



Feature Article

Vulnerability of tourism industry

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1. Japanese government sees international travelers as key to its growth strategy

Globalization facilitates the movement of goods and people, and booming tourism during the past 20 years has proved it. Not only in Japan but also almost all nations enjoy the rising number of tourists from the East and the West, from the North and the South. In the post-industrial era, the tertiary industry, especially tourism including hotels, restaurants, souvenirs shops, transportation etc. have become vibrant businesses. Each country has been trying to attract as many tourists as possible, and they invest huge amounts of money into public relations, infrastructures, multilingual explanations, and foreign language guides.

The number of foreign visitors to Japan from 2010 to 2019, published by the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), shows the acute rise of tourists from abroad to Japan. Why can Japan register such an increase of tourists? There are many factors for this. Firstly, economical growth, especially in Asia, is the most decisive factor for this change. China, with the second biggest economic power and a population of 1,437,661,871 (based on Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data, on March 13, 2020), is Japan's neighboring country. South-Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia with vibrant economic success are also Japan's neighbors. The second factor is that airfares have become relatively cheap, the huge aviation industry and

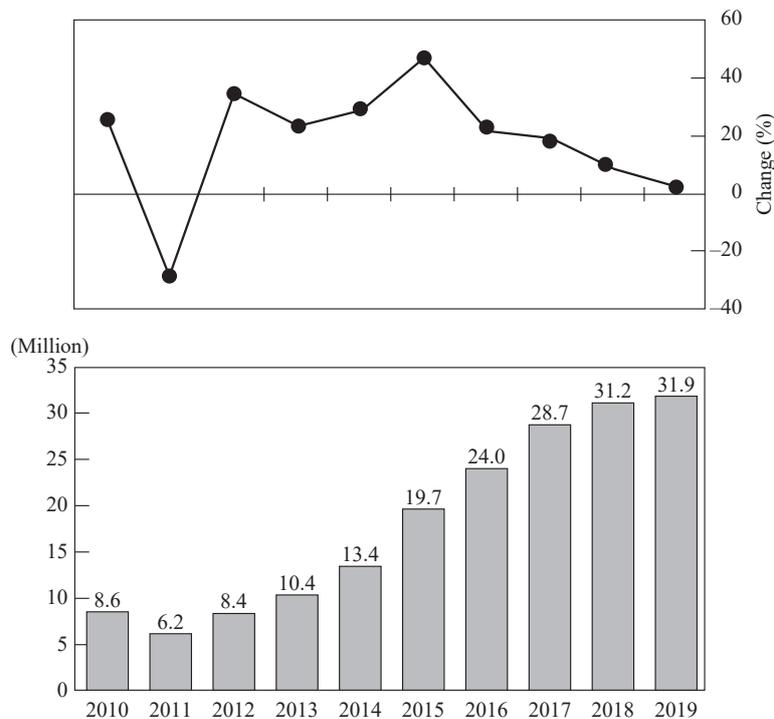


Figure 1: Visitor arrivals to Japan for last 10 years (2019)

Source: Reproduced by the author based on Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2020.

LCCs are setting airfares that were unthinkable cheap in the past, and this has helped tourism in Japan. The third factor is that the relatively cheap price level in Japan, as a result of its prolonged economic stagnation, is attracting many tourists to Japan because a trip to Japan is affordable for many foreign tourists. The fourth factor is that Japan has a lot of attractions as a tourist destination. For example, Japan enjoys security and has a long history, diverse cultures, festivals, beautiful landscapes and good foods. Japan is also famous for art and craft, and anime. Winter sports in Nagano and Hokkaido are also favored by many foreign tourists.

To meet such increasing demands in Japan, many hotels, ryokans (traditional inns with breakfast and dinner), hostels and guest houses have been constructed, also many empty wooden houses have been changed into private lodging services. However, only a small percent of tourists can speak Japanese, therefore the Japanese government has tried to increase the number of touristic language guides.

2. National licensed guide interpreters in Japan

In Japan, there are national licensed guide interpreters. To acquire the qualification, they must pass a test for the license conducted by the JNTO which belongs to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. The number of the licensed guides is low so they cannot meet the demand of the tourism industry.

