

# Global hospitality brands prefer workers with overseas experience

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Global hotel brands continue to be as focused as ever on the Asia Pacific, especially China, for tomorrow's growth. They are staking out prime locations and building luxury properties. Behind every grand opening, there is a fresh hunt for hundreds of foot soldiers: front desk clerks, room managers, food and beverage crew, and back-office bean-counters.

Increasingly, the training of these workers is moving beyond the college classrooms of Beijing and Shanghai, even with their Western textbooks and video links. Instead, the picture now includes everything from Switzerland's finest hotel schools to \$40-a-night, budget motels in Alabama to the housekeeping department of a five-star, downtown Vancouver hotel.

Meet Shine Yan, 23, for example. She arrived in Vancouver from China's Henan province a few years ago to study English. She recently completed an eight-month hotel management course at Vancouver-based Spratt-Shaw Community College and is doing an internship here. It's mostly office work, but her English is improving and she gets to be a cog in a fancy chain.

"I want to try and stay and upgrade my skills here," Yan said. "If I go back to China, I know I can find a hotel job easily because I have [overseas] work experience."

Inculcating a sense of customer service is one of the toughest challenges for foreign hotels wanting to expand in China, according to Toby Chu, CEO of Vancouver-based CIBT Education Group, which owns Spratt-Shaw and also runs a school of hotel and tourism management in Beijing.

"There was a big boom of hotels like the Venetian opening in Macau [in southern China, near Hong Kong] before the [economic] crisis, but many of the new workers were just not trained up to international standards. During the entire first month, guests at the Venetian there were lining up for 45 minutes to check in while staff stood watching," Chu said.

Ada Guo, a native of China's central Hunan province, is taking introduction to hospitality, facility management, and food and beverage courses at CIBT's school in Beijing. By the time she leaves China for her first time ever next year to do two years of school and training in the U.S., she will know a formal table setting inside out and be able to print reports with the most advanced of reservation systems.

Still, the placements are luck of the draw and she could get plopped into a \$40-a-night budget motel near Gadsden, Ala., like one of her predecessors did. "It's just about getting some U.S.-based advancement of what they have learned in China," Chu said. "At least it is overseas experience. When they go back, they may not immediately be hired by the Grand Hyatt, but it's a start."

"The challenge in China is getting the balance right for the service level," said Graham Kwan, CEO of Melco China Resorts, a Canadian-listed company, which is developing a set of mountain resorts in China.

*Time* magazine recently described Melco's Yabuli ski destination in northern China as having undergone a Cinderella-like transformation, rating it the best resort makeover in Asia. Kwan, in his time overseeing this, has seen a wide spectrum of hotel service and management.

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TRAINING MANAGER, IBIS HOTEL CHAIN

at, they didn't wash the sheets. They just washed the sheets in the swimming pool," Kwan said. "Then you go into the big, international firms and they have a lot of expatriate managers — guys with French cuffs and cufflinks. But there you have a gap too because they are sitting in offices, not really understanding how to run a business in China. And you have all the grey in between."

"The hardware is superior to anything you'll see, the level of luxury, for example," Kwan said. "The software is where it can fall apart, or not."

Kwan, who first started travelling to China more than five years ago as a Vancouver-based Intrawest executive, said he has hired some Chinese graduates of Les Roches, a renowned Swiss hotel management school that has a campus in Shanghai. "More and more local Chinese are getting trained over-

seas or working with a large chain and then moving into other areas," he said.

"We need people who know the Chinese market, but who have a better understanding of other cultures and languages," said Evy Meng, a Beijing-based training manager for Ibis Hotel, an economy chain that is part of Accor, the giant French hotel group which aims to open 50 hotels, more than 10,000 rooms, in Asia this year. "This kind of person is difficult to find, but more and more people are coming back [to China] from schools and hotels overseas.

Chu's CIBT works closely with the educational arm of the American Hotel Lodging Association, distributing its materials, teaching its programs, certifying and placing graduates in China with member chains, including names like Marriott Hotels, Hilton, Hyatt Hotels and Resorts, Holiday Inn, Westin Hotels and Resorts and the Shangri-La.

Most of these have their own internal training divisions, but the hyper pace of growth means there is room for the AHLA programs to serve as, at least, a solid first step, Chu said.

Ian Wilson, regional vice-president for Fairmont Hotels & Resorts in Asia, said that in gearing up to open the chain's Yangcheng Lake property near Shanghai, the hotel received some 12,000 applications, interviewed 3,000 candidates and offered about 400 positions. With a new hotel in Beijing and the renovation of an iconic one in Shanghai both on the near horizon, Singapore-based Wilson said that "if you are a P.R.C. [People's Republic of China] native and you have worked overseas and gained experience in a five-star hotel, the world is your oyster."

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