

Uncovering the secrets of a ryokan

NUS professor Chris McMorran took on 14-hour work days and interacted with staff to learn the ins and outs of this feted form of Japanese hospitality

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Like picnicking under cherry blossoms, walking through vermilion torii gates or catching a glimpse of Mount Fuji's peak on a clear day, a stay at a ryokan, or traditional inn, is the essence of Japan for travellers.

Between the steaming onsen and exquisite multi-course kaiseki meals, so alluring is the ryokan experience that people around the world repeat visits to Japan's 50,000 or so inns.

Most guests check in for a night or two.

But 50-year-old Chris McMorran, associate professor of Japanese studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS), spent a year working at a ryokan in Kurokawa, an onsen town in Kyushu in the country's south.

He did this between 2006 and 2007 as part of research for his PhD in geography from the University of Colorado Boulder, on top of short stints working at six other inns.

The American moved to Singapore in 2010 and has returned to Kurokawa almost every year, including study trips with NUS students from his course on field studies in Japan.

In 2022, he published a book detailing his account, titled *Ryokan: Mobilizing Hospitality In Rural Japan*.

BACK OF HOUSE: PARADOX OF RYOKAN HOSPITALITY

Through 14-hour work days, the changing of seasons and interacting with staff at the back of house, McMorran uncovers paradoxes of feted Japanese hospitality.

Women working there, known as nakai, are primarily in their 40s and 50s. Their job is to care for guests and this entails everything from serving food to housekeeping to babysitting, anticipating their needs at every step.

Service is sensitive yet unobtrusive: Turning slippers so they face outwards, so guests can slip their feet in easily when they leave a room. Observing foreign guests to determine if they would prefer a fork and knife, or chopsticks. Tidying the room while guests are at breakfast, so they have an easier time packing for check-out.

All this to create a "nostalgic, harmonious and purposefully Japanese atmosphere", a retreat that feels like home. But for many nakai, this home is a place far less welcoming. Many are divorced, widowed or unmarried.

"What they share is what they lack - a home whose family members need their everyday care," observes McMorran in the book.

He tells the tale of his co-worker Suzuki, for whom work as a nakai was a refuge from her abusive, philandering husband.

After leaving her husband, she sought work in ryokan around the country. Though the work was tough and the pay was little - around US\$80 (S\$106) for a 10-hour work day - employment offered a roof over her head and a chance to rebuild her life.

Suzuki even likened ryokan to a kakekomidara, a Buddhist temple during the Edo period (1600-1863) that offered women refuge and helped them initiate divorce, which they could not legally do themselves.

Yet nakai recognise the bind they are in. Essentially gig workers, they are vulnerable to changes in the economy.

For those living in staff quarters, losing their job could mean homelessness. And while the remoteness of the landscape is a draw for tourists seeking an escape from city life, it isolates workers from other job opportunities.

McMorran tells *The Straits Times*: "Ryokan explicitly acknowledge the economic value of making people feel at home. The nakai are women who have world-class soft skills. Yet, they see themselves as replaceable and are essentially trapped."

To an extent, these are challenges faced by the hospitality industry the world over.

Hotels may never recover from the manpower crunch brought about by the pandemic.

Yet these paradoxes are more pronounced because of the world's fascination with Japan. Beguiling



Japan is home to 50,000 or so inns, which draw visitors from around the world. PHOTOS: CHRIS MCMORRAN



National University of Singapore's associate professor of Japanese studies Chris McMorran (above; and right, with students on a study trip to Japan) spent a year working in a ryokan as part of research for his book, *Ryokan: Mobilizing Hospitality In Rural Japan*. ST PHOTO: RYAN CHIONG



yet unknowable, the language barrier and cultural gulf make it difficult for the casual visitor to understand the inner workings of these feted inns, and the women who serve them.

FRONT OF HOUSE: SUCCESSION PLANNING

It took McMorran a decade and a half to publish his book since his working year in the ryokan.

