
The Significance and Potential of Cultural Tourism in Japan

In Japan, the government is working to promote “Cultural Tourism” in regions centered on hub facilities, like art galleries, museums and other base facilities for cultural tourism.¹ We interviewed Professor Oshita Yoshiyuki of Doshisha University about cultural tourism in Japan. A cultural policy researcher, Oshita is also a member of numerous related governmental and municipal committees.

Please tell us about the basic concept and significance of cultural tourism as it is promoted by the Japanese government, as well as what sets it apart from sightseeing in general.

Tourism or sightseeing, in the first place, already means taking in and learning about the culture and the sights and scenery of a place one is visiting. Think of all the people who decide to include the Louvre Museum in trips to Paris, even if they rarely visit art galleries and museums otherwise. This is tourism seeking to deepen cultural understanding; in other words: cultural tourism. Culture and tourism have an inseparable relationship, like two wheels on the same cart.

The origins of tourism are considered to be found in the tradition of the Grand Tour, where upper-class European youths of the 17th and 18th centuries would embark on educational tours around the continent to learn more about the cultures and histories of other countries before entering aristocratic society as adults. In 2020, Japan enacted legislation to encourage a return to this essential approach to tourism. The Cultural Tourism Promotion Act makes base facilities for cultural tourism the core focus of efforts to promote culture-driven regional tourism. The objective of this act is to create a virtuous cycle by promoting both culture and tourism, revitalizing the region, and reinvesting in cultural promotion efforts as an economic benefit, centered on base facilities for cultural tourism

in region.

Could you explain what sort of effects and benefits visitors and local residents might experience as regions promote local cultural tourism, including specific examples?

Such regions can expect to experience two main benefits: economic impact and cultural effect.

The first, positive economic impact is the benefit from the circulation of money through the region, related to the Cultural Tourism Promotion Act I just mentioned.

The second is the cultural effect. In order to obtain this effect, let's first consider the case of visitors to Japan from overseas. A prerequisite is disseminating information to effectively

convey appealing features of the culture; in other words, putting into words aspects of the culture as it exists in daily life from a third-person point of view, the tourist's perspective. For example, when explaining the history, many will not be familiar with Japan's unique system of historical periods, such as the Edo period. Expressions like “from early 17th century to mid-late 19th century” will be needed instead. Then, if one tries to give explanations that even those who know absolutely nothing about Japanese culture will understand – for instance by making comparisons with the international situation at the time when mentioning the 1700s – even visitors from overseas should be able to follow along. This can stimulate their interest in Japanese culture and help them develop deeper understanding. Also, consider that this is an era in which information is shared personally on social media. Visitors who have absorbed this information become cultural disseminators themselves, conveying aspects of Japanese culture online as they experience it. This also leads to new discoveries of appealing facets from their perspectives.

Meanwhile, we, the people of Japan, will experience benefits by promoting cultural tourism, as well.



It should provide opportunities for local residents to rediscover the charms of their own areas, for one thing. Also, textual explanations for overseas visitors retranslated into Japanese could serve as excellent materials for Japanese children to learn about their own culture. This is because, the children, just like foreigners, do not have sufficient knowledge about Japanese culture. I anticipate that the promotion of cultural tourism to bring about considerable and widespread effects not limited to the tourism industry alone.

Could you point out some things you would like overseas visitors to see or experience for themselves when coming to Japan for cultural tourism? Please share what you think of as appealing features of cultural tourism in Japan that you would like to convey to people outside Japan.

I would say Japan's food culture and traditional *kogei* crafts. In a survey of overseas visitors conducted by the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), "the food" ranked first in what they looked forward to experiencing on a visit to Japan, and also as the aspect they were most satisfied with on their trip. I feel it is important, however, not to be satisfied with this ranking, but to logically explain what makes Japanese food so appealing. For example, the Japanese food culture is influenced by the geographical characteristics of the land, long and narrow Japanese archipelago with many range of mountains, and the abundance of good-quality, mountain-sourced or other sourced water has aided agricultural development. Furthermore, the blessing of marine products from the surrounding seas, which has given rise to our culture of eating some seafood raw. In particular, Kyoto cuisine does not just provide deliciousness, but also expresses



Arakurayama Sengen Park in Fujiyoshida City, Yamanashi Prefecture is popular among overseas visitors to Japan as a location where Mount Fuji can be photographed together with a five-story pagoda and fall foliage or cherry blossoms. It is less familiar, however, to residents of Japan. It came to be known globally thanks to tourist guide magazines and social media, and Japanese began to visit as well.



Photo: Tsuruoka Sightseeing Navigation

Above: Mount Gassan, one of the Three Sacred Mountains of Dewa, rises behind post-harvest rice fields in Tsuruoka City, Yamagata Prefecture: an unspoiled Japanese landscape.

Below: *Dadacha* soybeans, one of the approximately 60 characteristic indigenous crops maintained in Tsuruoka City, boast a sweet, rich flavor.

