



From Emotional Apprenticeship to Policy Critique: Rethinking Omotenashi through the Perspective of Okami's in Japanese Ryokan Culture

Peemmaphat Buarapha*

**Faculty of Business Administration, Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology, Bangkok, Thailand*

*Corresponding Author. E-mail address: peemmaphat@tni.ac.th

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Abstract

This paper re-evaluates omotenashi in the context of human resource development (HRD) in Japanese traditional ryokan (inns), particularly the role of okami (the female proprietress) as a cultural and affective mentor. Based on a systematic review of 8 Japanese and international academic papers published between 2010 and 2024, along with three grey literatures, this paper utilizes the framework of PCC to explore how omotenashi is cultivated informally through training, observation, and affective labor.

The analysis reveals a tension between long-established emotional apprenticing and developing standardized training initiatives driven by national policy. Despite okami-focused training that is characterized by tacit knowledge, trust-based learning, and situational awareness, recent measures institutionalize behavior rubrics or certification kits. This paper adds to the literature on human resource practices in context by arguing that the attempt to formalize omotenashi risks depleting its authenticity and relational underpinnings.

Keywords: Emotional apprenticeship, Omotenashi, Okami, Policy standardization, Ryokan hospitality

I. INTRODUCTION

Japanese onsen ryokan, the country's traditional hot spring inns, serve as more than just a place to relax. They serve as adaptable organizations for cultural legacy, emotional work and knowledge dissemination. At the center of these establishments stands the figure of the Okami (女将), the female owner who embodies both symbolic protector of tradition and practical developers of human capital (Kumamoto Prefecture Branch of the Japan Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultants Association, 2008; Morishita, 2016). By being there, staff are not only being coached in how to serve guests. Instead, they are taught to embody the ethos of omotenashi, an intuitive, empathetic approach to hospitality that is an integral aspect of Japanese tradition (Kanai, 2008; Takahashi, 2009). While omotenashi is available in numerous service contexts in Japan, the ryokan represents the most established and symbolically pure environment in which this tradition manifests, through everyday practice, intergenerational guidance, and emotional training (Takahashi, 2009; Morishita, 2021).

Although omotenashi has elicited attention worldwide as a reflection on Japanese service culture, the literature to date has predominantly focused on its impact on customer experience or on promoting the nation's tourism brand (Peippo, 2023; Zhu, 2016). Relatively few studies have considered how omotenashi is cultivated and maintained in an organization, particularly from a human resource management point of view. This discrepancy is noteworthy especially in view of the recent establishment of a system of training programs and service certification system intended to corporatize omotenashi (Japan Hospitality Movement Association [JHMA], n.d.; Omotenashi Japanese Service Quality, n.d.; Otaru Omotenashi Certification, n.d.). Academics are worried that institutionalization may reduce the emotional authentic nature of the practice (Fujita &

Kaseda, 2022; Miki, Takeshima, Kida, & Kakigi, 2022; Nobukawa, 2023; Peippo, 2023).

This paper fills in that gap by considering the okami as a living repository of cultural knowledge and emotional mentoring. It suggests that the human resource development model utilized in numerous onsen ryokan represents a type of "emotional apprenticeship", an uncoded, relational enterprise based on a regime of observing, receiving feedback to fine-tuning and the embodied, instinctual knowing acquired from repeated learning-by-doing as opposed to formal training manuals (Nobukawa, 2023; Ohno, 2016). Employing case studies, field reports and policy documents, this article explores how the Okami inducts staff in not just how to fulfil service standards but in how to embed values, interpret the unspoken needs of guests and to deploy discretion in emotionally complex work.

Moreover, the paper grounds this analysis in a wider set of policy and cultural factors. As omotenashi is laboriously incorporated into formal, centered branding and human resource systems of tourism in Japan, conflicts emerge between the top-down, centralized expectations and the localized, highly flexible and necessary practices upheld by Okami and regional groupings, such as Okami no Kai (Morishita, 2016; Nobukawa, 2023). By examining this contradiction and suggesting a hybrid model that acknowledges the emotional while being responsive to policy imperatives, this article adds a cultural and applied lens to human resource development theory and hospitality research. Specifically, this paper aims to:

1. Explore the transmission and internalization of omotenashi by means of affective apprenticeship in traditional Japanese ryokan, where the figure of the Okami stands as a cultural and affective mentor.
2. Consider the differences between the conventional patterns of omotenashi training and new standardized programs encouraged by national policy.



3. Analyze the impact of policy formalization on the integrity of omotenashi as a relationship and cultural sustainability.

