

Foreign Workers' Cultural Adaptation in Japanese Traditional Service Culture: A Ryokan Pilot Study

Jaehyun CHOI

Tokai University, 4-1-1 Kitakaname, Hiratsuka City, Kanagawa Prefecture, 259-1292, Japan

Abstract

In recent years, Japan's tourism and service industries have faced a severe labor shortage, leading to the active promotion of foreign worker employment. In hospitality, especially in ryokan, service quality is closely tied to Japan's cultural expectations and Japanese-style service, which foreign workers may find difficult to understand and embody. This study examines the current situation and challenges of foreign workers in Japan's tourism industry, focusing on their cultural adaptation and its relationship with service quality. Based on preliminary interviews with managers and foreign staff at ryokan, several issues emerged, including linguistic and cultural barriers, insufficient structured training, and reliance on dispatch agencies. The findings indicate that, although foreign workers gradually adapt to Japanese-style service through on-the-job experience, the lack of systematic support and intercultural education remains a major obstacle to consistent service quality. At the same time, the participation of culturally diverse staff creates opportunities to reconsider the essential value of Japanese hospitality. Given the small-scale and exploratory nature of this study and the absence of direct customer data, its implications are preliminary and should be interpreted with caution, but it offers an initial step toward understanding how cultural adaptation mediates service quality in Japanese hospitality.

Key words: Japanese-style Service, Foreign Workers, Service Quality, Ryokan

1 Introduction

In Japan's tourism and service industries, chronic labor shortages have persisted for many years. In response, the employment of foreign workers has expanded rapidly in recent years. Within this context, ryokan serve not only as lodging facilities but also as distinctive cultural spaces in which guests can experience Japanese culture through service.

In previous discussions, the importance of enhancing experiential value in high value-added tourism has been emphasized; however, little is known about how foreign employees adapt to the culturally embedded service

norms required in ryokan operations. This gap is particularly important because Japanese-style service relies heavily on tacit knowledge, high-context communication, and refined nonverbal behavior, and is therefore not easily reproduced by workers with different cultural backgrounds.

To address this research gap, this study examines how foreign staff interpret and adapt to customers' expectations regarding Japanese-style service, and how such adaptation processes affect perceived service quality. Based on this aim, the study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do foreign employees understand Japanese-style service in the context of ryokan?

RQ2: What kinds of challenges do foreign employees face in the processes of linguistic, cultural, and nonverbal communication?

RQ3: How are these adaptation processes related to perceived service quality in ryokan operations?

Given the limited scale and exploratory nature of the present research, this study is positioned as a pilot study that aims to test the feasibility of the research design and to generate preliminary insights rather than generalizable conclusions.

In this study, the term Japanese-style service refers to a distinctive service culture that has developed in Japan over time and is exemplified in particular by ryokan. It is characterized by discreet yet attentive hospitality, expressed through subtle behavioral nuances and polished language use. Such service emphasizes empathy, anticipation, and interpersonal harmony, and enacts the spirit of sincere and considerate care (*Omotenashi*) toward guests, often embodied by kimono-clad hosts such as *Okami* (female managers) and *Nakai* (attendants).

2 Literature Review

2.1 Foreign Labor Studies and Service Quality Frameworks

Previous studies on foreign labor in Japan can be classified into four main categories.

First, studies on policy and institutional frameworks focus on the legal and systemic aspects of foreign labor acceptance (Yamada, 2019; Miyamoto, 2017; Fuji Research Institute, 2019). Second, research on working environments and treatment analyzes the actual employment conditions and living realities of foreign workers (Small and Medium Enterprise Diagnosis Association, 2019; Takeuchi, 2017). Third, studies on social coexistence and education address multicultural understanding and initiatives toward coexistence

(Korekawa, 2020–2022; Iwamoto et al., 2020; Nagasaka, 2022; Sakamoto, 2020). Finally, studies on foreign workers in the tourism and hospitality sector (Yoshida, 2019; Japan Tourism Agency, 2022) focus on their employment and adaptation to service industries.

Despite this body of work, the relationship between foreign workers' cultural adaptation and service quality has not been sufficiently explored. To construct a theoretical foundation, this study draws on Donthu and Yoo (1998), which emphasize the link between cultural dimensions, customer satisfaction, and service quality evaluation.

