

# Hospitality Management to Welcome Foreign Guests in the Japanese Lodging Industry

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**Abstract**—This study examines the factors for attracting foreign guests in the Japanese lodging industry and discusses some measures taken for accepting foreign guests. It reviews three different accommodation providers acclaimed highly by foreign guests, Yamashiroya, Sawanoya and Fuji-Hakone Guest House, and identifies their characteristics. The common points for attracting foreign guests were: 1) making the best use of the old facilities, 2) multilingual signs, guidance and websites, 3) necessary and sufficient communication in English, 4) events and opportunities to experience Japanese culture, 5) *omotenashi*, warm and homely Japanese hospitality. These findings indicate that foreign guests' dissatisfaction level can be decreased through internationalization utilizing ICT and by offering multilingual support. On the other hand, their satisfaction level can be increased by encouraging interaction with other guests and local Japanese people, providing events and opportunities to experience Japanese culture and *omotenashi*, home-style Japanese hospitality.

**Keywords**—Hospitality management, foreign guests, Japanese lodging industry, *Omotenashi*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE number of foreign tourists visiting Japan has greatly decreased due to COVID-19. However, before COVID-19, the number was increasing sharply from over 10 million in 2013 to over 30 million in 2018 [1]. When the situation returns to normal and by the time the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics will be held in 2021, foreign tourists will start visiting Japan again and are expected to increase more than ever before. In this situation, issues for *ryokans*, Japanese-style inns, accepting foreign guests have been pointed out. Discontented foreign tourists are quoted as saying the following in regard to service and hospitality: "Had no opportunities to interact with Japanese people," "Felt like I was being ignored" and "No one told me how to eat Japanese food even when I was having difficulty" [1]. Japanese people who are not good at foreign languages usually look away from foreigners because they are shy and also because they cannot understand their language. Improvement in both language and social activeness are therefore challenging for them. In addition to this personality trait of Japanese, *ryokan*'s half-board accommodation plans, in which the breakfast and evening meal are included, keeps foreign tourists at a distance [1].

In previous studies, measures to attract foreign tourists to stay at *ryokans*, Japanese-style inns, have been presented mainly by experienced business practitioners. Examples are developing an online reservation system, multilingual support

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including English and improving web contents such as room availability management [2]. Others are: 1) free WiFi, 2) guest support through multi-language information, voice-based translation devices and chat concierge services, 3) sending information overseas through personal blogs or SNS (Social Networking Service), 4) multilingual websites with many images and photos, 5) separating lodging from meals but offering a variety of meals on the menu as a separate service and 6) including *soba*, *udon* noodles, curry and rice, ramen and sushi on the menu [3].



Fig. 1 Ryokan, Japanese-style inn

Most of the previous studies [2], [3] mainly discuss measures to reduce the foreign guests' dissatisfaction level which are different to the measures for improving their satisfaction level. This study, therefore, reviews the cases of *ryokans* and hotels which have been highly acclaimed by foreign guests and discusses the measures implemented to satisfy and impress them.

## II. ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES WITH AN ESTABLISHED REPUTATION AMONG FOREIGN GUESTS

In order to identify the factors which, satisfy and impress foreign tourists visiting Japan, three different accommodation providers highly acclaimed by foreign guests, Yamashiroya [4], Sawanoya [5] and Fuji-Hakone Guest House [6], were selected and their characteristics were analyzed.

### A. Yamashiroya

Yamashiroya is located in Yunohira Onsen in Oita prefecture, Japan. They are ranked third in the Japan accommodation facility guest satisfaction survey and ranked tenth in the top Japanese *ryokans*, Japanese-style inns, chosen by foreign guests. About 80% of their guests are the foreigners [4]. Their strengths are the *omotenashi*, Japanese hospitality, with which they pay attention to every detail, and the peace of

mind they offer by creating a comfortable environment for foreign guests. They offer homely Japanese meals to all guests and globally promote the attraction of the Japanese family-run inn. Many foreign guests also re-visit the inn to see the owner and his wife.