4. Present a model of the Emotional Apprenticeship HRD that combines tacit learning and policy awareness

II. LITERATURE REVIEWS

A. *Omotenashi as Cultural Performance*

1) *Definitions and Roots of Omotenashi*: Translating “Omotenashi” literary as “Japanese hospitality,” can be misleading. The concept of “omotenashi” reflects a value-system of sincerity (makoto), humility and the ability to anticipate the needs of others without necessarily needing something in return. Historically, omotenashi has been linked to culture: the ritual of the tea ceremony (sadou), for instance, in which every gesture is meticulously choreographed to provide guest comfort and respect. More deeply, omotenashi are also derived from the bushidou ethics, seasonal sensitivity (shun-kibun), and the ‘non-verbal care’ spirit and ethos of Japan, which constitute the spiritual base of Japanese service interactions (Setogawa, 2013). These are the kinds of values that are reflects in the ‘visible side’ and the ‘hidden side’ of the service culture in ryokan ‘providing a hidden service at the same time the visible service’ (ura-no-omotenashi) involving service as concealing effort (Al-alsheikh, 2014; Takahashi, 2009)

Unlike the low-context Western types which emphasize verbal communication and standardized procedures, hospitality in omotenashi functions in a high-context mode which is populated by non-verbal nuance, perception and caring (Zhu, 2016). According to Nonaka and Konno (1998) the space common that serves as the basis of a shared emotional and situational space and the fluid cognition between host and guest is called ba (場). This space or ba comprises omotenashi as a unique service logic.

The definition and application of omotenashi have transformed over centuries. In modern international travel and business travel, the concept of service is mostly viewed in commercial or performance terms. Academics point out that omotenashi has been repackaged into a tool in the marketing of national soft power, void of moral/relational dimensions (Peippo, 2023; Zhu, 2016). With this transition, omoiari (empathetic concern) and yasashisa (gentleness) are now linked to idealized service personas, thereby reducing omotenashi into a scripted emotional labor, rather than collective social understanding (Takahashi, 2022).

Moreover, while the traditional form of omotenashi was practiced naturally, based on experience, trust, and long-term relationships, the modern version tends to be performed in one-off situations, where staff are instructed to act empathetically according to a script given by the organization. This has serious effects on the sense of realness and emotional honesty in service work. The gradual move to turn omotenashi into a fixed standard may lead to a conflict between its cultural roots and how it is now being used as a formal rule in hospitality today (Fujita & Kaseda, 2022; Peippo, 2023; Wharton, 2009).

2) *Tourism Branding and Service Identity*: Recent discourses about omotenashi tend to connect it to national image of Japan and to constitute omotenashi to a competitive advantage in global tourism (Peippo, 2023; Zhu, 2016). This identity has been institutionalized by government agencies like the Japan Tourism Agency and certification through formal training, with omotenashi as a keyword in national branding (Japan National Tourism Organization [JNTO], n.d.). Such frameworks largely focus on guest experience and the uniformity of service and have decontextualized omotenashi as a prefabricated product rather than a working practice.

B. Omission of HR and Learning Dimensions

1) Neglected Human Resource Development Perspective:

Omotenashi is found in many tourism studies but there are few studies on omotenashi from the perspective of human resource development. Studies are predominantly centered on guest satisfaction, as well as hospitality marketing, or cultural symbolism and have significantly neglected investigating how practices are translated in an organization. This reflects a lack of conceptual depth: omotenashi is treated as self-evident performance rather than something that is taught or learned. Nobukawa (2023) and Miki et al. (2022) described that there are limited studies of how omotenashi can be inculcated in employer staff, developed organizational values or nurtured emotional competency.

2) Emotional Labor Without Learning Agency:

Hospitality emotion work as artistic labor although the literature on emotional labor in hospitality, stemming from Hochschild's seminal analysis, usually portrays workers as subjects who produce feelings – in the service of organizationally-imposed "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1984; Takahashi, 2009). Yet, this framing tends to overlook the experiential learning of emotional labor in the traditional Japanese context where workers do not just engage in acting emotional labor, but acquire emotional competency through guided exposure, reflection, and storytelling (Fujita & Kaseda, 2022; Taira, 2020). This gap emphasizes the importance of HR models that recognize the staff as 'learners', not only performers.

C. The Okami as Embodied HR Developer

1) Emotion-Based Learning and Situated Intuition:

Although emotion in hospitality literature is typically positioned as labor: something to be regulated, performed, or suppressed, recent scholarship in affective pedagogy argues that emotion is also a valuable form of learning.

In Hawkins (2017) theory of Emotion-Based Learning (EBL), she challenges the cognitive-dominant view of education by asserting that feelings are not distractions from learning, but the very lens through which meaning is made. These feelings allow the possibility of reflection and what she terms "learning triggers," prompting people to reconsider established practices, relate experiences to one another, and reflect on deeper understanding.

Similarly, Blair (2017) provides a neurobiological account that suggests that emotion-based learning mechanisms drive moral reasoning. The result is gradual learning by individuals through exposure to emotional feedback, as these people get to understand themselves which behaviors lead to good or bad results, even if the rules are less than transparent. These findings suggest that emotional learning does not involve memorizing reactions, but about attuning: learning how to interpret, react, and modulate behavior in context-specific manners.

