

CHAPTER 7



Liberating Work in the Tourist Industry

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WHAT IS THE IDEAL MAN? The question arose out of nowhere on a cold, rainy day in March 2007, deep in the mountainous interior of Kyūshū. The topic came up as I headed to a café in the hot springs resort of Kurokawa Onsen with Shimada-san (62) and Nishihara-san (48), two women who worked with me at a nearby *ryokan*, or Japanese inn. For Shimada-san, the ideal man was simple: “He would be wealthy, but stuck in the hospital.” Nishihara-san erupted with laughter as Shimada-san continued, “I would only need to stop in every day to check on him. Otherwise I could shop all day and spend time with friends.”

Nishihara-san agreed, “That’s a great idea! Yes, the only useful man is a rich one who leaves you alone.” Feigning disappointment that I was not rich (and that I was married), my coworkers lamented the absence of any man to fit their narrow criteria.¹ However, they expressed gratitude that their jobs meant they actually “did not need a man” (*otoko wa iranai*). For these women, both of whom are divorced, the *ryokan* provides a necessary livelihood, including a daily wage, a uniform, three meals a day, and a dormitory room. Because of this, for Shimada-san and Nishihara-san and tens of thousands of women in similar circumstances around Japan, *ryokan* work provides liberation (*kaihō*) from the institution of marriage and its associated reliance on a man.

This chapter explores the *ryokan* as a site of women’s liberation. Here, I do not mean the women’s lib (*ūman ribu*) movement associated with early 1970s feminism (discussed in chapters by James Welker and Setsu

Shigematsu in this volume). Instead, I mean a private sense of social and geographical liberation from the limitations (and occasional dangers) women feel elsewhere. At first glance, the *ryokan* may seem an unlikely space of liberation. Typically translated as “traditional Japanese inn,” *ryokan* cater to both domestic and international tourists longing to experience “traditional” Japan, imagined as a time and space vanishing since the arrival of Perry’s “Black Ships” in the 1850s.² A major feature of the *ryokan*’s presentation of traditional Japan is its incorporation of a model of gender that fits conventional ideas of femininity and a woman’s “place” in Japanese society. Specifically, *ryokan* typically feature *nakai*, women like Shimada-san and Nishihara-san who welcome guests, escort them to their rooms, serve them tea and meals, and clean their rooms following departure.

In this chapter I show that while this work seems to recreate gender ideologies that define women’s work and spatially fix it in the home, it also provides *nakai* an opportunity to upset those ideologies and find a personal sense of liberation. This chapter highlights women typically overlooked in Japan, both in general and in feminist scholarship: the tens of thousands of divorced, separated, and single female employees in the country’s inns and hotels whose limited education, lack of recognized job skills, and decision to leave their homes convince them they have “no place to go” (*ibasho ga nai, iku tokoro ga nai*) besides the *ryokan*. I show that through their work, *nakai* disrupt the ideologies they seem to reproduce—specifically that of the nurturing woman in domestic space and the supporting member of an extended corporate family in commercial space. I explore the agency of *nakai* through their labor, recognizing not only the limitations but also the possibilities of conceptualizing *nakai* work as feminist praxis in contemporary Japan. In doing so, I echo the insights of Nancy Stalker in this volume by showing how women use conventional femininity as a tool to create spaces for individual freedom and enrichment despite gender inequalities that remain in Japanese society.

This chapter stems from a research project about the emotional and physical labor necessary to create the tourist refuge of the *ryokan*.³ The study also found that the *ryokan* is a refuge for some employees: a refuge from abusive spouses, unhappy marriages, and financial reliance on a man. The research is based on twelve months of “working” participant observation in a dozen inns in and around Kurokawa Onsen starting in 2006, as well as follow-up interviews with inn workers and owners almost

annually through 2015. As a *ryokan* employee I washed dishes, carried luggage, scrubbed baths, laid out bedding, parked cars, vacuumed *tatami* mats, prepared dinner trays, cleaned toilets, and did countless other tasks that put me in direct contact with both guests and the people who create a place of refuge for tens of thousands of guests each year.