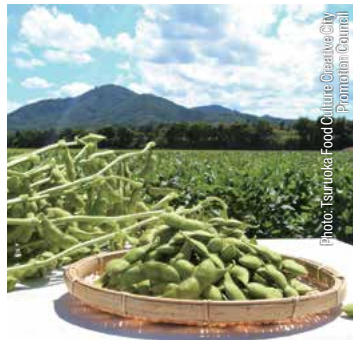


Photo: Tsuruoka Food Culture Creative City Promotion Council



Photo: Tsuruoka Food Culture Creative City Promotion Council

Shugendo culture has a 1,400-year history on the Dewa Sanzan peak of Mount Haguro. A ritual called Otaimatsu-hiki is performed overnight from New Year's Eve into New Year's Day each year, brightly illuminated with fires.

the essence of Kyoto in its entirety, including the tableware, furniture, and the atmosphere in which the meal is served. Then, the regional culinary cultures, I feel, is a form of cultural tourism that can be experienced only by visiting Japan. To actually consume local cuisine onsite oneself, with explanations of the factors that make it so appealing — this is bound to be a highly valuable cultural experience.

I'd like to illustrate this with the example of Tsuruoka City in Yamagata Prefecture where that sort of rich culinary culture can be experienced. In 2014, Tsuruoka was certified as a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network², becoming the first UNESCO Creative City in Japan in the field of Gastronomy. Its unique climate, influenced by the four changing



Photo: Tsuruoka Food Culture Creative City Promotion Council

An example of *shojin ryori* handed down at Mt. Haguro, which has developed along with the Shugendo culture of the Haguro monks

seasons, makes the area one of the center of rice cultivation in Japan, and produces a diverse range of agricultural products with about 60 varieties of native crops including vegetables, fruit trees, and grains. There is the Dewa Sanzan³ (Three Sacred Mountains of Dewa) where Shugendo⁴ is practiced nearby. With its rich abundance of culinary delights, this is a site of *shojin ryori*⁵ vegetarian cuisine development as well. Visitors will encounter diverse, bountiful culinary experiences here.

The other is *kogei*. While this can be translated into English as “crafts,” lately there is a tendency to leave it intentionally untranslated as *kogei*. In the historic development of art valuation in the West, “art” generally refers to pure art, fine art. There’s a division where anything created for some certain purpose will fall into the category of “crafts” rather than “art,” regardless of its beauty. This differs a bit from the Japanese sense of beauty, though, doesn’t it? “Crafts” have never been considered to be of a rank lower than “art” in Japan. The sort of beauty crafts might be endowed with has even been deemed to represent “true” beauty. This Japanese view of “functional beauty” can be shared with visitors from overseas as a kind of new value, thanks to its integration of aesthetic and practical value. Another benefit of crafts is that they can be easily purchased. If the *kogei* crafts found all throughout Japan come to be known as items of value in their respective regions, it should lead to economic circulation, providing the artisans who make them with a stable livelihood. That will be a positive effect that should help resolve difficulties finding successors to train, as well. I feel that using the term *kogei* to spread awareness of the crafts’ inherent value, rather than having them be seen as souvenirs, will be instrumental in further developing this field.

This is a trend that has already gotten underway. The large-scale “Go for Kogei”⁶ art events being held in the three Hokuriku region prefectures of Toyama, Ishikawa, and Fukui offer a great example. The exhi-

bitions are all held in sites of flourishing *kogei* craft production, communicating the value of *kogei* as something on par with “art.”

I believe that pressing forward with the promotion of cultural tourism, taking the opportunity as people of Japan to reaffirm our own culture while conveying it to overseas visitors, will have positive impacts on a diverse range of fields here in Japan. ㊦



Example of a traditional *kogei* craft: *Hakkenshita Showakusei Raku Marin* (“Found Asteroid Raku Marin”) by Toshio Ohi Chozaemon XI. The artist is a ceramicist active in Japan and abroad, producing traditional forms of pottery used in the traditional tea ceremony while incorporating approaches rooted in contemporary art, as well. He is heir to the approximately 350-year tradition of Ohi Ware production in Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture.



At a “Go for Kogei” exhibition featuring traditional crafts, one of a number of such events held throughout the city of Toyama.

1. Japanese museums or other cultural facilities serve as bases for promoting regional cultural tourism by providing explanations and introduction to foster deeper understanding of culture and working with tourism-related personnel as defined in the Cultural Tourism Promotion Act.
 2. A new program established by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2004. It provides a framework to support international collaboration and mutual exchange between cities seeking to revitalize their respective regions with the aim of promoting creative local industries, protecting cultural diversity, and contributing to sustainable world development. In addition to gastronomy, it includes six other fields of study: literature, film, music, craft and folk arts, design, and media arts.
 3. A collective term for the three peaks of Mount Gassan, Mount Haguro, and Mount Yudono, which

are located in the area between the city of Tsuruoka and the towns of Nishikawa and Shonai in Yamagata Prefecture.

4. An ancient Japanese form of mountain worship. A religion unique to Japan that formed with the influence of esoteric *mikkyo* and other Buddhist sects. Practitioners of the faith engage in ascetic practices in mountainous settings.
 5. A plant-based cuisine that uses no meat or seafood, based on Buddhist teachings. It developed as a diet for monks.
 6. A festival held since 2020 in the three Hokuriku region prefectures of Toyama, Ishikawa, and Fukui, with events designed to communicate the appeal of *kogei* crafts from a contemporary perspective. Encompassing exhibitions by creators of contemporary art and other events.