Taking together, these structures provide a powerful means of seeing how omotenashi is trained in the ryokan. Emotional learning here is being-in-place, being-relation, and being-intuitive. Staff do not learn how to serve residents from training manuals or cognitive scripts but by observation, participation, and emotional resonance with the Okami and guests in their midst. Things like discomfort, empathy and pride are voices we hear inside that direct behavior long before they are ever put into words. This also sheds light on why omotenashi is, in fact, described by practitioners as something "felt," "absorbed," or "grown into" rather than trained, confirming its parallel with affective learning models.

2) Beyond Manuals and SOPs: The theoretical framework of emotion-based learning explains how hospitality cannot be trained through standardized instructional formats but must be learned through immersive, emotionally complex experiences. In the context of the ryokan, this is most dramatically seen in the actions of the okami. Instead of checklists or



instructions, they are the site of embodied learning across proximity, affect, and location.

There are several cases and reports from the field showing that omotenashi ryokan training is conceivably unmanageable. Okami don't often rely on training manuals. Instead, they develop immersive contexts in which junior employees watch, copy and absorb practices, often through implicit cues (Nobukawa, 2023; Ohno, 2018). Interview evidence in local leaders and associations like Okami no Kai indicate a suspicion of SOP-style training as well, claiming that leading omotenashi would involve knowledge of context-specific discretion and emotional sensitivity (Kumamoto Prefecture Branch of the Japan Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultants Association, 2008; Morishita, 2016).

These informal, relational training processes undermine the logic of traditional hospitality training and point to something more tacit, intuitive, and context-driven at play. To more easily grasp this alternative form of skill transmission, the next section is informed by situated learning and tacit knowledge transfer theories to position the okami as a dynamic of emotional apprenticeship.

3) Tacit Transmission and Emotional Apprenticeship: The informal process of learning works (Lave and Wenger, 1991) situated learning theory and Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) knowledge conversion model. So unarticulated knowledge is transferred by form of direct participation and interaction within the particular context, and not from explicit teaching. The Okami forms an emotional guidance to impart its lesson not by providing evaluation but through storytelling and experiencing together (Taira, 2020). These practices are the cornerstone of a human resource development system grounded in emotional apprenticeship, trust, and learning about relationships.

D. Omotenashi Certification System

As attention from foreign tourists increased, the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry

established the Omotenashi Standard Certification System as of 2025, which initially ranked in the following three levels: 金 (Gold), 紺 (Navy), and 紫 (Purple), expanding through subsequent revisions, most recently in 2022 (JHMA, n.d.).

The system was built to "visualize" service quality with standards based on ISO 23592 for 30 items like leadership, customer engagement, job autonomy, and emotional resonance. Assessment instruments include structured behavioral checklists, employee attitude measures, and scenario-based testing designed to be used as a benchmark for "excellent service." While such tools afford measurable consistency and national branding, they also signify an attempt to standardize from above what has hitherto been an experientially specific and relational process.

This process of formalization, documents from Shibuya's (2024) materials which were made accessible through the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology's website, translates an affect-based, tacit socio-ethical ethos of omotenashi into an administratively responsible product. While it may be beneficial in relation to marketability, quality control, and cross-industry comparison, some scholars (e.g., Fujita and Kaseda 2022; Yokoyama 2023) also express concerns. They posited that an overemphasis on institutionalized indices threatens to undermine the intuitive, reflective, and situational integrity of authentic omotenashi in practice.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A Toward a Hybrid Understanding of HRD in Japanese Ryokan

1) Soft Knowledge and Emotional Learning in Hospitality: The service culture of Japanese ryokan is not maintained by formal education but rather emotionally driven education that relies upon tacit knowledge, affective intuition and personal mentorship. This is

characteristic of emotional apprenticeship, where new employees gain knowledge through observation, imitation, and reflection rather than explicit teaching. Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory can clarify this: Learning takes place in the social structure of the workplace, not in isolation as instruction, but as "legitimate peripheral participation". Here, junior staff learn to fully participate through observing the okami system, internalizing the unspoken game rules and adapting through experiential learning. For example, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) knowledge conversion model, and in particular the socialization and internalization process, provides an understanding of how omotenashi values can be embedded in settings where codification is impractical or unwelcome. Instead of the passing on of explicit knowledge, ryokan workers internalize skills through the medium of shared experiences, storytelling, and affectively rich feedback. The Okami, in this way, serves as a conduct of cultural memory and as a guide through emotional literacy.

2) Institutional Pressures and the Risk of Over-Formalization: This emotionally engaged model has continued to keep traditional ryokan service vibrant for the longest time, though recent institutionalization threatens to oversimplify it into service formulas and checklists. For example, state-inspired programs in Japan led by the Japan Tourism Agency seek to diffuse omotenashi as a standard element in service by way of formal certifications, service appraisals, and mode of training that emphasize standardization and replicability (JNTO, n.d.). The top-down approach that such a response necessarily implies may serve to grow Japan's global service brand, but it also threatens to disrupt the sentimentally authentic and contextually bounded informal learning structures that an unspoken omotenashi structure provides.