Locating Women in *Ryokan*

Ryokan are found throughout Japan, from large cities to small villages. However, most are in tourist destinations like hot springs resorts. There are over 50,000 *ryokan* around the country, averaging 15 rooms each.⁴ *Ryokan* are typically owned and operated by a husband-and-wife team, similar to a bed and breakfast. While this couple’s labor may suffice in small inns, larger and busier ones require a staff of full- or part-time employees, which may include one or more chefs, front desk staff, drivers, gardeners, and *nakai*.

The title *nakai* is always gendered female and identifies maids or servers in Japanese-style inns or restaurants. Consisting of the *kanji* characters *naka* (relationship, 仲) and *i* (to reside or exist, 居), *nakai* suggests a spatial in-betweenness, someone who shuttles food and drink between the kitchen and the guestroom or dining room. The *nakai* also serves as an intermediary between the owner of an establishment and the guests. This position and responsibility of “in-betweenness” is taken very seriously in the *ryokan* industry, where family-owned inns are said to reflect the personalities of their owners, particularly the *okami*, or proprietress.⁵ The *nakai*’s job is to absorb as much of the *okami*’s personality (often described as her *aji*, or flavor) as possible and share it with guests through her emotional and embodied labor. In other words, she must attempt to faithfully recreate the hospitality that would be offered by her boss.

A *nakai*’s workday begins with serving breakfast at 7:00 a.m. and ends at 8:30 p.m. or later, when she has retrieved the last dirty dish from the guestrooms, where dinner is often served. A short afternoon break interrupts an otherwise nonstop cycle of caring for the needs of others that lasts ten to twelve hours a day. Students of Japanese society should recognize a resemblance between *nakai* labor and the caring, embodied labor expected of Japanese women, both in the domestic sphere and the workplace. Most of the country’s emotional labor, both at home and work, still rests on the shoulders of women. In this way, *nakai* labor neatly

recreates and perpetuates conventional gender stereotypes associated with women's place and role in contemporary Japanese society.

Interestingly, however, the *nakai* work schedule and location prevent many women from accepting this position: those who must prepare morning and evening meals for family members; those who must be available to collect an ill child from school at a moment's notice; those who must contribute time and energy to a neighborhood organization or PTA; those who must care for the disabled or elderly. In other words, although a *nakai* appears to recreate conventional ideologies of women's work, a *nakai* must "be there" for guests and no one else in her life. She must remain rooted in or near the *ryokan*, yet be completely mobile to meet the needs of guests. As I show later, while their personal circumstances mean constant economic uncertainty for many *nakai*, the daily lack of responsibility to family members and the absence of an anchor of home provide many *nakai* with a sense of liberation rare among Japanese women today.

The geographical location of women has long been an implicit concern of scholars of Japan, with women's place often revolving around or being defined with respect to the home.⁶ This is evident in Vera Mackie's work on early feminists banned from attending political events in public; Miriam Silverberg's scholarship on "modern girls" who caused moral outrage by freely moving about 1920s Tokyo; research by Joy Hendry and Robin LeBlanc on "professional housewives" who center their social and political worlds on the home; and work by Karen Kelsky on unmarried women who challenge society's expectations that "place" them in the home by refusing to marry or by moving overseas.⁷ Even women who work full or part time after marriage often continue to feel spatially and temporally bound to the home in some way, by accepting work that will not interfere with (or will complement) duties like housework and "being there" for family members.⁸

Location with reference to the home also matters to *nakai*, only for very different reasons. Take Suzuki-san (58). A victim of domestic violence, she fled from her husband to the open arms of the *ryokan* industry decades ago and has been working around Japan ever since. At her first job, in a resort near Tokyo, she worked with over fifty women from all over Japan who had also turned to *ryokan* to escape violence and other troubles at home. According to Suzuki-san, "Some had escaped terrible things." For such women, "The *ryokan* is a refuge for women

(*kakekomidera*).⁹ You can go there and immediately have meals and a place to live. You don't have to worry about anything."