Figure 2, published by the JNTO, shows the shift of the total number of registered licensed guides in Japan (light gray bar). The dark gray bar is the number of successful applicants for the test of the national licensed guide interpreter in every year, and black dots show the pass rate of the test. There is a big fluctuation of the pass rate in these years. Such a great fluctuation

may reflect the demand for guide interpreters by the tourism industry. To meet the demand, the JNTO introduced the “Comprehensive Special Zone System” in 2011. With this system, a new type of tourist guide, the so-called license for regional language guide, is granted for those who have attended the lecture held by some prefectures. The working area of the regional guide license is limited to a certain region while the national licensed guides can work nationwide. As mentioned above, most of tourists in Japan come from Asian countries and they need Asian languages such as Chinese, Korean, Malay, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Thai and so forth. Two thirds of the national language guides are English guides.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of languages for the national licensed guide interpreters: 69 % is English, 11.5 % is Chinese, 5.1 % is Korean, 4.5 % is French, 3.9 % is Spanish and 2.8 % is German. The language spoken by guides who hold a state license does not reflect the language spoken by foreign tourists who actually visit Japan. A mismatch in languages remains unsolved even after the rising number of regional and national guides. To solve this problem, the JNTO abolished on June 2, 2016 the monopolized business position of national licensed guide interpreters. Until that time, according to the law for Interpreters Guide (Act No. 210 of 1949), it was forbidden for non-qualified interpreters to provide information on travel to foreigners in foreign languages for a fee. Now, anybody can work and receive money as a language tourist guide without any license. Such an abolition of an official qualification is not only unusual in developed countries but also unfair for the official guides. The ambitious aim of the Japanese government is to have 40 million foreign tourists in the Olympic year 2020, therefore the tourism industry needs to expand the number of guides. Most guide-interpreters work as freelancers, and they

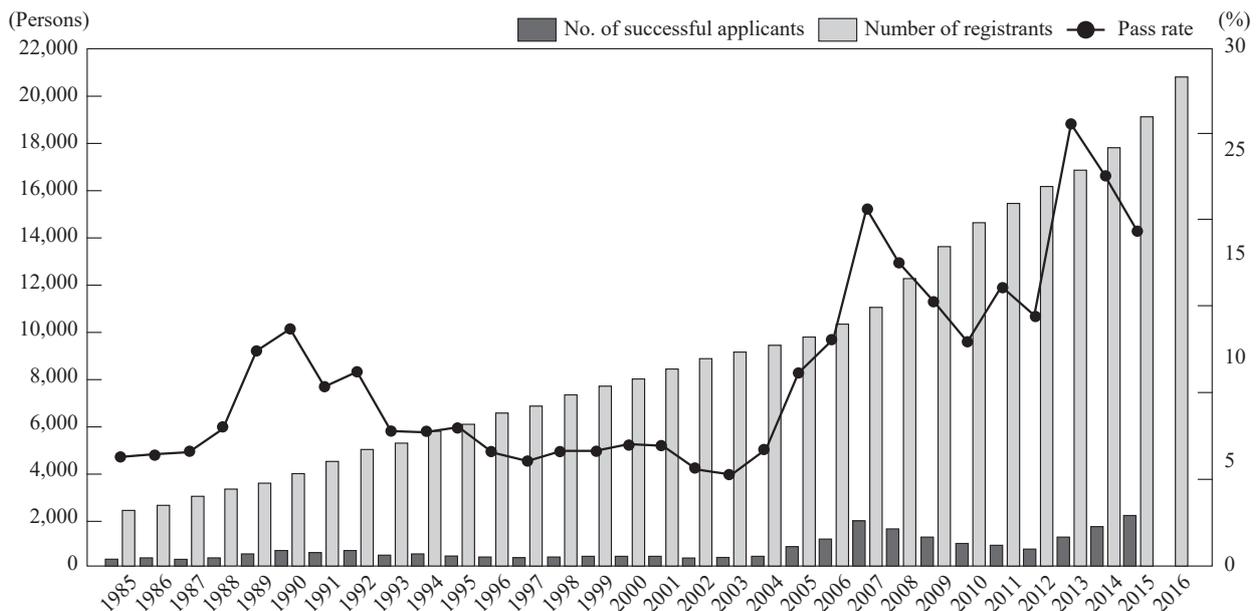


Figure 2: Trends in the number of registered interpreters and guides
 Source: Reproduced by the author based on Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2020.

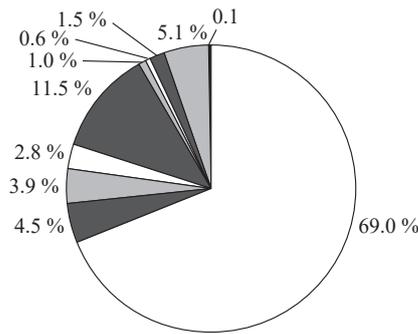


Figure 3: Percentage of languages for the national licensed guide interpreters

Source: Reproduced by the author based on Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2020.

work alone without a workers union and they are sometimes hired by big travel agents. Now, anybody can work as a language guide so that a decrease in the interpreter guide fee is unavoidable. The status of the licensed tourists language guide is weakened. Their situation was further exacerbated by a pandemic, and they became jobless.