From a human resource development perspective, this dichotomy creates a tension between two logics,

one of relational knowledge, community-created mentorship, and lived experience, the other of bureaucratic control, national branding, and technical rationality. If omotenashi is to remain more than an empty cultural token in tourism, HR strategies must navigate these contradictory imperatives.

A hybrid model of human resource development named 'emotional apprenticeship' is presented in this paper, with affective learning and structural awareness as integral components. The model is not hostile to formalization. It does, however, maintain the cultural heart of omotenashi by organizing around four pedagogical principles of emotional apprenticeship in the ryokan context, derived from theory and field observations:

- *Mentorship over Manuals:* Training focuses on relationship-embodied learning, as opposed to using scripts and directions (Morishita, 2016; Ohno, 2016).
- *Tacit-to-Experiential Learning:* Learning through absorption, intuition, and silent observation, which involves Nonaka & Takeuchi's (1995) tacit knowledge transfer and Lave & Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory.
- *Feedback through Narrative:* Instruction is frequently in the form of emotion-based stories, corrective feedback, and moral reflection, not in a rubric-based evaluation (Taira, 2020; Yokoyama, 2023).
- *Community-Based Knowledge Networks:* Knowledge is supported and developed in peer-centric social groups like the okami no kai, natural learning communities, and the guardians of cultural traditions (Morishita, 2021).

This model, presented in Figure 1 responds to the requirements of the current tourist industry in a culturally coherent way. It does not treat HRD as just a technical strategic tool, but as a regular and emotional journey in which tradition and flexibility intertwine.

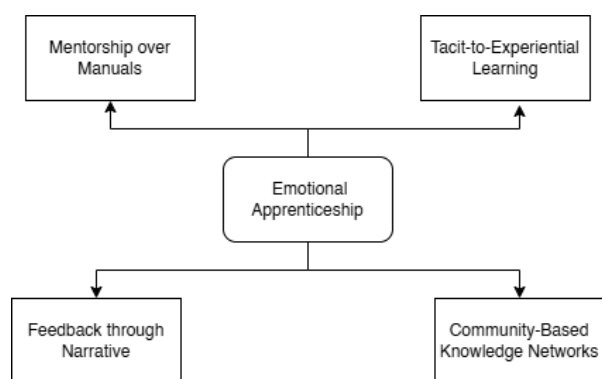


Figure 1: Emotional apprenticeship HRD model

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic review methodology to investigate how *omotenashi*—a culturally embedded concept of hospitality in Japan—is transmitted, taught, or developed within *ryokan* (Japanese-style inns), particularly through the role of the *Okami* (the female proprietress or manager).

The review is guided by the PCC framework, which is widely used in scoping reviews and qualitative synthesis to help define the boundaries and direction of inquiry. The three elements of PCC are:

- 1) *Population*: Service staff and *okami* in the Japanese *ryokan* industry.
- 2) *Concept*: Development of *omotenashi* through training, education, emotional apprenticeship, and informal learning.
- 3) *Context*: Traditional *ryokan*, Japanese hospitality culture, and service settings influenced by *omotenashi*.

A. Literature Search Strategy

A search for literature in three languages, which are, Japanese, English, and Thai, was performed using academic databases and grey literature. The primary databases used were; Japanese: CiNii Articles, J-STAGE, English: Google Scholar, Scopus, DOAJ, SSRN, Thai: ThaiJO, TCI and Grey Literature: Ministry reports, tourism association publications, JNTO and regional *okami* association archives (when accessible).

The search was constructed using Boolean operators to enhance relevance and accuracy. Sample English-language search terms included:

("omotenashi") AND ("ryokan" OR "Japanese inn")
AND ("training" OR "apprenticeship" OR "education")
AND ("okami" OR "female manager")

Corresponding search strings were prepared in Japanese and Thai.

B. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

For relevance and consistency, the following inclusion criteria were used:

1. Explicit mention of *omotenashi* in relation to service/hospitality
2. Focus on *ryokan* or Japanese-style accommodation directly mentioned or alluded to regarding honorable mention: *ryokan* or Japanese traditional-style accommodation mentioned in passing or in comments about other topics
3. Education, training, mentoring, or Human Resource Development related to *omotenashi*.
4. Published from 2010 to 2024.
5. Journal article, conference paper, research paper, other academic writing, or official policy/guideline document.

C. Screening and Selection Process

Literature selection was performed based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol, which is composed of four stages: Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion. Eight studies were identified for synthesis. From the 45 records after duplicates were removed, relevance was screened, and eligibility was assessed. Likewise, three grey literature were identified for synthesis from 15 sources as shown in figure 2.