Most of the women I met and worked with turned their backs on the home, and many purposefully tried to move as far away from it as possible. Some reared children and cared for husbands for years or decades, before eventually leaving. Whether to escape physical abuse, an unfulfilling relationship, or financial troubles, or to achieve a sense of self-reliance previously missing in their lives, they all relocated outside the home and away from a man. Unfortunately, they often lack academic credentials, and those who retired from paid employment upon marriage typically have few job skills valued by employers. For these and other reasons many *nakai* claim they have no place to go besides the *ryokan*. This makes them pliant employees, but it also means they may quit in the middle of the night, never to be seen again. In many ways, these women live a complex "in-betweenness" neatly encapsulated by their job title and constitute one of the most mobile groups in Japanese society.¹⁰

Liberating Work

Despite the precariousness of the position, I never heard a *nakai* regret trading the home for the *ryokan* industry. Instead, most *nakai* acknowledged the difficulties that led them to *ryokan* work and expressed intense satisfaction at being able to survive without a man. No one expressed this more strongly than Nishihara-san (48), who earlier joked about the ideal man. She had her first child at the age of twenty. "It was a mistake," she admits, "but I finally married the father three years later. He was the second son in his family, but because his older brother lived and worked elsewhere, we had to move in with his parents." The living situation was especially difficult because her mother-in-law doubted the child was really her son's offspring. Eventually, they had a second child, but the relationship soon fell apart. Following the divorce, "He kept our second son, eventually marrying another woman and incorporating the child into his household."

With no money or job, Nishihara-san moved into her parents' home with her son, who was six at the time. "Because I had married so young, I didn't have any career or training. I didn't even have a driver's license." She needed a job without any special requirements, with on-site housing, and with the potential to save money to study for a different career. "That

was the only way I would be able to live independently." For Nishihara-san location was important: far enough from home to become self-reliant, yet close enough to visit her eldest son, who lived with her parents. Eventually she found work in a *ryokan*. Within two years she earned her driver's license and saved enough money to train to become a nurse.

Unfortunately, despite her nursing qualifications, permanent full-time employment has eluded Nishihara-san. Most care work is temporary or part time, and it features irregular schedules and backbreaking labor. Her employment history is a patchwork of one- or two-year positions in elderly care facilities, offices, and five different *ryokan* and hotels around Kyūshū. Because she has no permanent home, she accepts positions with the kind of security associated with marriage, like subsidized food and housing. When referring to her dormitory room, she admits that it is tiny, "but it's mine." She proudly adds, "This job has a dorm and three meals, so I no longer need a man. That is very liberating." (*Kono shigoto dewa, sanshoku, ryō mo atte, otoko wa hitsuyō ga nai. Hijō ni kaihō desu.*)

Ryokan as Site of Feminist Praxis

The *ryokan* industry provides what many *nakai* consider to be the only viable alternative to a home life defined by patriarchy and repression, and in some cases, violence. However, the assertion of the *ryokan* as a solution to so many social, economic, and political problems affecting women might appear hollow. After all, working in a *ryokan* will not change the conditions that lead women to the industry in the first place. Moreover, their job provides no outlet for political self-expression. Most women are guarded about their pasts, and many have a fatalistic attitude about changing their own circumstances, let alone the gender ideologies that continue to keep women "in their place" in Japan. Similar to women who have "raced for the exits" by leaving paid employment before challenging its restrictions on career mobility and family lives, the *nakai* I worked with left the institutions of marriage and the household (*ie*) before trying to improve those institutions for others.¹¹ They have little job security and find it best to keep their heads down and slowly work their way up the social hierarchy of a particular inn. Therefore, one might ask how their labor can be understood in feminist terms.

