Thinking through Tourism in Japan
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DOI: **10.1080/14790530601132377**
Published in: **Tourism and Hospitality Planning & Development, Volume 3, Issue 3 December 2006 , pages 199 - 207**

THINKING THROUGH TOURISM IN JAPAN

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Acknowledgements

The author was an invited Research Fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) from Dec. 2004 to March 2005, hosted by the National Institute for Environmental Studies (NIES) in Tsukuba (Ibaraki Pref.).

I wish to thank many colleagues for their support and insights, among others, Dr. Aoki (NIES), Dr. Asamizu (APU Beppu), Mr. Blumenstengel (GNTB Tokyo Office), Prof. Cooper (APU Beppu), Prof. Fujii (Chiba University), Prof. Funck (Hiroshima University), Director Hanyu (Toyama Pref. Government), Director Hayashi (JTB Foundation), Prof. Ichioka (Sapporo University), Prof. Ikenaga (Nagasaki International University), Director Ito (Ibaraki Pref. Government), Prof. Kureha (Tsukuba University), Prof. Mizoo (Rikkyu University), Prof. Nagai (Utsunomiya University), Mrs. Nakagaki (Japan Ecotourism Society), Dr. Shoji (Sapporo Forestry Research Institute), Dr. Tsuji (ERINA) and Prof. Yasujima (Rikkyu University). The ideas and views (and errors) presented are however entirely my responsibility.

THINKING THROUGH TOURISM IN JAPAN

Four major factors shaping Japanese tourism development

The following two quotes provide an interesting starting point for the discussion of Japanese internal tourism and reveal some insight into the complexities of the prevailing mindset:

> "Tourism Encourages Nation-building that Provides a Good Living Habitat and a Good Place to Visit
> The basic concept for a country built on tourism is the realization of 'nation-building' that provides a good living habitat and a good place to visit' whereby the people living in the region can have a stronger recognition of its 'highlights' and the people visiting the region can also feel the 'highlights' even more strongly. To this end, a tourism revolution is called for (one that revitalizes cultural charm, re-polishes the 'highlights' and recreates a journey that is sound for the mind and soul)." (Japan Tourism Advisory Council 2003, emphasis added WA)

> "Now that we are able to benefit from material prosperity, we need to abandon our traditional attitude of putting the economy above all else. We need to step out of our workplaces and enjoy nature and culture with our family and friends. We need to regain our emotional wealth and spiritual prosperity.
> Tourism provides us with opportunities to look at our land, our history, our culture, and our way of life from new perspectives and to build a nation that is truly rich and filled with creative energy. If this 'faceless' Japan is to gain the trust and understanding of the international community, we must first look inward and learn to understand ourselves." (Keidanren 2000, emphasis added WA)

Given the tradition of tourism in the form of pilgrimages and the high international profile of Japanese tourists, tourism in Japan is surprisingly underdeveloped. As the two quotes from the Japanese government and the national employers association demonstrate, tourism is furthermore laden with concepts quite different from other industrialised countries- an assertion that can be rationalised by at least four important factors that can help to understand the framework under which tourism exists in Japan:

- the unique circumstances of the ongoing 'nation-building' process of the imagined community 'Japan'
- the position of leisure and tourism in the Japanese society
- the strong influence of 'big business' interests in tourism development
- the forms of nature appreciation in Japan.
- Taking each of these in turn, we can now explore the factors in a little more depth.

Nation-building

"All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias." (Anderson 1991, 204).

'Ambitious Japan', as it calls itself in English on the new Shinkansen 700 trains (see Figure 1), appears as an insular, industrial society stranded in a globalised post-industrial world, trying to retain (mainly imagined) pre-industrial values.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Like other young nations, the victorious Samurai rebels had to start their work on 'Inventing Japan' (Buruma 2003) after the Tokugawa realms isolational self-deceptive pride was shattered by Capt. Perry's ships in 1853. Unlike other young nations, the imagined community (Anderson 1991) had the double and contradictory task of 'restoring' the rule of the Emperor, the Shinto religion and 'national' pride through attempts of catching up with 'modernity' to become – unlike Qing China - a accepted member of modern nations.