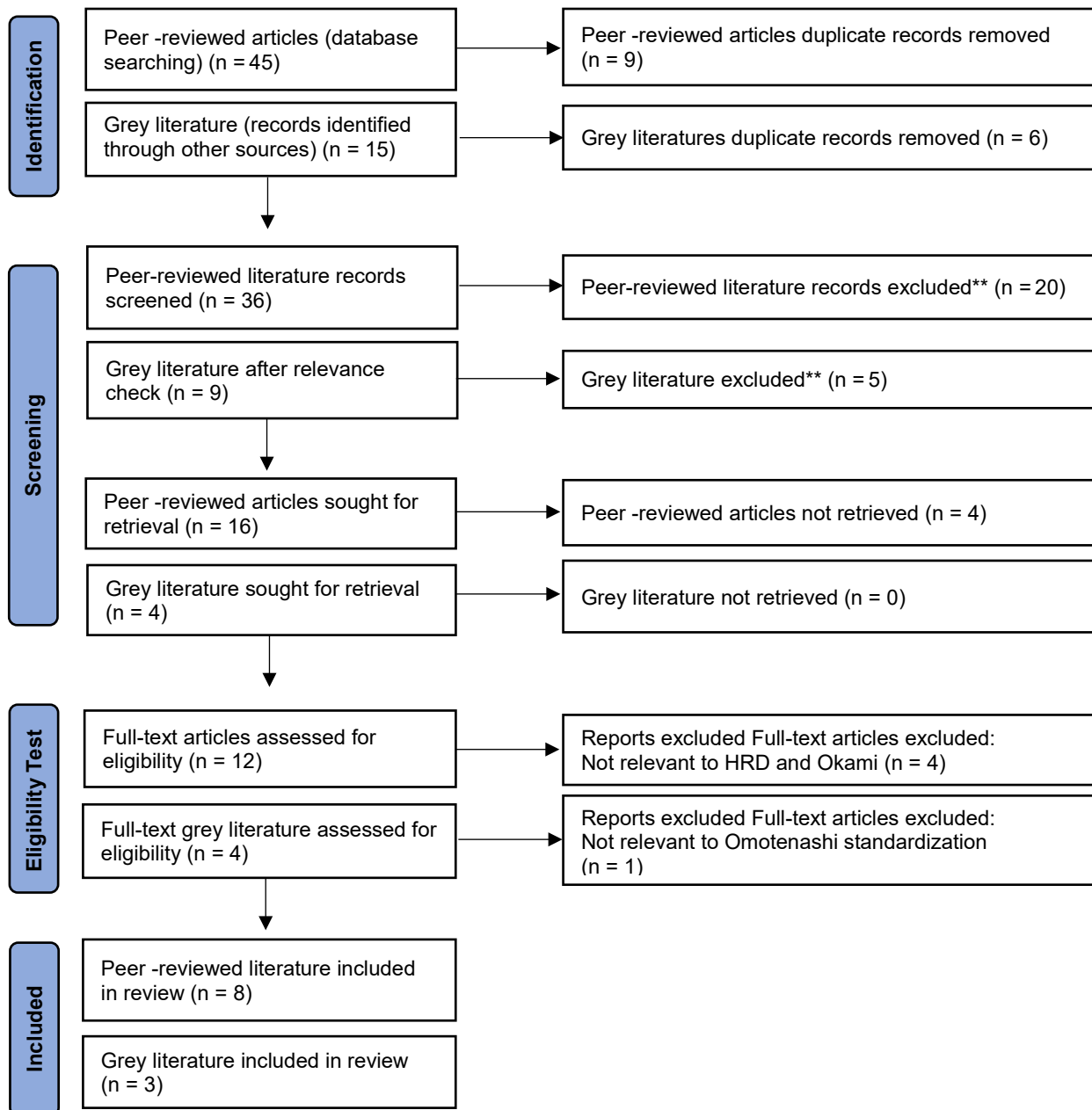


Figure 2: PRISMA diagram

D. Data Synthesis

The thematic synthesis method was adopted to identify and classify the principal modes of omotenashi transmission in the studies. Informal and Emotional-based Learning Models were the main interest, such as, observation and imitation (見習い / minarai), The mentor-staff relationships among more senior and junior employees, emotional labour and the body in service work, tacit knowledge through daily routine.

1) *Inclusion of Gray Literature*: In addition to peer-reviewed academic works, gray literature, such as regional government reports as well as hospitality training guidelines and organizational websites (e.g., Omotenashi Japanese Service Quality, JHMA (n.d.), Shibuya, Y. (2024), were critically reviewed, providing the context to evolving policy and practice. We then filtered these with due consideration to what sorts of sources they were (METI, JNTO, AIST) and policy relevance. Their participation, although not always

suitable within academic norms, was crucial to be able to make sense of recent policy initiatives in their context as well as the ways that omotenashi training is being institutionalized.

2) *Triangulation Strategy*: Where appropriate to support the robustness of both themes, peer-reviewed findings were flexibly combined with insights from more unedited (grey) literature discussing standardization trends, certification systems, and such bureaucratic logics shaping the transformation of omotenashi into performance metrics that can be captured.

V. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. Contrasting Models of Omotenashi Training (Objective 3)

One important nuance found in the literature is the interpretation of omotenashi in traditional ryokan setting juxtaposed with its institutionalization in national tourism

policies. Both approaches share a focus on quality of service, but their theoretical approaches to staff development and the nature of the emotional work involved are very different.