Certainly, this is not feminism as a public, political project. It does not involve consciousness-raising or assertiveness training.¹² And given its position outside the home, it is not "housewife feminism."¹³ At its most extreme it rejects the institutions of marriage and the *ie* through the physical act of running away. For Nishihara-san this is "liberation" (*kaihō*), wherein she no longer needs a man. In the *ryokan*, then, one may understand feminism not as part of a public social movement, but in terms of a private pride for one's risky and radical decision to leave the socially accepted institution and space of the home. If feminism is about resistance to or liberation from the oppression or exploitation of women, then the *ryokan* may qualify as a feminist space.

Of course, *nakai* often trade one form of exploitation for another. They may feel personally liberated by leaving a violent or useless spouse, but they enter into a relationship with capital that tends to exploit their vulnerabilities, including their need for steady income, a lack of a permanent residence, and for some, limited mobility due to a lack of transportation. Plus, their job is to play the hostess, thus recreating and reinforcing societal expectations that *place* women in the home and devalue their labor. Indeed, *nakai* continually say their work is natural, that what they do is "women's work" and that as women they are naturally suited to hospitality. Through their caring labor, therefore, *nakai* seem to reproduce the very naturalized categories that limit their vocational choices and place them in such a vulnerable position.

However, I suggest that through their work, *nakai* both reinforce and resist commonly held beliefs about domestic labor and the appropriate place of women. By being paid to use conventional femininity to create a retreat for tourists outside domestic space, *nakai* help undermine the ideology that connects femininity and the home. As I explain below, understanding *nakai* labor as a performance enables one to appreciate their embodied and emotional activities as more than simply recreating the conditions of their exploitation, and instead opens up the possibility that their practices might reconfigure ideas about domestic labor in Japan and elsewhere.

Let's return to the "typical" *nakai*. She either is, or has been married, but lives apart from her husband and desires work that provides accommodations. She also may lack work experience after years as a housewife. On the surface, she may seem a pitiable figure. However, before we

feel sorry for the *nakai*, we must question outdated, even nostalgic ideas about both the home and group-centered Japanese society that lead to this judgment. If we only view the *nakai* through a narrow normative idea of home, then we see her as deviant and vulnerable: rootless, homeless, and reliant on the economic success of another family. Such a perspective fails to recognize the radical potential of *nakai* work to actually undermine the normative notion of home and the ideologies that tie women to domestic space and labor.

The *nakai* proves that home need not be central to Japanese women's identities, by living and working independently of the home. The *nakai*'s lifestyle deviates from the norm, but it offers social and economic rewards, including a decent wage, to perform the emotional and physical labor previously unremunerated, and underappreciated, in the home. Moreover, the *nakai* undermines beliefs about the centrality of the home to Japanese femininity precisely through her performance of conventional gender roles for the benefit of tourists. The *nakai* faithfully reproduces the role of the helpful and subservient female. She cares for and caters to guests, and whether she is having a wonderful day or seething inside, she cannot refuse to play the part of the hospitable hostess without the risk of losing her job.

In this faithful performance of the role of hostess, the *nakai* demonstrates a particularly powerful potential to undermine conventional femininity and its "natural" association with domestic space. Here, Judith Butler's insights on gender are instructive.¹⁴ In her powerful critique of the assumed natural one-to-one relationship between biological sex and gender, Butler focuses on drag, cross-dressing, and other performances of gender. She argues that those who cross-dress often faithfully reproduce the gender-appropriate behaviors, and through this performance undermine the assumed naturalness of gender. This realization led Butler to conceive of gender not as natural but as "a stylized repetition of acts."¹⁵ Similarly, one can see *nakai* labor as "a stylized repetition of acts" normally associated with Japanese women in domestic space. However, the repetition of these acts in nondomestic space, particularly by women who have shunned the normative home, enables these acts to be seen instead as a parody of the caring labor at the heart of conventional femininity. In this way, the *nakai* actually undermines the assumed "naturalness" of women's work, especially its connection to the home.