Fig. 2 Yamashiroya

#### Yamashiroya's First Opportunity to Accept Foreign Guests

In 2006, an article about *Yunohira Onsen*, hot spring, appeared in a Korean travel magazine when the travel company [4] covered *Beppu* and *Yufuin Onsen*, the popular hot spring places nearby. Since the photo of Yunohira's attractive stone-paved path was posted on the front page of the magazine, the number of guests from Korea increased. Furthermore, after the owner of Yamashiroya participated in road bicycle races held in Korea in 2010 and Taiwan in 2011 and advertised *Yunohira Onsen*, guests from Taiwan also increased. In 2015, when the kitchen of Yamashiroya appeared in a Hong Kong magazine, guests from Hong Kong increased.

#### Facilities at Yamashiroya

Although all the rooms are equipped with free WiFi, other facilities have been utilized in their original form. For example, the banquet hall for group customer use was changed into a restaurant equipped with tables and chairs. Free multilingual brochures about sightseeing spots in Oita prefecture are offered at their new "International Tourism Information Salon," which has been created in the common area in front of their large public bath. In this salon, English versions of popular Japanese manga comics became available as an initiative of a student from the local high school, which is the only a high school in the prefecture offering a tourism course.

#### Multilingual Support at Yamashiroya

Yamashiroya has a multi-language website available in Japanese, English, Chinese and Korean. International students from a nearby university helped translate the contents for the access map showing how to get to the inn from Hakata Port, Fukuoka International Airport and Kitakyushu. Since the nearest station, *Yunohira*, is unmanned, they offer explainer videos to show how to buy tickets and how to get on and off at the station. The videos were created with the aid of international students and English, Chinese and Korean versions are available. All guestrooms are equipped with an

internet-connected TV which enables guests to watch videos in many languages about nearby sightseeing spots as well as Japanese ryokan etiquettes, for example, about bathing, wearing *yukata*, places to take off slippers and the proper way to use the Japanese toilet.

#### Communication with Foreign Guests at Yamashiroya

Communication in English with foreign guests is limited to checking-in, explaining about bathing and meals and checking-out. The staffs can use basic English phrases necessary in the above-mentioned situations and are coping well with most foreign guests. Even in other situations, their attitude of doing their best to understand the guests enables them to handle situations well. Since they have been posting articles on Facebook both in Japanese and English to spread information globally, they are getting quite a few inquiries from overseas. They have therefore prepared a list of response examples in English, and when they cannot use any of the responses in the list, they make the best use of web translation. For most replies to inquiries from Asian countries including Korea, China, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Singapore, they understand in English.

Employees at Yamashiroya have Wednesday and Thursday off every week which helps them feel refreshed and perform better at work and this improves the guest experience. In addition, they are closed during the Japanese summer holidays as well as the year-end and New Year holidays, since this does not greatly affect the number of foreign guests staying at the inn. Based on the idea of an international student, they provide their original picture postcard and send it for the guests and also offer a yukata and Japanese umbrella lending service. These services have been very popular among foreign guests.

#### B. Sawanoya



Fig. 3 Sawanoya

Sawanoya is located in Taito-ku, Tokyo and their three-story building has 13 guestrooms with a maximum capacity of 22 guests in total. They opened in 1968 and renovated the entrance to make it more Japanese style in 2009. About 90% of their guests are foreign tourists and up until now [5], they have welcomed foreign guests from over 100 countries through-out the world. At first, there were many guests from Europe, US and Australia. In recent years, however, the number of guests from Asian countries is increasing. The inn was originally established for Japanese guests to stay and was not specially designed for foreigners. They do not provide special facilities and services specific to foreign guests. Meals are not included in the accommodation fee, but they provide a breakfast consisting of two pieces of toast and cooked eggs at an

affordable price on request. The guests can have self-serve tea and coffee as well as complementary snacks left on the table in the dining room. They hand out an English map featuring nearby restaurants to foreign guests to help them with ideas for dinner. Since it is a family-run business, reception hours are limited to 7am till 11pm, but the guests can use a telephone at the reception to contact staff even after hours or in the case of an emergency.

#### Sawanoya's First Opportunity to Accept Foreign Guests

In 1981, Sawanoya was facing a severe situation and not making any profit with their room occupancy rate between 50% and 60%. There were even three consecutive days with no guests. The owner therefore visited *Yashima Ryokan* in Shinjuku, which was actively accepting foreign guests and was quite prosperous at that time when less foreign tourists were visiting Japan. Taking this opportunity, Sawanoya started accepting foreign guests in 1982. Even though they had some difficulties, the occupancy rate increased to 64.8% in the first year, 82.2% in the second year and exceeded 90% in 1984 [6]. In order to avoid any loss due to the cancelation on the day, they made contracts with credit card companies and started setting up the futon beds in advance for smoother operation. Since their warm and homely Japanese hospitality has been acclaimed highly by foreign guests, Sawanoya has become one of the most famous inns among foreign tourists visiting Japan.

