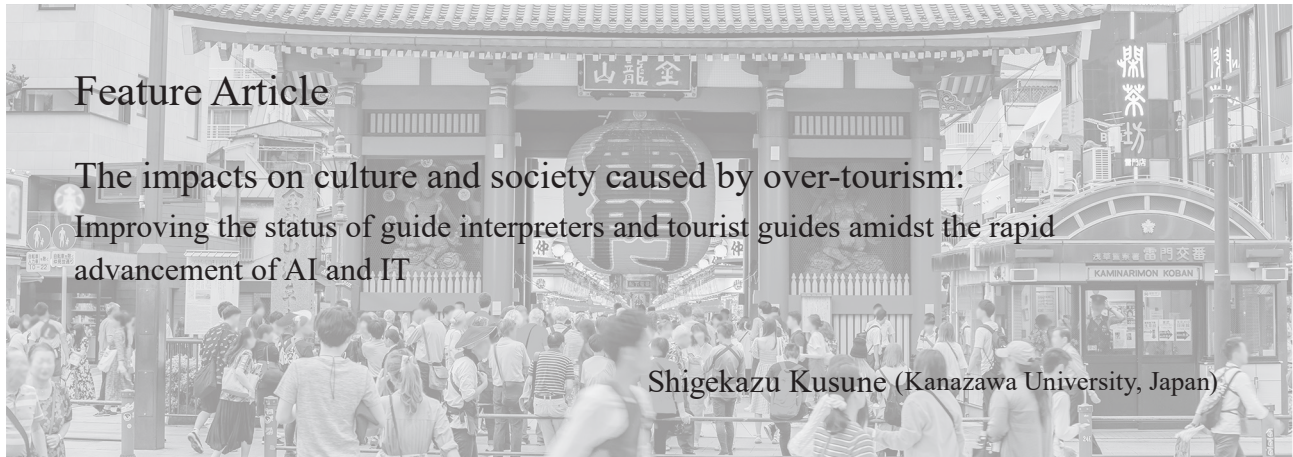


Feature Article

The impacts on culture and society caused by over-tourism:  
Improving the status of guide interpreters and tourist guides amidst the rapid advancement of AI and IT

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1. Preface

When comparing international tourism statistics, Japan does not emerge as a country with a high influx of foreign tourists. It may sound strange because we often hear over-tourism and inbound tourists. Historically, Japan has not been a popular destination for foreign tourists since the Meiji era. For a long time, the focus of tourism in Japan has been on domestic travel, characterized by communal meals, shared baths, souvenir purchases within the facility, and returning home after a few days' journey.

Such travel patterns are the result of Japan's non-ratification of the International Labour Organization's Paid Vacations Convention (No. 132) of 1970, which states that "workers shall be entitled to an annual leave with pay of three working weeks (15 days for a five-day week and 18 days for a six-day week) for every year of work. Leave shall normally be taken in one pe-

riod, but where necessary, may be divided into parts, provided that one part shall not be less than two working weeks." In other words, the provision stipulating that paid vacation must be taken consecutively for two weeks has not been ratified, and furthermore, the rate of paid vacation uptake is exceptionally low in Japan. According to a survey by the prominent travel brand Expedia, Japan's uptake rate is reported to be notably poor when compared to other major countries as shown in Figure 1.

These statistics may overlook certain factors. In Japan, many individuals opt to utilize paid vacation when they need to leave work for events such as medical treatments. While separate medical leave is available for hospital visits, treatments, or short-term hospitalizations, many individuals choose to use their paid vacation days instead. Consequently, in Japan, extended vacations are often concentrated around occasions such