Japan tried three times in vain to become a – or rather the - major global power. First through aiming at a mimetic modernity (Iwabuchi 2002) by imitating European mores and institutions to rather absurd dimensions. The failure of this try - in spite of starting to eat meat, putting on top-hats, kicking out Buddha statues and defeating the Zsarist navy – became apparent in 1922 at the Washington Conference.

Second through mimicry of European super-nationalistic policies and military might, ending tragically in 1945 with the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Third through mimicry of the economic power of the USA, shattered with the end of the Bubble Economy in 1990.

On top of this history of just-misses, the construction of an imagined community becomes even more complicated under the specific cultural conditions of high Hofstedian index

readings for both Group Orientation and Uncertainty Avoidance, resulting in an especially rigid pressure to have everybody conforming to and believing in the invented self-image. This puts musings about the 'uniqueness' of the Japanese in the place of open discussions in the discourse including the extensive genre of Nihonjinron (discourses on the Japanese) and leads to a "profound categorical uneasiness" (Ivy 1995, Ivy 2000).

In the development of Japanese domestic tourism this is reflected in the successful decade-long marketing campaigns of "Discover Japan" in the 1970s and "Exotic Japan" in the 1980s. 'Discover', starting after the EXPO in Osaka and at the same time as the government invested into rebuilding pre-Meiji feudal castles in ferro-concrete, appealed to young (mainly female) Japanese not to visit meishos (noted places) but rather to find the spirit of the 'old' Japan in encounters with it and therefore to find themselves.

"Although this Japan was billed as native and original, it was a Japan in many ways unknown to its young urban travellers… Japan beckoned as something strangely familiar: the native remote." (Ivy 1995, 47)

'Exotic' took the nostalgic longing one step further: Stylish and arty in appearance, it enticed to travel within Japan not to rediscover 'old' Japan, but the nostalgia for it, the lost feeling of the feeling of loss. (Ivy 1995)

Stirring up such demand takes on the supply side mostly the form of *furusato* (old hometown) tourism, connecting it to the support of rural communities. Rural lifestyles, after being modernized and rationalized mostly out of existence, were reconstructed in the 1970s. With the *isson ippin* (one village, one item) movement (Kajiwara 1997, Thompson 2004) traditions soon found a reified version. "Each locality becomes a commodity sign, an image to be consumed." (Carle 2003, 34) To organize this "agrotourism" in the *furosato* form Japanese researchers look mainly to Europe (Ikenaga 2002, Tehuriko 2004, Tomikawa 2004).

"This phenomenon shows the two-fold functions that *furosato* tourism projects and its related discourses play in modern Japanese society. Firstly *furosato* tourism projects aim at reconstructing the past for the people of a specific locality, and thereby affirm their local identity. Yet, .. even in rural areas, much of the valued tradition has lost its force in everyday life. To be more accurate, therefore, what is actually done in these projects is to reconstruct select images of the Japanese people's traditional way of life. … On the other hand, .. such attempts are effectively communicated to the urban folk who are themselves lost and alienated, and who are in pursuit of their own cultural roots and identities." (Moon 1997, 185)

Leisure and tourism in the Japanese society

"The family holiday is not unknown, .. but in general such trips tend to be much shorter than .. in Europe. Two nights away is perhaps typical, and the father of the family will be itchy to get back to work." (Hendry 1987, 165)

In recent years the Japanese government has tried to promote leisure and tourism spending by moving public holidays and with several campaigns (see quotes at beginning of the chapter). However, long absence from work by making full use of granted paid holiday is still frowned upon. Unlike western positive images of *otium* as 'recharging the battery' and 'getting new ideas', i.e. self-actualisation through leisure, leisure activities and the necessary absence connected to it are seen as 'letting down the colleagues', only partly redeemed by "doing

something positive on behalf of the whole group" (Graburn 1983, 58) by buying *omiyage* (souvenirs).