In addition to these studies that connect cultural factors and service evaluation, another key theoretical framework is the Service Quality Gap Model proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985). This model posits that perceived service quality is determined by the discrepancy between customers' expectations and their actual service experiences. When perceived performance exceeds expectations, satisfaction occurs; when it falls short, dissatisfaction arises. The model delineates five key gaps contributing to this discrepancy: the knowledge gap (between management perceptions and customer expectations), policy gap (between managerial understanding and service standards), delivery gap (between service specifications and actual delivery), communication gap (between delivered experience and what is communicated to customers), and customer gap (between expectations and perceived outcomes).

While the Gap Model identifies five types of service discrepancies, this study conceptually focuses on the delivery gap (the discrepancy between service specifications and actual delivery) and, at a theoretical level, on the customer gap (the discrepancy between customer expectations and perceived outcomes). Because the present pilot study does not collect customer-side data, the customer gap is discussed only as a hypothetical implication rather than an empirically evaluated construct. These gaps signify a mismatch between prescribed service standards and actual service delivery, and the

linguistic and cultural adaptation of foreign employees is considered to directly influence these gaps.

In the context of ryokan operations, the Gap Model serves as a useful analytical framework for identifying discrepancies in service perception and delivery among management, staff, and guests. It helps clarify misalignments between organizational intentions, employee behaviors, and customer evaluations, thereby offering insights into service improvement in multicultural workplaces.

Complementing this perspective, the Kano Model (1984) provides a framework for classifying service attributes according to their influence on customer satisfaction. Particularly relevant to hospitality settings is the concept of must-be quality, basic expectations such as politeness, smooth communication, and attentiveness that customers naturally assume. In the ryokan context, these qualities may include elements of *Wa* (Japanese hospitality or atmosphere of harmony and emotional alignment between host and guest) or traditional aesthetics associated with authenticity. Although their absence triggers strong dissatisfaction, their presence alone does not necessarily enhance satisfaction.

Together, the Gap Model and the Kano Model provide complementary perspectives for analyzing both service deficiencies and the attributes that contribute to customer satisfaction.

Thus, as demonstrated in the Gap Model and the Kano Model, these existing frameworks provide important theoretical foundations for understanding how services delivered by foreign workers and their cultural adaptation influence customers' expected value. In particular, this study focuses on the delivery gap, as well as on must-be quality attributes such as politeness, smooth communication, and attentiveness in ryokan settings.

Based on these frameworks, this study explores the challenges faced by foreign staff in reproducing Japanese-style service through empirical observation.

2.2 Japanese-Style Service and Cultural Expectations

in Ryokan Operations

Japanese-style service, commonly referred to as *Omotenashi*, has attracted increasing scholarly attention within the lodging industry. *Omotenashi* is typically characterized as a form of warm and courteous reception grounded in Japanese culture and etiquette. Prior literature identifies several defining features of this practice, including attitudes rooted in traditional cultural norms, an ability to discern guests' implicit needs, a stance that fosters a sense of unity between host and guest, and the provision of service in a natural and unobtrusive manner. These elements are cited as core components of service quality from the customer's perspective, particularly in traditional ryokan.

From a communication standpoint, Japanese-style service is often situated within what Hall (1977) conceptualizes as a high-context culture, in which much of the communicative meaning is conveyed implicitly through situational cues rather than explicit verbal articulation. In ryokan settings, this cultural tendency manifests through refined nonverbal behaviors, such as the angle of a bow, posture, the timing and sequencing of movements, silence, and the management of interpersonal distance. Alongside formal and polite speech patterns, these behaviors substantially shape guests' perceptions of staff sincerity, attentiveness, and overall quality of service. Consequently, the communicative competence required of ryokan employees extends beyond linguistic accuracy to include sensitivity to nonverbal and affective dimensions of interaction.

Research on *Omotenashi* further highlights the critical role of tacit knowledge accumulated through practice. For example, service providers often learn, through experience, to anticipate guests' needs even in the absence of explicit requests and to adjust their behavior in accordance with the atmosphere of the moment. Moreover, studies of foreign visitors' experiences in Japan suggest that *Omotenashi* is perceived as a distinctive form of hospitality that combines personalized attention with

deep respect and consideration.