Had he written it sooner, he admits that it would be far more

critical of ryokan owners for what he describes as the exploitative nature of employment.

But through repeat visits, he came to understand the challenges that ryokan owners grapple with, making him more sympathetic to the uncertainties of running a small, family-owned business.

One of these is finding a successor to take over the inn.

Traditionally, the eldest son is the heir apparent, or shacho.

But many questions must be answered before he can assume his

place. Does he have plans for marriage? Will his wife make a suitable okami, the role of a woman who manages the ryokan? And after experiencing life abroad or in big cities Tokyo and Osaka, will he want to return?

Long before a successor is of age to step into the role, the parents would have laid out the life trajectory for their scion.

This includes a study or work stint away from home, which offers life experience and the distance with which to appreciate Kuro-

kawa's rural pleasures.

"Parents understand the burdens of managing an inn and want their children to experience some freedom before returning home," writes McMorran.

Yet when the time comes, families are intentional about enticing their children (and a new spouse) home. Some upgrade living quarters, while others may build a new section of the home for the newlyweds.

Woven into these perks is a sense of familial duty. The gift of separate living quarters carries the tacit expectation of carrying on the bloodline. At the same time, a couple must learn the ropes to eventually take over the inn.

Just like how goodwill and gratitude bind nakai to their employers, so too are the children of ryokan owners obligated to pick up the mantle of the family business.

JAPANOPHILE

How does a California-born, Iowa-raised boy from the United States wind up devoting his academic career to the study of Japanese culture?

It starts with his interest in people, with a degree in anthropology from Central College Iowa and a desire to see the world.

After graduation, he applied to teach English in China and Japan. Having done his university exchange at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, he opted for somewhere new.

During his three years spent teaching in Kumamoto, the prefecture where Kurokawa is located, he stayed at his first ryokan, getting swept up in Japanese hospitality.

Later, he would learn about all the thought and care that workers poured into hosting each guest. But that first visit had the purity of a new, transportive experience.

He also met the woman who would become his wife.

She was from Kumamoto city and working at a travel agency there; he was heading to Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia. This was a time when one still needed physical tickets to travel, which gave them time to get to know each other.

They kept up a long-distance relationship while he was working towards his master's degree in geography at the University of Colorado Boulder, and she worked as a travel agent in London, before

getting married in 2001. The couple have no children.

Research for his master's degree in geography led him back to Kurokawa, where he shadowed ryokan employees to understand their work. But as neither worker nor guest, he found himself constantly underfoot.

So while researching for his PhD, he requested, via a handwritten letter, to work at a ryokan for a year.

"I wanted to feel the work, not just the physical but also the emotional aspect of it. The moments of elation and frustration that you just can't describe from afar," he says.

His role, often physical, included duties such as carrying luggage, making up rooms, doing laundry and cleaning onsen, or hot spring baths.

Though he requested to work unpaid, he eventually accepted a wage of US\$80 a day from the okami, who said it would be impossible for her to assign him the full suite of tasks - including unpleasant cleaning jobs - without offering a daily wage.

But the real reward was the interactions with co-workers he would never have experienced otherwise.

Small moments such as singing as they washed dishes late at night or working wordlessly yet in sync as they cleaned a room together are the good times he remembers.

In the book, he refers to the ryokan by the fictitious name Yamazakura, and has never revealed the actual inn.

But he will say it is a mid-tier property that offers "down home, comfortable but not top-class luxury" that today costs about \$180 a night for one, and that it is representative of many in the country.

Just as how tourists have come to view a ryokan stay as a quintessential part of a holiday in Japan, McMorran hopes the women who power the industry will receive due recognition.

He says: "These women are the unsung heroes of Japanese tourism. In addition to icons like the geisha and the Harajuku girl, why not a nakai too?"

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• *Ryokan: Mobilizing Hospitality In Rural Japan* (\$32.50) is available from Amazon.