> "A feeling of guilt in seeking mere pleasure dies hard within a culture of hard work. .. And this axiom is fortified by people's concern for, and attention to, others in close proximity, such as family, relatives, neighbours, and fellow workers." (Kajiwara 1997, 169)

So in fact the percentage of actually used days of holiday entitlement decreased from 54% in 1997 via 50% in 2000 to 47% in 2003 (TIJ 2004). Consequently, the most sought-after target group for travel companies are small groups of young, unmarried women (OL's – Office Ladies), who have a high-spending power but less obligations towards their company and family.

'Big business' interests in tourism development

Domestic tourism development in Japan is closely related to the alliance between major companies and political parties. Ski resorts and summer retreats were first started by Westerners living in Japan before World War II, but starting with Prime Minister Tanaka initiatives in the 1970s and resulting in the "Resort Law" of 1987, 'big business' in the form of construction companies moved into this sector. Under this law, no less than 20% of all land was supposed to be developed into resorts by 'Third sector system' companies (public-private partnerships). This led to massive hardware construction with little regard for maintenance, quality or impacts, especially before the end of the 'bubble economy' in 1990. (Asamizu 2003)

The icon of this development is Yoshiaki Tsutsumi, according to Forbes (the 'rich list' can be seen on www.forbes.com) the richest person in the world between 1987 and 1990 and a close friend and patron of Prime Minister 'Lionheart' Koizumi. With the battle cry "I want to own all land in Japan that is suitable for tourism development" Tsutsumis Kokudo Corp. developed 81 hotels, 36 Ski resorts, 52 golf courses etc., infrastructure provided free of charge by national and prefectural governments. In 1998 he succeeded in bringing the Olympic Winter Games to Nagano, using almost exclusively Kokudo installations there. For his substantive sponsoring of the Olympic Museum in Lausanne he was made an honorary member of the IOC. In 2005 he was sentenced to 30 months in prison, suspended for four years, for insider trading. In 2006, with just 1.2 billion US$ personal wealth left, he had tumbled down to position 645 on the Forbes list. His IOC membership remains suspended. (ESPN 2005, Köhler 2005, Yoshida 2005)

Forms of nature appreciation in Japan

Nature in Japan is appreciated not for its 'naturalness' or 'augustness' but for its relation and submission to mankind. Nature is appreciated not for itself, but through aesthetic-ised filters at certain times in its predictable, optimised and event-ized form. (Nakagaki 2005, Rauterberg 2005). For example, the following is typical of the Japanese framing of nature:

> "Since ancient times, Japanese people have been fascinated by the natural beauty of their land, appreciating it through such unique ways as poetry and plum and cherry blossom viewing. In Kansai, … many famous sites for viewing cherry

> blossoms and autumn leaves can be found, forming popular spots for weekenders and holidaymakers. …
> Particularly famous is Kanazawa's Kenrokuen Park. Winter closure of this garden is simply unthinkable: its snow-clad scenery promptly steals the hearts of its great number of tourists. The protective roping of pine tree branches to prevent their collapse under the weight of snow is appreciated as part of the winter landscape.
> …
> *Hanami* (blossom viewing) is defined as having three factors: It's not the mere appreciation of flowers nor the mere eating or drinking together with friends or families. … The appreciation of flowers by individuals is a common leisure activity in Japan as well as in other countries. There are also parties and meetings where friends get together to eat and drink. People sharing the same ideas may also come together. There is, however, only one culture that combines all these factors and holds the event outdoors. That is *hanami* in Japan." (Kansei Council 2005)

The website's descriptions meld together aspects of nature and human intervention in the landscape to provide a summary of the four factors of understanding mentioned above. The next section examines internal tourism in sufficient detail to enable some insight into the phenomenon.

Tourism in Japan today

As stated above, in comparison with other countries, domestic and inbound tourism in Japan is rather underdeveloped:

- Tourism delivers only app. 2% of GDP (2.2% in 2000, 1.9% in 2003) and
- less than 3% (2.9% 2000, 2.7% 2003) of jobs (OECD 2002, TIJ 2004), whereas
- the average for OECD countries in both respects is however 4-5%.