Taken together, these insights indicate that Japanese-style service in ryokan functions as a culturally embedded practice in which linguistic, nonverbal, and symbolic competencies intersect. For foreign employees, the challenge lies not only in acquiring procedural knowledge or basic language skills but also in developing the ability to interpret and respond appropriately to the implicit expectations shaped by this cultural context. This theoretical perspective provides an essential foundation for interpreting the adaptive processes and service behaviors examined in the empirical sections of this study.

These cultural expectations shape the context within which foreign employees must perform their service duties and therefore constitute the foundation for the empirical analysis presented in the following chapter.

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual framework introduced in the previous section, illustrating how linguistic, nonverbal, and cultural adaptation may influence service delivery.

Furthermore, because this pilot study does not collect customer-side data, the customer gap is addressed only as a theoretical implication and is not empirically evaluated.

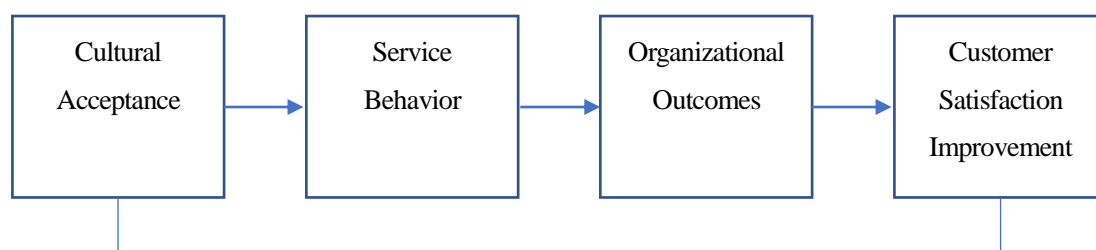


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3 Methodology

A preliminary qualitative investigation was conducted at two long-established ryokans in Kyushu in September 2025. The participants included three Japanese managers and three foreign staff members who were directly involved in guest-facing service operations. The two ryokans were selected based on their traditional service style, active employment of foreign staff, and willingness to participate in on-site research.

During the fieldwork, the author also stayed at the ryokan as a guest and observed day-to-day service interactions in guest and public areas. These observational insights were used to complement and contextualize the interview data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers and employees to elicit a wide range of insights through interactive dialogue. Each interview lasted multiple hours and was conducted in Japanese. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The

interviews were conducted in private rooms within the ryokan premises to ensure a quiet and confidential setting. An interview guide was used to structure the conversations while allowing sufficient flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences.

The interview guide covered four main topics: (1) participants' understanding of Japanese-style service, (2) linguistic and nonverbal communication challenges in daily work, (3) experiences with training and organizational support, and (4) perceived impacts of foreign staff on service delivery. Follow-up questions were asked to probe for concrete episodes and reflections. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their voluntary participation, and oral informed consent was obtained. Personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

The interview data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. First, the author repeatedly reviewed all transcripts to obtain an overall understanding of the

content. Next, initial codes were generated inductively, focusing on recurring patterns related to cultural adaptation, communication, training, and perceived service quality. These codes were then grouped into broader categories through constant comparison, forming the basis for the themes presented in the Findings section. Given the exploratory nature of this pilot study and the small number of participants, the analysis aimed to identify emerging patterns rather than produce generalizable claims. At this stage, the purpose is to examine the feasibility of the research design, interview structure, and analytical framework. Future research will involve a broader range of accommodation facilities and participants to enhance the validity and generalizability of the results. In short, the findings reported here are exploratory and serve to inform the subsequent development of a full-scale study.

4 Cultural and Communicative Challenges Faced by Foreign Workers in Japanese Traditional Hospitality

This chapter presents the key findings derived from the interview and observational data collected at the two ryokans included in this study. The results address the three research questions by illustrating, (1) how foreign employees understand Japanese-style service, (2) what kinds of linguistic and cultural challenges they encounter, and (3) how these adaptation processes are related to perceived service quality. In doing so, the chapter highlights differences in employee composition, task allocation, training practices, and service outcomes, with particular attention to the roles and experiences of foreign employees.

The investigation revealed that foreign employees frequently mentioned linguistic difficulties and distinctive features of Japanese communication, including the complexity of honorific language, implicit expectations, and situational awareness.

Managers reported that foreign staff members have not caused any particular troubles or problems, and that they

sometimes provide positive stimulation to Japanese staff, leading to generally favorable evaluations. However, with respect to training and education, several concerns were noted, such as the absence of formal training programs, resulting in a heavy reliance on individual observation for learning, and the view that although 'foreign employees improve quickly, their learning is significantly influenced by the coworkers with whom they are assigned', due to the lack of a systematic training structure.