3. Tourism is a kind of image industry—its vulnerability is inevitable

Tourism has become a booming business but it can cause negative side-effects. Overflowing of foreign tourists can damage the town character and culture, and it can deteriorate the living conditions in the touristic spots. Tourists crowd in concentrated certain popular touristic sites, so residents who live in and around such sites are confronted with public noise, garbage problems, traffic congestion and so on. These are the problems of over-tourism, and to solve such problems, it is necessary to make efforts to disperse tourists to other not so known touristic sites. Further negative aspects of the tourism industry are the

destruction of nature and carbon emissions. The rush of tourist buses and private cars causes traffic congestion everywhere, and noise pollution and air pollution reach unbearable levels.

Because the tourism industry is a kind of information and image industry, negative information and changed images can deteriorate the industry. The tourism industry is also very vulnerable and sensitive to political conflicts, rumors, terrorism, natural and man-made catastrophes, weather conditions, public hazards, pandemics and so on. If the image of a certain nation or region becomes bad, tourists will avoid visiting this nation or this region. The tourism industry has suffered a lot from diplomacy and natural and man-made disasters and epidemics, terrorism and wars. After attacks on tourists in Egypt on 17 November 1997, the number of visitors to Egypt plummeted. This attack was later named the Luxor massacre which killed 62 people. SARS (2002-2003) also paralyzed tourism in Asia.

There was a strong earthquake and following tsunami in North-Japan and nuclear power plant accidents in Fukushima on March 11, 2011. At that time, there was a strong panic among foreign residents who lived in Japan, and many foreign students and diplomats left Japan to return home. Foreign tourists avoided visiting Japan, and there was a general feeling that whole areas of Japan are contaminated with radiation, and the acceptance of Japanese people who leave Japan to escape radiation was in Europe seriously discussed. As shown in Table 1, foreign tourists avoided visiting Japan, and the sharp decrease of foreign tourists began from March 2011 onwards. The Japanese tourism industry suffered very much, taking many years to recover from that damage.

Figures 4 and 5, which are published by the JNTO, show the sharp decrease of Koreans visiting Japan. There are many disputes between Japan and South Korea. The most recent one is a political conflict. In the past, Korean workers were forced to work in factories and coal mines under the Japanese rule on the Korean Peninsula. In 2018, the Korean Supreme Court

Table 1: 2011 Visitor arrivals & Japanese overseas travelers

Month	Visitor Arrivals			Japanese Overseas Travelers		
	2010	2011	Change %	2010	2011	Change %
January	640,346 (437,752)	714,099 (505,543)	11.5 (15.5)	1,264,299	1,282,348	1.4
February	664,982 (514,106)	679,398 (506,446)	2.2 (-1.5)	1,289,825	1,391,193	7.9
March	709,684 (484,298)	352,666 (190,723)	-50.3 (-60.6)	1,563,113	1,420,584	-9.1
April	788,212 (601,872)	295,826 (108,820)	-62.5 (-81.9)	1,212,959	1,114,906	-8.1
May	721,348 (536,880)	357,783 (183,800)	-50.4 (-65.8)	1,262,453	1,152,339	-8.7
June	677,064 (511,123)	432,883 (282,167)	-36.1 (-44.8)	1,312,608	1,267,227	-3.5
January-June	4,201,636 (3,086,031)	2,832,655 (1,777,499)	-32.6 (-42.4)	7,905,257	7,628,597	-3.5

Source: Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2011.

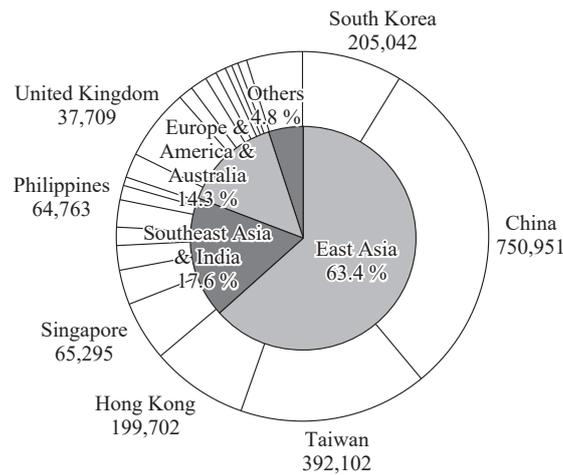


Figure 4: Visitor Arrivals in November 2019

Source: Reproduced by the author based on Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2020.