There are several sources that refer to the difference between an existing training method of omotenashi and a new standardized training approach, both from the empirical and policy-based points of view. Morishita (2021), Ohno (2016), and Nobukawa (2023) show how affective, situated learning unfolds on the ground within a ryokan. In contrast, national policy documents and evaluations (e.g., Japan Travel and Tourism Association, 2020; Shibuya, 2024) detail an array of more formalized approaches with scoring rubrics, scenario-based training, service branding, etc. Based on these sources, the tabulation in Table 1 highlights several key differences related to six central constituencies of HRD.

Table 1: Comparison between traditional and institutionalized omotenashi

Aspect	Traditional Ryokan Model	Standardized Policy Model
Learning Process	Tacit, observational, relational (Morishita, 2021; Ohno, 2016)	Script-based and segmented training procedures (Fujita & Kaseda, 2022; Taira, 2020; Japan Travel and Tourism Association, 2020; Shibuya, 2024)
Trainer	Okami as mentor and emotional model (Kumamoto Prefecture Branch of the Japan Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultants Association, 2008)	Certified instructor or contracted facilitator relying on scoring guides (Japan Travel and Tourism Association, 2020; Otaru Omotenashi Certification, n.d.; Shibuya, 2024)
Emotional Orientation	Learned through immersion and relational sincerity (Ohno, 2016; Morishita, 2021)	Emotion displayed via behavior scoring sheets, lacking authenticity (Zhu, 2016; Peippo, 2021; Fujita & Kaseda, 2022)
Flexibility	High adaptability, based on guest sensitivity (Morishita, 2021; Nobukawa, 2023)	Fixed rubric and predefined postures or greetings (Zhu, 2016; JHMA, n.d.; Otaru Omotenashi Certification, n.d.)
Source of Authority	Community knowledge, elder guidance, and regional association (Morishita, 2021; Nobukawa, 2023)	National policy, tourism branding goals (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2016; Peippo, 2023; JHMA, n.d.; Shibuya, 2024)
Knowledge Transfer	Storytelling, behavioral mimicry, and reflective feedback (Ohno, 2016; Nobukawa, 2023; Yokoyama, 2023; Kumamoto Prefecture Branch of the Japan Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultants Association, 2008)	Training manuals, behavior rubrics, and scenario scripts (Fujita & Kaseda, 2022; Taira, 2020; Japan Travel and Tourism Association, 2020; Zhu, 2016; Nishijima, 2020; Shibuya, 2024)

Table 1: Comparison between traditional and institutionalized omotenashi (cont.)

Aspect	Traditional Ryokan Model	Standardized Policy Model
Goal of Training	Moral cultivation and internalization of omotenashi ethos (Kumamoto Prefecture Branch of the Japan Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultants Association, 2008; Morishita, 2018)	Consistency in performance, branding uniformity, and hospitality certification (Fujita & Kaseda, 2022; Taira, 2020; Peippo, 2023; Japan Travel and Tourism Association, 2020; Otaru Omotenashi Certification, n.d.; Shibuya, 2024)

This comparative viewpoint sets the stage for understanding the increasingly fraught encounters between policy-directed formalization and community-based, affective embodied training traditions in ryokan.

1) *Conflict Between Local Wisdom and National Branding (Objective 3)*: Despite the emotionally rich, deep-rooted, and sincere approach to learning is being undermined by official efforts to repackage hospitality as “omotenashi.” The Japan Tourist Agency also advocates for standardized service and certification systems to make omotenashi “measurable” for the global market. But as one Okami said in a field report:

“Having everyone give the same service may feel safe, but it is not the essence of omotenashi”
(「誰でも同じサービスをすることは、安心感はあるけれども、おもてなしの本質とは違います。」) (Kumamoto Prefecture Branch of the Japan Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultants Association, 2008).

The above criticisms are indicative of general uneasiness with bureaucratized forms of service ethos. As Morishita (2021) notes, standardizing behavior here has the potential to erase the emotional texture that characterizes ryokan service. The more omotenashi becomes something done by the book, the more room there is for less intuitive delivery and genuine caring.

2) *Emotional Labor and the Risk of Surface Acting (Objective 3)*: Exploiting this tension, literatures also engage with the emotional labor of service and standardization. As Fujita and Kaseda (2022) state, “There is no way around it, whether staff members like it or

not, once they become actors with a script, they must engage with the role they are expected to enact. This type of surface acting can result in burnout, particularly when the emotion is not truly embedded. This concern is shared with Yokoyama (2023) who, working qualitatively with hospitality students at a vocational school, found that while the students could memorize the correct phrases or behaviors for certification, they often did not “feel” the spirit of omotenashi unless prompted and supported through reflection and relational feedback.