The *nakai* performs the role of the nurturing wife/mother, which is the model of appropriate female behavior in Japan. However, this is the very role that she has shunned by leaving her husband and turning to *ryokan* work. After all, she is obviously not the "good wife, wise mother" if she is working ten to twelve hours per day in some remote tourist village. In fact, she shows that the role can be turned on at the sliding of a door or the arrival of a guest to the inn's entrance. And she undermines the norm most when she plays it most earnestly, such as when she fawns over guests she finds annoying or pretends to be married in order to reject the advances of lecherous male guests. Playing the conventional feminine role provides the space for parody of what she has rejected and an avenue for expressing agency despite the limitations that come from her personal circumstances. Like the everyday forms of peasant resistance, or "weapons of the weak," highlighted by James Scott, a *nakai*'s performative acts may not lead to a violent upheaval and rearrangement of society, but they show that the women do not idly participate in reproducing their own inequality.¹⁶ While always playing the ideal hostess and seemingly reproducing an unequal set of gender relations, *nakai* should be seen not as helpless victims of their employment situation, but as astute observers of others, able to satisfy guests' needs while achieving liberation for themselves.

Conclusion: Dis-placing Gender

Every day, *nakai* perform norms that help maintain several social hierarchies. For instance, as women performing domestic duties they satisfy the norm that women belong not in the world of work, but in the domestic sphere. As workers in their employers' *ie*, they fulfill a norm that places women as dependent upon the salary of a man, in this case the owner. They have no ownership of the means of production, besides their own bodies, and rely on the continued economic success of another family's *ie* for their housing, clothing, food, and daily wage. By working in a *ryokan*, then, *nakai* seem to legitimate the institution, the *ie*, from which they have escaped. Indeed, *ryokan* owners hope the company as *ie* can stand in for the household/family as *ie* for their employees, and thus inspire similar levels of commitment and self-sacrifice. The performativity of the *nakai*'s daily acts seems to show their acceptance of this

arrangement. However, their words say otherwise. For the overwhelming majority of *nakai* I encountered, the *ryokan* is just a job, and their emotional connection to each day's guests is often stronger than their connection to their employers.

What implications, if any, does this resistance to the institution of the *ie* have for the women of this study, and for women everywhere? The concept of performativity can be used to argue that through an individual's acts, one can either reproduce society's norms of gender, race, sex, or nationality, or one can consciously act in ways that transgress these norms, and thus help create a resistant subjectivity. So, a new question must be raised: What of those people who perform acts that perpetuate society's norms, *but are paid to do so*?

I return one last time to Butler: "The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, *through a radical proliferation of gender*, to displace the very gender norms that enable repetition itself."¹⁷ Butler speaks of displacing gender norms. However, reexamined with a geographer's twist, one may imagine *dis-placing* gender norms, or removing gender norms from their normal location. Although this is not Butler's intention, the prospect prompts several questions: Could the daily repetition of gender norms in the *ryokan* help to displace these norms from the home? Might the repetition of home-focused gender norms in tourist space take them out of the realm of daily practice and into the realm of the exotic other?

As Japanese women spend more hours working outside the home, society's expectations of women and domestic labor may be challenged. In the future, the domestic hostess may become a nostalgic icon, an unattainable ideal from yesteryear whose selfless labor made the home feel comfortable. Perhaps the performance of idealized gender norms in the *ryokan* will not lead to their reproduction throughout society. Perhaps instead they will become a quaint tradition to be experienced only in the *ryokan*, or even "played" in the home, as a bodily memory of what was seen while on vacation. This may be one way to disrupt existing ideologies of gender and space. In the meantime, for Shimada-san, Nishihara-san, Suzuki-san, and the many *nakai* in similar precarious circumstances, the *ryokan* provides a location for feminist praxis, a space in which women can actively undermine the centrality of the institutions of marriage and household to their own lives, and live lives of personal satisfaction and liberation that come from not relying on a man.

