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Ryokan

Mobilizing Hospitality in Rural Japan

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Chris McMorran

Thursday
2022-10-13
18³⁰~20⁰⁰



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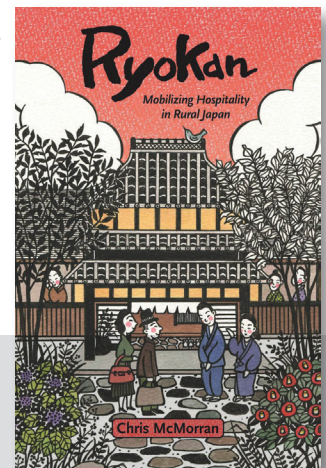
Amid the decline of many rural communities in Japan, the hot springs village resort of Kurokawa Onsen is a rare, bright spot. Its two dozen traditional inns, or ryokan, draw hundreds of thousands of tourists a year eager to admire its landscape, experience its hospitality, and soak in its hot springs. As a result, these ryokan have enticed village youth to return home to take over successful family businesses and revive the community. What does it take to produce this family business and one of Japan's most relaxing spaces?

In this talk, I share the behind-the-scenes work that keeps a ryokan running smoothly, from the everyday tasks of cleaning, serving, and making guests feel at home, to the generational work of producing and training a suitable heir who can carry on the family business. I draw on nearly two decades of research in and around Kurokawa, including a year spent welcoming guests, carrying

luggage, scrubbing baths, cleaning rooms, washing dishes, and talking with co-workers and owners about their jobs, relationships, concerns, and aspirations.

I discuss how Kurokawa's ryokan mobilize hospitality to create a rural escape in contemporary Japan, emphasizing the strictly gendered work found in the ryokan, as well as the generational work of ryokan owners vs. the daily embodied work of their employees. I share the realities of ryokan work—celebrated, messy, ignored, exploitative, and liberating—and introduce the people who keep inns running by making guests feel at home.

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Chris McMorran is Associate Professor of Japanese Studies at the National University of Singapore. He is a cultural geographer of contemporary Japan focusing on the geographies of home across scale, from the body to the nation. He is the author of *Ryokan: Mobilizing Hospitality in Rural Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press), an ethnography of a Japanese inn, based on twelve months spent scrubbing baths, washing dishes, and making guests feel at home at a hot springs resort. He also has published research on tourism, disasters, gendered labor, area studies, field-based learning, and the evolution of grading. He co-produces the *Home on the Dot* podcast with NUS students, which explores the meaning of home on the little red dot called Singapore. Chris grew up in a small town in Iowa but has lived outside the U.S. for much of his adult life, including Japan and Singapore, which he calls home.

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