Whereas staff managed by an Okami are more likely to acquire “deep acting” expressions with which internal emotions are synchronized with external service. And one staff member said that she was confident to learn from Okami, not with rules but with feelings. (Ohno, 2016), indicating that one feels being in a good emotional congruence at the basis of trust relationship and authentic learning. The above-mentioned finding is consistent with Hawkins’s (2017) model of Emotion-Based Learning, which understands emotional experience as a learning stimulus, promoting higher-order processing and action adaptations in context. Here, feelings such as discomfort or pride are not only internalized dispositional conditions mediating emotional internal and emotional exertive actions that are coordinated to the standards of both Okami and guests; they also become signs that notify the service staff when their emotional actions are being attuned to the expectations of Okami and guests, thereby rendering omotenashi as an emotion-fed pedagogical orientation. While These contrasts are visible at the policy and institutional level



but are most vividly captured in field-based accounts that describe the lived realities of *omotenashi* training.

B. Sources of Field-Based Data

This study is a narrative literature review, but integrates empirical lessons from the field and practice-based documents to anchor its analysis in lived experience. For instance, the Kumamoto Prefecture Branch of the Japan Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultants Association (2008) reports a first-hand account of an elder-generation *Okami* that "hospitality with a heartfelt service cannot be learned from a how-to book." It indicates the subtle and affective manner of training that is practiced in a classical *ryokan* environment. For example, Ohno (2016) presents qualitative comments from young service workers and examines how *omotenashi* is learnt by emulation and soaking, rather than being told and taught.

1) *Okami as Emotional Mentor in the Workplace (Objective 1 and 2)*: In a *ryokan*, training does not start with manuals, but with silent observation and near-imitation. The *okami* is a mentor and an emotive barometer. An elderly *Okami* in Kumamoto, one of the old school, stressed to mean that:

"Serving with sincerity cannot be fully described in a manual"

(「真心を持って接客するということは、マニュアルには書ききれません」) (Kumamoto Prefecture Branch of the Japan Small and Medium Enterprise Management Consultants Association, 2008).

This is based on an orthodox idea that the spirit of *omotenashi* can be acquired through physical involvement and sensitization of subtle actions. *Okami* didn't like to teach by the books, and she preferred situational lessons to explain to her staff. A more junior member of staff described it as being taught to read

"how the *Okami* adjusted her distance when entering the room". These small exchanges are part of what Lave and Wenger refer to as "situated learning", where learning is contingent on social context.

2) *Tacit Learning over Explicit Instruction*: This kind of learning is uncodifiable. Indeed, as Ohno (2016) observed through one of his workplace-based studies, new staff, they "train themselves through breathing in the air of the workplace" (*genba no kuuki wo yomu*), in order not to have to be "told (what to do), but to be able to 'read' things. It's not about error correction, but emotional calibration. One *Okami* said,

"It's more important to make them feel than to teach them"

(「教えるというより、感じさせることが大切で」) (Taira, 2020).

Those types of comments pinpoints how the *Okami* develops emotional insight – modeled behavior and feedback based on interpersonal interaction. Performance is achieved through an emotional relationship so not through technical exercises. This corresponds to Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) socialization in the creation of knowledge, in which tacit knowledge is transferred through common activity. This is also consistent with Blair's (2017) assertion that the function of emotional learning systems is not so much to learn specific responses to specific stimuli but rather to learn to modify behavior in response to one's internal emotional feedback, particularly in situations in which explicit contingencies are lacking.

In addition to these embodied, situational learning styles, even verbal expressions like *irassyaimase* are not exempt from cultural scripting. As Nishijima (2020) argues, such greetings are "unreplyable utterances," ritualized performances of ostensible hospitality that express emotional presence without requiring dialogic interaction. These formulaic acts, though often overlooked, serve as affective cues in the Japanese

service context, reinforcing a shared ethos of care without explicit instruction.

In contrast, policy documents and training programs designed by national and regional tourism bodies take a different stance. For example, (Japan Travel and Tourism Association, 2020) advocates for standardization through checklists, behavioral rubrics, and service scenario manuals. Specific examples include the Omotenashi Standard Certification System (おもてなし規格認証制度) and local initiatives such as the Otaru Omotenashi Certification project, which use fixed scoring formats and predefined behavioral scripts to assess service quality. These frameworks aim to align hospitality performance with broader branding and quality assurance goals. However, Fujita and Kaseda (2022) caution that over-reliance on such tool's risks diminishing the relational, interpretive, and moral dimensions of omotenashi that define its cultural authenticity. Yokoyama (2023) also reported that while the learning contents of vocational hospitality courses developed in Japan focused on the acquisition of formal behavior through the use of manuals and case-based training, students' recognition of the concept of omotenashi was enhanced only when they were encouraged to engage in organized self-reflection and questioned the meaning in what they had done.

The case illustration of Zhu (2016) on the Japanese retail store Ichi in Hong Kong further demonstrates this issue. Here, omotenashi was boiled down to training manuals for non-Japanese staff, tension between scripted hospitality and genuine service. Likewise, Taira (2020) discuss industry behavior-oriented assessment systems in hospitality education, which do not always reflect the myriad emotions at play in authentic service.

Collectively, these examples provide insight into how scripted approaches can reconfigure, and also limit, the foundational elements of omotenashi, which are the deeper cultural and relational underpinnings of

omotenashi, encouraging practitioners to explore the sustainability of these practices across various organizational contexts.