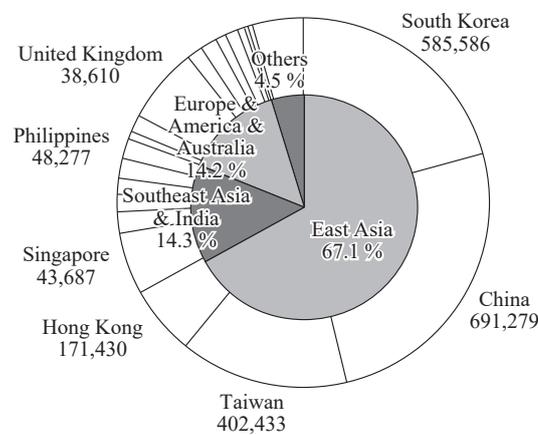


Figure 5: Visitor Arrivals in March 2019

Source: Reproduced by the author based on Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2019.

ordered that Japanese companies should pay unpaid wages and compensations to the workers. Some scholars and politicians in Japan used to say that not all were forced but they came to Japan on their own will and worked. The position of the Japanese government was, and is, that this dispute was already solved as the Japan-Korea Treaty was signed in 1965.

The Japanese government's position is that it has made compensation for the colonial era. In July 2019, the Japanese government decided to restrict exports of important semiconductor products to Korea. The Korean government took this unfriendly manner as retaliation of the Japanese government for this ruling. In opposition to this export control policy, a massive boycott of Japanese products took place in South Korea, and the Korean government decided to abolish the Japan-Korea Military Comprehensive Information Protection Agreement (GSOMIA), which shares confidential defense information among the U.S.A., South Korea and Japan. Later, South Korea reversed this policy under pressure from the U.S.A. government, however, the relation between the two countries has become so cold that it is the worst since World War II.

Anti-Japanese movement in South Korea has become so strong that many Koreans will not travel to Japan or hesitate to visit Japan. Figures 4 and 5, published by the JNTO, show the sudden decrease of Korean tourists in Japan. Before such conflicts occurred, the number of tourists from South Korea and from China was almost the same. Tourists from South Korea are since then decreasing, and this tendency continues in 2020 too. This problem is only a problem of the bilateral relationship. Japan could compensate for the loss of Korean tourists with increasing tourists from other nations. The year 2019 ended with a slight but increasing number of tourists in Japan.

In November 2019, there was in Wuhan an unknown epidemic which was later named Covid-19. The world community became aware of the epidemic in January 2020, and this strong infectious novel coronavirus has spread since then in a relatively short time all over the world. The number of infected people is growing and accordingly the death toll is soaring. The WHO called it officially a pandemic. Entry restrictions were imposed, followed by visa suspensions, tightened quarantines, and flight cancellations. The authorities of many countries have ordered

city blockades and events cancelled, so that it has led inevitably to restrictions on economic activities. The Olympic Games in Tokyo has been postponed, and this time, the negative impact on tourism was unprecedentedly huge and exceeded that of 2011 for Japan because the latter was a problem only limited to Japan.

Figure 6, published by the JNTO on April 15, 2020 shows the rapid decrease of foreign tourists to Japan from March 2019 to March 2020. It is impossible to predict when it will be possible to exit the tunnel, and it is unclear whether this has bottomed out or not. If the Japanese government positions tourism as an important pillar of growth, the government should take immediate action and provide support to ensure that many companies in the tourism industry can survive.

Reactions and perceptions toward influenza and the novel coronavirus disease are different. According to a WHO report, influenza kills every year between 250,000-500,000 people as the following quoted text shows. However, the perception of people is different:

‘Up to 650,000 deaths annually are associated with respiratory diseases from seasonal influenza, according to new estimates by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US-CDC), the World Health Organization and global health partners. This marks an increase on the previous global estimate of 250,000-500,000, which dates from over ten years ago and covered all influenza-related deaths, including cardiovascular disease or diabetes. The new figures of 290,000-650,000 deaths are based on more recent data from a larger, more diverse group of countries, including lower middle income countries, and exclude deaths from non-respiratory diseases’. (source: <https://www.who.int/>)

news-room/detail/14-12-2017-up-to-650-000-people-die-of-respiratory-diseases-linked-to-seasonal-flu-each-year.)