Overall, the findings indicate a high dependence on temporary agency workers and point to the absence of structured employment and training systems. These structural issues are suggested to affect both the pace and consistency of cultural adaptation among foreign employees.

4.1 Employment and Workforce Composition

In both cases, a meaningful number of foreign workers were employed within the overall workforce, although the scale was limited. In Case A, 10 out of 85 employees (approximately 12 percent) were foreign nationals, originating from Korea, Vietnam, Myanmar, and China. In Case B, 7 out of 180 employees (approximately 4 percent) were foreign nationals, primarily from Korea and Thailand.

Notable differences were also observed in recruitment pathways. Case A relied largely on staffing agencies to secure temporary personnel, whereas Case B tended to directly hire individuals who had previously completed its internship program. These contrasting employment structures illustrate the diversity of recruitment strategies within the Japanese hospitality industry and reflect differing managerial approaches to incorporating foreign labor into traditional service environments.

4.2 Work Responsibilities and Language Adaptation

Foreign employees were predominantly assigned to customer-facing positions such as guestroom service,

meal delivery, and front desk operations. However, work assignments varied according to each individual's linguistic proficiency and level of cultural understanding. Those with stronger communication skills and higher cultural adaptability were more likely to work in reception or front desk roles requiring frequent guest interaction, whereas others were placed in meal service or back-of-house duties where language demands were relatively lower.

Across both sites, linguistic adaptation emerged as a consistent challenge. The appropriate use of honorific expressions, comprehension of subtle nuances, and adjustment to regional dialects required considerable effort. Cultural adaptation was equally significant, as foreign workers needed to learn to interpret nonverbal communication and implicit social cues often taken for granted in Japanese hospitality contexts. Despite these difficulties, gradual improvement through daily interaction and peer learning was commonly observed, suggesting an incremental adaptive process supported by workplace experience.

4.3 Training and Organizational Support

Both facilities relied heavily on on-the-job training (OJT), with limited formal or structured programs available for foreign employees. New workers typically shadowed senior staff and learned through observation and repetition, supplemented by informal mentoring from experienced colleagues. The absence of systematic intercultural or language-focused training was a shared characteristic across both sites, often leaving employees to acquire necessary skills through experiential learning. Nevertheless, supportive supervisors and open communication helped mitigate these challenges. In several cases, senior staff provided individualized guidance on language use, customer interaction, and culturally specific practices, contributing to a gradual increase in service competence and cultural understanding. This informal learning environment appeared to

compensate, at least partially, for the lack of formal instruction.

4.4 Service Outcomes and Customer Perceptions

In both facilities, managers reported that no major service-related problems attributable to foreign employees had occurred. Rather, according to their internal evaluations, the presence of foreign employees exerted a positive influence on the workplace atmosphere and the flexibility of service provision. In several cases, their participation was assessed within the organization as adding diversity to the existing service style.

Regarding the delivery gap (the discrepancy between service specifications and actual delivery) and the customer gap (the discrepancy between customer expectations and perceived outcomes), which are the focus of this study, some instances of such gaps were acknowledged based on employee experiences; however, these did not necessarily develop into critical issues. Nevertheless, because these outcomes depend substantially on individual employee attributes, further investigation involving a broader range of customers will be necessary. In other words, this study did not systematically collect direct feedback from customers, nor did it include a wide variety of accommodation types. Therefore, these evaluations are preliminary and should be interpreted with caution.

Even so, the findings suggest that, when appropriately supported, multicultural employees can play a role in maintaining, and potentially enhancing, service quality within traditional Japanese hospitality settings.

5 Preliminary Discussion and Conceptual Implications

The findings suggest several factors that may influence the alignment between customer expectations and perceived service outcomes.

In the present study, this alignment can only be discussed

indirectly, based on managers' and employees' perceptions. Difficulties related to linguistic and nonverbal communication, as identified in the findings, may contribute to a delivery gap between formal service standards and actual behaviors. However, without direct data from guests, their impact on the customer gap remains a theoretical implication rather than an empirically demonstrated effect. These insights provide a conceptual foundation for interpreting the adaptive processes observed among foreign employees in this study. As customer-side data were not collected, no conclusions can be drawn regarding the customer gap. Any implications related to customer evaluations remain theoretical.

