book, McMorran examines issues of *ryokan* succession. Younger generations are no longer interested in continuing their family *ryokan* businesses in non-metropolitan areas. The author comments that *ryokan* tend to be located at *hikyō*, literary translated as “hidden borders,” places deep in the countryside where it is hard to access. Nowadays, these places are also focused on rural sustainability discourses. Most policies appear to be created from the metropolitan or municipality’s point of view, tending to forget the actual residents such as *ryokan* owners and workers. The quality of lifestyle and income gap has widened, even before the COVID pandemic, between the metropolitan and rural area. The book communicates numerous problems of rural–urban inequality through the study of hospitality in *ryokan*.

This book also opens up a discussion on the future of *ryokan*. According to the author, there have been debates about *ryokan*’s authenticity; some people are willing to change some of the style, some of them are not. McMorran highlights that there are multiple arguments toward *ryokan* scandalization and professionalization. This discussion is relevant to traditional arts in general including tea ceremony and *ikebana*. If we trace this history, it is apparent that tradition has always been invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). *Ryokan* style will be reinvented in the future to survive by welcoming more non-Japanese tourists and foreign workers. Foreign workers have become a more realistic option for *ryokan* owners since not many in the younger generations are willing to work so hard.

McMorran comments that *ryokan* hospitality is heartfelt and valuable during our busy lifestyle. On the other hand, it has not only the problem of attracting younger workers, but also difficulty in attracting younger guests, who may see face-to-face interaction with people such as *nakai* as *mendokusai* (bothersome). It remains to be seen whether AI robots can solve problems of succession and rural tourism.

### Summary

We as readers are generally only able to see the front part of *ryokan*, the simple but clean guest room, hot bath with just right temperature, delicate meals served with excellent timing, and sophisticated hospitality. As mentioned before, this book offers the precious opportunity for readers to understand the backstage of *ryokan* through multiple layers: workers daily routine, hard work, and workers’ emotions behind their effortless smiles or sweating brows. The book paints a scene as if the reader were at the *ryokan*, and communicates the feelings and perspective of the informants. Ignoring the tendency in the social sciences to overlook emotions and passions as important expressions of the human condition, the author beautifully leverages emotion for valuable academic analysis. This book will even hold the attention of Japanese readers. We no longer have *tatami* floor, do not wear *kimono*, take a shower rather than bath, tend not to have Japanese food (*washoku*), and choosing a hotel rather than a *ryokan* to stay. *Ryokan* certainly holds our attention, entertain us, and enrich our knowledge. This book will deepen our understanding of *ryokan*, and their value for understanding working styles, gender, and succession issues in Japan more broadly.

### References

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 Hobsbawm E. and Ranger T. (eds) (1983) The Invention of Tradition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.