Why is it so difficult to curtail a pandemic? How often have epidemics attacked humankind up to now? In recent years, there were such epidemics such as Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) (2012-) and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) (2002-2003). The outbreak of these two epidemics was relatively regionally limited. The number of patients was not so big even though the fatality rates of the two syndromes are higher than Covid-19. The fatality rate of SARS was probably 9.6 % and that of MERS was 39 %. The HIV/AIDS pandemic (its peak was 2005-2012) has killed 36 million up to now. At first it caused a great panic in the entire world, but due to information fatigue and the widespread recognition that it is all right if you do not have close contact with others, and the development of treatments and medications for the disease, people live with HIV as business as usual. Even though this disease has not yet been eradicated, it is disappearing from people’s consciousness.

4. Human race is now being tested

An absolute protection against Covid-19 has yet to materialize and will supposedly take a long time. The scary thing about pandemics in today’s world is not only over-information by traditional mass media, but also the spread of information through the internet, especially social networking services. Such information can cause an outburst of anxiety, and an infodemic is sometimes more dangerous than an infectious disease itself. Arbitrary perceptions further stir up anxiety and feelings of insecurity and lead to personal attacks and buyouts. As Covid-19 was also known as the Wuhan flu, there was unhappy

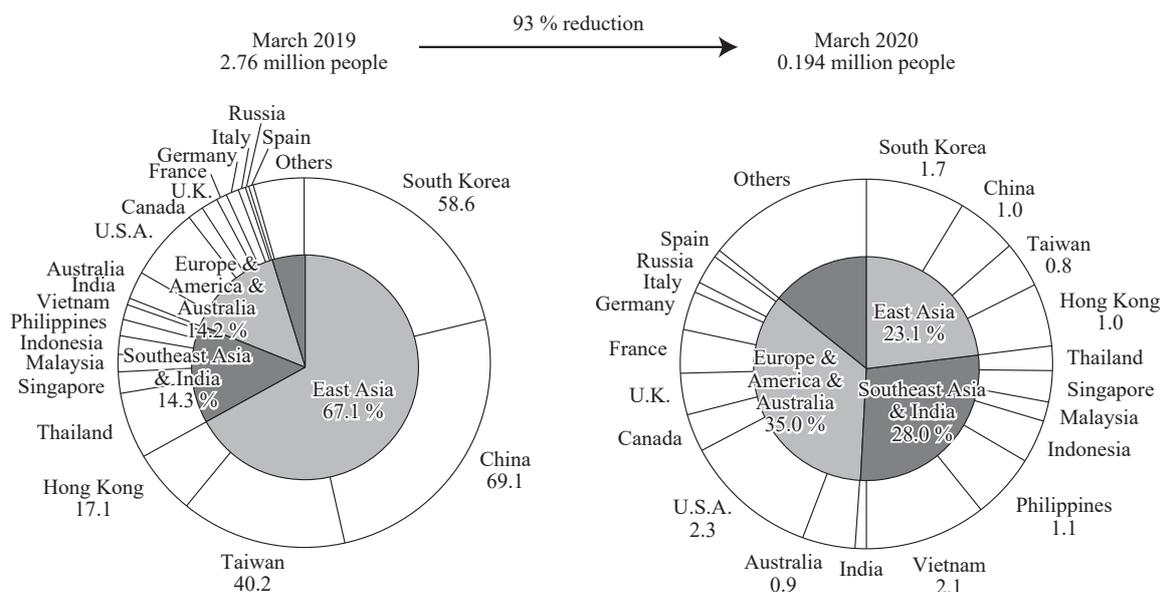


Figure 6: Comparison of number of foreign visitors to Japan
 Source: Reproduced by the author based on Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2020.

racial discrimination. Asians tourists with masks travelling in Western countries were tormented with the word “Corona” and beaten. Within two months it had become a pandemic, and an infectious explosion has occurred in Europe and the United States, thus Europe and America have become epicenters of Covid-19. The world has been divided by racial prejudice, patriotism and nationalism. In order to strengthen state control, Britain has decided to leave the EU, however, can such a nationalistic way of thought save its nation? Humankind should not be divided by borders, culture or race, and it is important for humanity to gather its wisdom and work together to fight against this pandemic. Novel viruses will continue to assault humanity in the future.

For the development of stable tourism it is necessary to cooperate internationally in advance so that we can be well prepared to deal with the next global incident successfully. For example, an international stockpile of masks, protective clothing and medical equipment and cooperation of international medical treatment systems are important issues. Can we humankind learn a lesson from Covid-19 to prepare for the next pandemic? Pope Francis imparted on March 27, 2020 at the Vatican in the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing: “In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters.” The same thing is also true for global tourism. It needs peace, solidarity and mutual trust. I could understand in the words the meaning of globalism.