This preliminary study offers exploratory insights into the participation and adaptation of foreign workers in Japan's traditional service sector, particularly within ryokan operations. Although the sample size was limited, several tentative implications can be drawn in relation to existing studies and theoretical perspectives.

First, the findings suggest that service quality in Japanese-style service may be deeply embedded in cultural communication and values. As noted by Parasuraman et al. (1985), service quality depends not only on objective performance but also on the degree of alignment between customer expectations and perceived outcomes. In the ryokan context, this alignment appears to involve linguistic and cultural elements such as the use of honorifics, interpretation of unspoken cues, and understanding of hierarchical relationships. These aspects may indicate that service quality in this setting is strongly influenced by cultural communication competence, rather than procedural accuracy alone.

Second, the results seem to indicate that foreign employees acquire service-related skills mainly through experiential learning in the workplace. Both ryokans relied heavily on OJT, and formal intercultural education was limited. Such informal learning appeared to promote gradual adaptation; however, the absence of structured training could potentially lead to inconsistencies in service

delivery. Developing basic language and communication-oriented programs may therefore be beneficial for supporting more stable service performance and enhancing staff confidence.

Third, based on internal observations and indirect feedback, participants expressed generally positive views of foreign staff. This tendency appears broadly consistent with Yoshida (2019) and Japan Tourism Agency (2022), which indicate that the participation of foreign workers does not necessarily reduce customer satisfaction. However, since this study did not obtain direct customer data, this interpretation should be treated as provisional. Further empirical research, including surveys or interviews with guests, will be necessary to verify whether similar perceptions are shared among actual users. In this sense, the potential for increasing acceptance of cultural diversity in Japan's hospitality industry can only be cautiously inferred at this stage.

The findings do not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that the meaning of Japanese-style service is changing in a broader sense. As noted earlier, the data do indicate that foreign employees' adaptive behaviors, particularly in honorific usage and nonverbal timing, play a significant role in reducing the delivery gap. These results support the argument that cultural communication competence is integral to service quality formation in ryokan settings, aligning with the propositions of Parasuraman et al. (1985) and Donthu and Yoo (1998).

However, this possibility remains to be examined through more extensive data collection, including customer-based evaluations.

Overall, while the study remains exploratory, it suggests the potential importance of cultural adaptation, experiential learning, and organizational support in maintaining service quality in ryokan operations. Future research with larger samples and quantitative analysis will be essential to validate these preliminary findings and clarify the evolving relationship between foreign employees, service quality, and customer perceptions.

6 Conclusion

This pilot study offers three preliminary insights into the role of foreign employees in ryokan operations. First, cultural and linguistic competence, including the use of honorifics and sensitivity to nonverbal cues, appears to be a central component of service delivery in Japanese-style hospitality. Second, while on-the-job training supports experiential learning, the absence of structured intercultural training contributes to uneven service performance among foreign staff. Third, organizational support, particularly individualized feedback and mentoring from supervisors and experienced colleagues, is essential for mitigating these inconsistencies and reducing the delivery gap.

Through qualitative interviews and site observations, several potential issues were suggested, including linguistic and cultural barriers, the predominance of OJT, and the limited presence of systematic intercultural education. These factors appeared to influence how foreign employees internalize and reproduce the characteristics of Japanese-style service. The findings further suggested that while cultural and linguistic challenges persist, workplace learning and interpersonal communication may play key roles in supporting gradual adaptation.

Moreover, indirect observations indicated a generally positive tendency toward foreign staff, although the absence of direct customer data limits the ability to make conclusive statements. Future research incorporating customer surveys and cross-cultural comparative analysis will be essential to clarify how foreign employees influence service quality and customer satisfaction in practice.

Its primary contribution lies in identifying emerging issues and analytical perspectives regarding the coexistence of cultural diversity and Japanese-style service. As Japan's tourism industry continues to rely on foreign human resources, understanding the processes of adaptation, perception, and service quality formation will

become increasingly important. These insights are constrained by the small sample size, the focus on two ryokans, and the absence of direct guest feedback. Future research should incorporate larger and more diverse samples, systematically collect customer evaluations, and conduct comparative studies across different types of accommodation. Such studies will be necessary to validate the tentative propositions advanced here and to clarify how foreign employees' cultural adaptation shapes service quality and customer satisfaction in practice.

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