RYOKAN: MOBILIZING HOSPITALITY IN RURAL JAPAN

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Ethnographic fieldwork in Kurokawa Onsen, Kumamoto Prefecture (Aug 2006-Aug 2007)

Map by Lee Li Kheng
Ethnographic fieldwork in Kurokawa Onsen, Kumamoto Prefecture (Aug 2006-Aug 2007)

Work = scrubbing baths, washing dishes, sweeping paths, vacuuming tatami mats, carrying luggage, laying out bedding… making guests feel “at home” in a ryokan

Plus, repeat sits nearly every year since

Focus: the daily, seasonal, and generational work found at a ryokan

Argument: work is a “last resort” for both ryokan owners and employees
For owners:

Spatial division of labor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male – <em>shachō</em> “outside” work</th>
<th>Female – <em>okami</em> “inside” work</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Landscaping</td>
<td>- Welcoming guests</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Building maintenance</td>
<td>- Serving meals</td>
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<td>- Attending meetings</td>
<td>- Cleaning rooms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Training and managing employees</td>
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<td>PLUS</td>
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<td>- Caring for the family</td>
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<td>- Biological/social reproduction (raising an heir)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
For owners:

Fuzzy boundary between family and business
- pass the business through generations
- provide jobs
- embody the neighborhood
- live on site
- no privacy
- “trapped” in place

Ryokan is a last resort
- to honor ancestors,
- to maintain communities, and
- to pass something to the next generation
For employees:

Flexible labor, flexible time

Flexible labor: constantly adjusting personality, body, pace of work, language to meet guest needs
  - entertainer
  - tour guide
  - babysitter

Flexible time: constantly “on call” to meet guest needs
For a busy ryokan, okami is not the body of hospitality

Ryokan needs “home-less” women
- Divorced
- Separated
- Widowed
- Unmarried
- Women whose family members do not need their everyday care

Ryokan is a last resort
- for economic stability,
- personal fulfilment, and
- a brighter future
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