#### Facilities at Sawanoya

Sawanoya is a typical Japanese-style inn, *ryokan*, with a long history. Their rooms are traditional Japanese style with a little table on *tatami* mats and are not equipped with a TV, but they lend small flat-screen TVs on request. Since they opened, they have always offered shared bathrooms, but the style was changed from Japanese to Western as well as from unisex to sex-segregated in the process of accepting foreign guests. There are a few different types of baths and the cypress wood and porcelain bathtubs with which the guests can experience the Japanese style are the most popular. As for the shared facilities and amenities, a toaster, microwave oven, kettle, hair dryers, iron, trouser presser, detergent-free coin laundry and vending machine etc. are available.

#### Multilingual Support and Communication with Foreign Guests at Sawanoya

Sawanoya's brochure and website are available in both Japanese and English, and signs and notices in the building are written in English, Chinese and Korean. In addition, the accommodation price list, how to take a bath, how to use a bathroom and how to use a shared refrigerator etc. are written in multiple languages. For foreign guests, they offer a "Sawanoya Original English Map" showing them the area around the inn including sightseeing spots, supermarkets, convenience stores, banks, dry cleaners, public baths and antique shops. This "Sawanoya Original English Map" is a handmade map, and the contents are always kept updated. As for communication with foreign guests, they try their best to use English words and gestures, and when this does not work, they try communicating in writing.

#### Japanese Cultural Events at Sawanoya

At Sawanoya, a variety of Japanese events and festivals have been offered to foreign guests to experience the seasons of Japan. They sometimes hold cultural shows with the aid of volunteers from the neighborhood and also promote foreign guests to participate in local events and festivals. They host a small party once every three months to encourage interactions between the guests and employees.

Given that the reception hours are limited, facilities are old, rooms are traditional Japanese style, bathrooms are shared, and employees are not good at English, it cannot be said that their environment is convenient for foreign guests. However, warm and homely Japanese hospitality, *omotenashi*, overcomes these inconveniences and they wish for foreign guests to enjoy staying at a Japanese family-run *ryokan*.

#### C. Fuji-Hakone Guest House

Fuji-Hakone Guest House is a family-run inn which has a total of 14 guestrooms in their single and two-story buildings. With the owner's wish of welcoming foreigners as friends, the inn was started by extending his family house in 1984. The attractive point for foreign guests is to be able to experience Japanese lifestyle and culture with an affordable accommodation fee. All guestrooms are furnished in the traditional Japanese style with *tatami* mat flooring and Japanese style sliding doors. There is a TV in each room but no bathroom. They offer *yukata* for the guests to wear when going to bed. They provide a breakfast consisting of bread and fruit for an extra charge but do not provide any dinner. Instead, they supply information about nearby restaurants and convenience stores. Staffs lay out a *futon*, Japanese bedding mat, before the guests arrive, so they do not have to be interrupted during their stay. Staffs explain Japanese etiquette to foreign guests and tell them clearly what they are unable to assist with. There are many repeat guests and the inn's reputation has been spread by foreign guests through word of mouth, SNS and travel websites such as *Tripadvisor*.



Fig. 4 Fuji-Hakone Guest House

#### Fuji-Hakone Guest House's First Opportunity to Accept Foreign Guests

The owner of Fuji-Hakone Guest House started offering his accommodation service because he was influenced by his own

experiences overseas and his interactions with foreigners. He always wanted to help foreigners and make this his life's work. In the beginning, he started offering homestay accommodation for foreigners and acquired a variety of cross-cultural experiences. These experiences enabled him to learn that it was important not to have stereotypes about foreigners and not to force our values on them, but instead to accept their differences and to put ourselves into their shoes with flexible thinking and respect. He then opened Fuji-Hakone Guest House with the motto: Welcoming and caring for all guests as friends. Regardless of the guest's nationality, staff at the inn deal with all guests in the same way that they do with their own friends and provide full support whenever needed. The inn has gained trust through this stance and has been chosen by many people from all over the world. A homestay-like atmosphere and *omotenashi*, warm Japanese hospitality, are unconventional and quite impressive for foreign guests. As a result of cutting unnecessary services to offer more affordable accommodation fees and instead, focusing on warmth and thoughtfulness, they have won over the foreign guests' hearts. Many foreign guests have become repeat visitors and have been promoting the inn favorably throughout the world.