Notes

- 1 My positionality as a white, heterosexual male married to a Japanese woman with whom I resided during this research was known to my coworkers and was relevant. Additionally important to many coworkers was my status as a child of divorce, a fact that arose early in conversations with a few coworkers and soon became common knowledge.
- 2 On the rise of nostalgia-focused travel, see Jennifer Robertson, "Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia," *Politics, Culture, and Society* 1, no. 4 (1988); "It Takes a Village: Internationalization and Nostalgia in Postwar Japan," in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, ed. Stephen Vlastos (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). On *ryokan*, see Sylvie Guichard-Anguis, "Japanese Inns (*Ryokan*) as Producers of Japanese Identity," in *Japanese Tourism and Travel Culture*, ed. Sylvie Guichard-Anguis and Okpyo Moon (London: Routledge, 2008).
- 3 Chris McMorran, "Practising Workplace Geographies: Embodied Labour as Method in Human Geography," *Area* 44, no. 4 (2012); "A Landscape of 'Undesigned Design' in Rural Japan," *Landscape Journal* 33, no. 1 (2014); "Mobilities Amid the Production of Fixities: Labor in a Japanese Inn," *Mobilities* 10, no. 1 (2015).
- 4 Doi Kyūtarō, *Yoku wakarū hōteru gyōkai* (Tokyo: Nihon Jitsugyō Shuppansha, 2009).
- 5 Proprietress is a term used by Fuji Jeanie, a US citizen who married into a multigeneration *ryokan* family and became its *okami*. In an interview, she claimed this term came closest to encompassing all of her (highly gendered) duties. She has also written about the experience of being *okami* and Japanese hospitality in general. See Jeanie Fuji, *Nipponjin wa, Nihon ga tarinai* (Tokyo: Nihon Bungeisha, 2003); and *Amerikajin ga mananda Nihon no omotenashi kokoroecho* (Tokyo: Gentōsha, 2004).
- 6 Beyond Japan, geographers in particular have analyzed the complex and problematic ways gender intersects with domestic space in politically, economically, and culturally significant ways. See especially Alison Blunt and Robyn M. Dowling, *Home* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 7 Vera Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan: Citizenship, Embodiment and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Miriam Silverberg, "The Modern Girl as Militant," in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600–1945*, ed. Gail Lee Bernstein (Berkeley: University of California

- Press, 1991); Robin M. LeBlanc, *Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Joy Hendry, "The Role of the Professional Housewife," in *Japanese Women Working*, ed. Janet Hunter (London: Routledge, 1993); Karen Kelsky, *Women on the Verge: Japanese Women, Western Dreams* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).
- 8 Kaye Broadbent, *Women's Employment in Japan: The Experience of Part-Time Workers* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Dorinne K. Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Sawa Kurotani, *Home Away from Home: Japanese Corporate Wives in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Nancy Ross Rosenberger, *Dilemmas of Adulthood: Japanese Women and the Nuances of Long-Term Resistance* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013); but see also Glenda Susan Roberts, *Staying on the Line: Blue-Collar Women in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).
- 9 *Kakekomidera* refers to temples that offered refuge for women during the Edo period (1603–1868). At the time, women were not allowed to initiate a divorce. However, they could seek shelter in some Buddhist temples, which would provide safety and help initiate a divorce for them. For Suzuki-san, the *ryokan* resembles the *kakekomidera* as a place of flight and eventual liberation from marriage. See Diana E. Wright, "Severing the Karmic Ties That Bind: The 'Divorce Temple' Mantokuji *Monumenta Nipponica* 52, no. 3 (1997).
- 10 McMorrán, "Mobilities."
- 11 Leonard J. Schoppa, *Race for the Exits: The Unraveling of Japan's System Social Protection* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- 12 Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 150.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 14 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 15 *Ibid.*, 140; emphasis in original.
- 16 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
- 17 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 148; emphasis added.

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