In 2002, Japanese on average travelled for leisure 2.1 times, staying 1.8 nights, resulting in just 3.9 overnight stays per person (TIJ 2004). These figures have been steadily decreasing since 1991 (OECD 2002). The figures for European countries like Britain or Germany in comparison are 16 to 17 overnight stays per person.

Inbound tourism amounts to approximately 6 million visitors per year only, less than Sweden or Singapore, and less than half the global average in the ratio of arrivals/population. Even if the current "*Yokosa* Japan" (Welcome to Japan) campaign reaches its aim of bringing 10 million visitors to Japan by the year 2010, Japan will not be among the 25 major tourist destinations (WTO). Inbound tourists are responsible for less than 6% of overall revenues of the Japanese tourism industry (TIJ 2004). A final piece of the evidential jigsaw is supplied through the fact that JTB Corp. Group, by far the biggest Japanese travel agency, employs 11,000 people; Thomas Cook AG and TUI AG of Germany employ 24,000 and 65,000 respectively.

Taking into account the four factors discussed above, these results are not so surprising after all. Domestic tourism is first of all an exercise in definition of 'Japanese-ness', *furusato* tourism is not for foreigners, just the opposite, as even trips to 'Peter Rabbit Country' and 'Anne Land' become visits to "A *furosato* away from home", as Michael H. Rea puts it (Rea 2000).

The guilt-ridden briefness of absence from home leads to short-term, event-orientated travels with onsen (hot springs) as the major non-temporary attraction. This is also reflected in the hardware: hotels with no wardrobes, airport transit busses without luggage departments. Organizers of events do not try to entice visitors to stay 'an extra day'.

The overarching influence of construction companies in tourism resort development is reflected in the concentration on big projects designed for visitors arriving in big groups and in the limited concern on giving reasons for return-visits; a form of tourism in decline since the end of the bubble economy.

The event-orientation expands from cultural festivals also to en-masse visits to specific nature resources on specific occasions (blossoms, coloured leaves, heat wave etc.). The preference of man-made nature makes understandable the construction of huge artificial beaches within view of the ocean like the famous Ocean Dome in Miyazaki/Kyushu. (Gluckman 1999)

The categorization of the development of tourism into the three basic steps of Discovery, Acquisition and Invention, which can be found in the physical and mental development of tourism in history on a global scale, but also in the development of destinations and touristic sites on a regional and local scale, is a useful tool to measure speed, stage and thoroughness of the development in question.

As 'Discovery' in domestic Japanese tourism is, as is argued in this paper, to a large extent 'Invention', and the inbound tourism is small and spatially limited to a distinctive *gaijin*-trail, the acquisition of spatial and cultural resources is comparatively limited in Japan.

Unlike many other countries, tourism in Japan has not succeeded in forcefully opening up the inside of sacred places like Shinto shrines to the tourist gaze. The support of – albeit often idealised and commodified – local traditions through the form of *furosato* tourism and the "One Village – One Product" movement have helped to keep local cultures alive or rather to bring them back into existence. In the cities however, the weakness of tourism vis-à-vis large-scale land speculation resulted in demolition of profane historic buildings, the filling-up of canals, the blocking of vistas as part of landscaped gardens etc.

> "On the whole, the backstage of village life has been protected and not exposed to the constant public gaze." states Moon (1997, 181) for the mountain-village-turned-ski-resort he researched. In the case of UNESCO World heritage sites like Shirakawa, a ".. repository of the sentiments and values of Lost Japan, a focus for the nostalgic gaze of the modern, .. presented simultaneously as a unique locale, and as a metonym for the nation" (Carle 2003, 34).

However, 1 million visitors per year descending on 600 inhabitants have resulted in the "industrialisation of the emotional work of tourism" (Carle 2003, 53) and consequently to visitors and local complaining about the loss of the warmth and spontaneity, seen as a major part of the nostalgic experience (this is reminiscent of the authenticity debates familiar to scholars of tourism).