#### Japanese Cultural Experiences and Exchanges at Fuji-Hakone Guest House

Foreign guests can experience a variety of Japanese culture at Fuji-Hakone Guest House. There is a shared space named the International Exchange Lounge, where guests can enjoy communicating with each other regardless of their nationalities. The space is decorated with many traditional Japanese items, with which the guests cannot only feel Japanese culture but also the atmosphere of a traditional Japanese family dining room. In the lounge, staffs teach *origami* paper folding, and also local people who engage in the Japanese tea ceremony, the Japanese art of flower arrangement, traditional dance, *kendo* and *karate* give performances and lectures. The owner abides by his motto "Welcoming all guests as friends" and tries to join the guests in the lounge as much as possible. He enjoys interacting with the guests and sometimes drinking together. This has been a great opportunity for him to have a heart-to-heart talk with the guests and find out about their real needs. On the other hand, the guests often become friends with each other and visit sightseeing spots together. In some cases, they visit each other's homes after going back to their own countries. They also accept Japanese student internships and the students have breakfast together with the foreign guests to promote international exchange. The staff provides information about local festivals and traditional events not listed in guidebooks.

#### Multilingual Support at Fuji-Hakone Guest House

They hand out their original English map of the surrounding area showing sightseeing spots, restaurants, convenience stores, ATMs and bus stops etc. to foreign guests. Many of the local tourist maps only show sightseeing spots and lack important information for foreign guests, for example information about restaurants, post offices, banks and public telephones that can make international calls, so they created

their "Original English Map for Foreigners" together with local elementary school students. Regarding the inn's etiquette and rules, after they experienced issues caused by foreign guests due to cultural misunderstandings, they prepared explanations in many languages to show not only the basic rules but also how to take a bath at a Japanese hot spring, *onsen*, and how to wear a *yukata*. They provide clear information to enable the foreign guests to understand cultural differences. On the other hand, since some foreign guests do not like being naked with strangers at public baths, they have made their baths private through the use of an hourly reservation system.

#### Communication with Foreign Guests at Fuji-Hakone Guest House

Staff at Fuji-Hakone Guest House knows the minimum English words and phrases that are specifically necessary for guest service in the hospitality industry. They do not place importance on the level of English but on the intention of making guests feel welcome. Some foreign guests show great interest in Japanese history and culture as well as local tourist attractions and ask detailed questions. They therefore try to acquire sufficient knowledge in regard to the topics that are assumed to be of interest to foreign guests and prepare answers in English in advance. Foreign guests usually do not expect perfect answers. Their philosophy is that as long as they try their best to make themselves understood, their feelings will be conveyed to the guests.

At Fuji-Hakone Guest House, the *futons* are laid out with the top against the wall in the same way as western beds. Also, for the foreign guests who do not like drinking tap water, there is always water offered in a jug in the lounge. Staff always grasps foreign guests' concerns and needs and makes it their top priority to remove inconvenience and dissatisfaction. They ease anxious feelings of foreign guests who come from different countries by welcoming them as friends and offer a sense of security. They also make the best efforts to avoid guest complaints caused by cultural misunderstandings.

### III. CONCLUSION

This study reviewed three different accommodation providers acclaimed highly by foreign guests, Yamashiroya, Sawanoya and Fuji-Hakone Guest House, and identified their characteristics. The case analysis showed that the common points for attracting foreign guests were: 1) making the best use of the old facilities, 2) multilingual signs, guidance and websites, 3) basic communication in English necessary for guest service in the hospitality industry, 4) events and opportunities to experience Japanese culture, 5) *omotenashi*, warm and homely Japanese hospitality. These findings indicate that it is important to reduce dissatisfaction through internationalization utilizing ICT and by offering multilingual support. On the other hand, the satisfaction level can be increased by each inn offering foreign guests' unique opportunities to experience Japan. This can be implemented by promoting interaction with other guests as well as with local Japanese people, offering events and opportunities to experience Japanese culture and providing *omotenashi*, homely

Japanese hospitality. This study also indicated that the courage and determination to start accepting foreign guests could be a factor that plays an important role. In order to suggest specific measures to other accommodation service providers, further in-depth research should be undertaken.

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