C. Organizational and Network-Based Dynamics (Objective 4)

One answer to this challenge lies in the role of informal peer networks, which function as parallel channels for preserving and transmitting omotenashi outside formal policy structures. Beyond individual ryokan, many Okami participate in Okami no Kai, an informal infrastructure for sharing, mentoring, and sustaining omotenashi practices across ryokan regions. The model is addressed in the Conclusion section where the Emotional Apprenticeship HRD model, which is developed directly from these field patterns, will be outlined.

Outside the realm of an individual ryokan, many Okami belong to Okami no Kai, regional networking clubs in which innkeepers discuss, together, knowledge, training quandaries and community-driven HR strategies. They act as informal network mechanisms through which tradition can be supported but also contemporary HR problems can be addressed. According to Morishita's (2021) interview with a young Okami in her 20s, she explained her reason for joining the network: "I wanted to ask what to do when I couldn't feel what my mother-in-law said was important," highlighting the emotional and generational dynamics at play in Okami mentoring relationships. Such peer-based systems spread the concept of omotenashi, not as a static idea that enforces rules upon people, but as practice that develops in the course of experience and collective efforts.

VI. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

A. Reframing Omotenashi as Human Resource Development

Responds to the first and second objectives by exploring how the Okami functions as an emotional



mentor and how omotenashi is transmitted through experiential and tacit learning practices. This article has proposed that omotenashi needs to be considered not just as an ideal of customer service or cultural branding, but also as staff development based on unarticulated learning and emotional mentorship. In ryokan there is no instruction manual, instead beginners are taught through observation, imitation and affective feedback. Emotional mentor and cultural guide, the Okami models how service is internalized, adapted, and performed in situations.

Such a reframing contests the prevailing assumption that omotenashi is a deliverable product. Rather, it appears as an embodied and situated work, transmitted through interaction and physical presence. It challenges traditional HR systems by showing that workplace learning can be a function of trust, modeling in the small, and shared values as much as formal instruction.

This view is supported by psychological models of emotion-based learning that highlight emotion as a conduit of deep and situated learning (Hawkins, 2017; Blair, 2017). The ryokan form of omotenashi can thus be understood as an embodied pedagogy, one that emphasizes reflection-in-action over rule-following.

B. Cultural Integrity and the Pressures of Policy Formalization

Addressing Objective 3, this section examines the conflict between traditional omotenashi practices, and the formalization imposed by national certification systems. The paper has shone a light on something of an enduring tension between local learning cultures and national policy endeavors. Bodies such as the JNTO (n.d.) are calling for omotenashi to be codified in a proper certification and training process. Though that could potentially serve as a draw to place Japan in the international tourism market, it would also dilute the emotional richness and flexibility that makes 'omotenashi'.

As the analysis above demonstrates, a lot of Okami reject this formalized version. They maintain that emotional sensitivity cannot be codified. Rather, it is that which must be nurtured via the labor of relationing and context-specific learning. Japanese hospitality, however, is based on protecting this cultural integrity, and preserving that core essence to the HRD function in Japanese hotel groups is a key challenge in the face of wider demands for standardization and scalability.

C. The Emotional Apprenticeship HRD Model as an Alternative Strategy

Responding to the Objective 4, The paper has offered the Emotional Apprenticeship HRD Model consisting of four interrelated elements:

1. Mentorship from the Okami
2. Tacit-to-experiential learning via interaction with the lived
3. Emotional dialogue and storytelling, and feedback with stories.
4. Social community reinforcement by groups such as Okami no Kai.

This model provides a multi-strategy model of HRD that combines conservative practice with a policy orientation. It is not opposed to standardization per se; rather, it stresses that culture authenticity and emotional learning should be strategically valued, not bottlenecked. The model might have relevance further afield in other forms of hospitality, especially for those interested in maintaining cultural complexity in the face of performance measurement and the logic of commercial tourism.

The Emotional Apprenticeship HRD Model is based on the results of the exemplar grounded thematic analysis spanning ten relevant empirical and conceptual literature (case studies, field reports, policy reports) from Japanese and overseas settings.

These sources repeatedly emphasized the processes that underlie the passage of omotenashi in ryokan, such

as, learning through silent observation, emotional feedback from the Okami, and relational adjustment within work settings. Four central pedagogical constructs emerged as these patterns were coded and clustered within and across materials. Analytical complexity was subsequently deepened by rendering these themes through established learning theories: Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) knowledge conversion model, particularly the socialization of tacit knowledge; Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning; and Hawkins (2017) emotion-based learning theory. These frameworks gave conceptual visibility to how omotenashi is not just learned but absorbed and performed under a system of cultural and affective apprenticeship.

Ultimately, omotenashi is not a matter of service. It is a pedagogy, transmitted relationally and emotionally as well as it is thing to be known and valued. Conceptualized as a modality of HRD, this allows for more substantive, relational forms of learning and resilience in the hospitality industry.

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