Sustainable tourism in Japan

"Sustainable Development of Tourism is a contested concept that is socially constructed and reflects the interests of those involved."
Duim and Caalders (2004)

Following the crash of the Resort Law in the aftermath of the bubble economy and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro 1992, a "Green Tourism Law" was proclaimed in Japan in 1995 (Asamizu 2003), taking up local initiatives and the idea of Sustainability developed by the Brundlandt commission in 1987 and translated by the WTO in 1988 (Liu 2004) into a definition:

> "Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing the opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled, while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems." (WTO)

'Sustainability' entered consequently most official papers, even if some major works like the "White Paper on Land, Infrastructure and Transport in Japan" by the new ministry of the same name still does not use it (MLIT 2003). It remains however a slogan more than a fully developed holistic concept.

> "When promoting tourism, it is vital that we avoid hasty destruction of the natural environment and the creation of commercially oriented resorts, and that we focus instead on the preservation of the natural environment and historical heritages. This is what is meant by sustainable tourism. The first step is to foster regional development through the creation of comfortable communities that residents can take pride in.
> One aspect of sustainable tourism is "green" tourism (tourism based on experiencing nature or trying out agriculture, forestry, or fisheries). This can make an important contribution in areas ranging from the promotion of human interaction between urban dwellers and people in rural and fishing communities to the revitalization of mountain villages."
> (Keidandren 2000, 2, emphasis added WA)

As this quote shows, the discourse on sustainable tourism in Japan is strongly connected to the development or rather the threat of de-development of the rural areas, the process of *muraokoshi* (awakening the village), even including the use of tourism to lure senior city dwellers back to the countryside permanently (Mohamed 1997). Rather than concentrating on the ecological and economical side of the 'sustainability triangle', local participation and community involvement is seen as a way to overcome the problem of depopulation of the countryside with the help of tourism. The interest of the environment as a stakeholder per se is ignored; human interaction and pride are the important elements of sustainable tourism.

At least, this concentration on local participation and government involvement is in step with the direction of the new definition the WTO adopted in 2004:

> "Sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including

> mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability.
> …
> Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building."

On a practical level, as the 'old' tourism of big groups on a one-time short-term visit, to which the infrastructure still is geared to, is fading in the post-bubble economy or at least is moving to cheaper overseas destinations, 'new' family/friends based tourism is seen as a sustainable form, with some redeveloped places like Yufuin (Kyushu) praised as best practice example.

> "People in Yufuin realized that there was no future in competing directly with (the neighbouring spa of, WA) Beppu, and they therefore drew up a blueprint for a spa resort which avoided conventional amusements, like sleazy bars and striptease shows. They included buildings on a human scale, rather than high-rise construction. Rather than inviting major companies from outside to build golf courses, they made efforts to open a craftsmen's village and to hold a film festival." (Kajiwara 1997, 173)

Yufuin today welcomes about 4 million visitors per year, growing against the general decline in domestic tourism numbers, and witness to the fact that "… forms of travel have diversified since the mid 1980s, and especially after the collapse of the bubble economy." (Kajiwara 1997, 175).

New forms of tourism like Industrial Heritage tourism do, however, not find acceptance yet. Ecotourism, visits to National Parks and other activities, which are seen in the west as typical forms of sustainable tourism, take place either overseas or only in eventisized form, given the preference for manipulated nature over the search for authenticity in pristine forests. Small wonder then, that the Japanese National Ecotourism Organisation is a One-woman-organisation sponsored by JTB and the Infrastructure Ministry.

The question of the sustainability of the development of tourism is in Japan therefore rather a question of urgency for the future, closely connected to the general development of the Japanese society and economy. The "deep feeling of malaise among the Japanese today" (Kajiwara 1997, 176), the somehow sedated post-bubble society has yet to find a new base and direction. The concurrence of the economic development from being one half of the Pacific Rim to being the junior partner of China with the aging, more stratified society (Rebick 2004) of the first generation of more travel-orientated citizens, maybe transferring their acquired overseas tourist behaviours to Japan, will probably lead to a much deeper impact of tourism onto the domestic economy, ecology and culture.

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