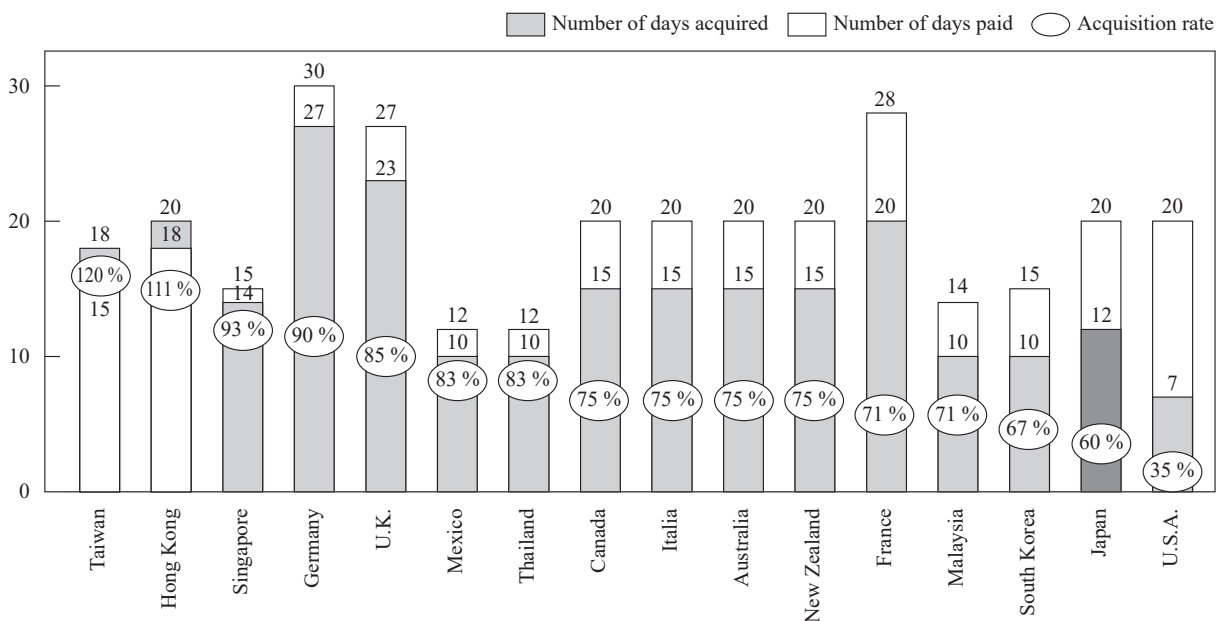


Figure 1: Comparison of paid leave acquisition status in 16 regions around the world in 2022

Source: Created by the author based on Expedia, 2023, [https://www.expedia.co.jp/stories/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Expedia\\_Vacation-Deprivation-2022-1.pdf](https://www.expedia.co.jp/stories/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Expedia_Vacation-Deprivation-2022-1.pdf).

as honeymoons, extended holidays, or the New Year, where several days of leave can afford a longer period of rest. Furthermore, typical travel patterns in Japan consist of short-term trips lasting one to three days, during which travelers strive to maximize their experiences within this limited time-frame. Despite this, during periods of economic prosperity in Japan, characterized by a strong Japanese yen, Japanese nationals enjoyed overseas travel opportunities. However, prolonged economic downturns in Japan, coupled with the government's policy of low wages, have resulted in a continuous decline in real wages over the past 30 years.

Foreigners living in Japan are all counted as tourists upon entry. Individuals leaving Japan are also counted as tourists. This includes departures for purposes such as business, visiting relatives living abroad, research, conferences, sports, and other reasons, all considered under the umbrella of tourist statistics. This upwards tendency was disrupted by COVID-19. Looking at the data for 2023 and the beginning months of 2024, the number of foreign nationals entering the country is gradually approaching pre-COVID levels. As the yen depreciates and fuel costs soar, the expenses associated with outbound travel from Japan have not increased. Conversely, inbound travel to Japan has become more appealing due to the remarkable decrease in prices, positioning Japan as an attractive destination in terms of value for money among advanced economies. The emphasis shifted towards attracting a significant influx of foreign tourists, commonly referred to as "inbound tourism." Unfortunately, Japan faced a surge in foreign tourists before fully establishing the necessary infrastructure to accommodate individual travelers from abroad. Despite the decline in

tourists from mainland China, which opposes the discharge of processed water, diluted to some extent to remove radioactive substances, from the contaminated water resulting from the nuclear accident in Eastern Japan into the Pacific Ocean, the number of tourists from other regions to Japan has increased. Consequently, inbound tourism to Japan, which lacks fully established reception facilities, is profoundly changing Japanese society (see Figure 2).

The Japanese government has been promoting the increase of foreign tourists as a reflection of Japan's attractiveness. However, the issuance of a large volume of deficit bonds and the increase in interest rates may lead to the collapse of the deficit bonds previously issued. Anticipating an inability to raise interest rates, this has prompted a depreciation of the Japanese yen. Over the past year, the Japanese yen, when converted into US dollars, requires over 50 percent more yen to obtain one dollar. The significant decrease in overseas tourists from Japan should be attributed to three decades of low-wage policies and the precipitous decline of the Japanese yen. Over-tourism should be regarded as a transient blossom blooming atop the failures of Japan's economic policies.

In this paper, Chapter 2 titled "Over-tourism" addresses the issues surrounding the distortion of Japanese culture and society caused by tourism, commonly referred to as over-tourism. Chapter 3 discusses "How to improve the status of tourist guides." Due to the increase in the number of foreign tourists, compounded by the depreciation of the yen, significant changes have swept through Japan's tourism interpreting and guiding sector. Taking the lead, the JNTO initiated reforms in examination and guide systems. Additionally, the profession of tour-

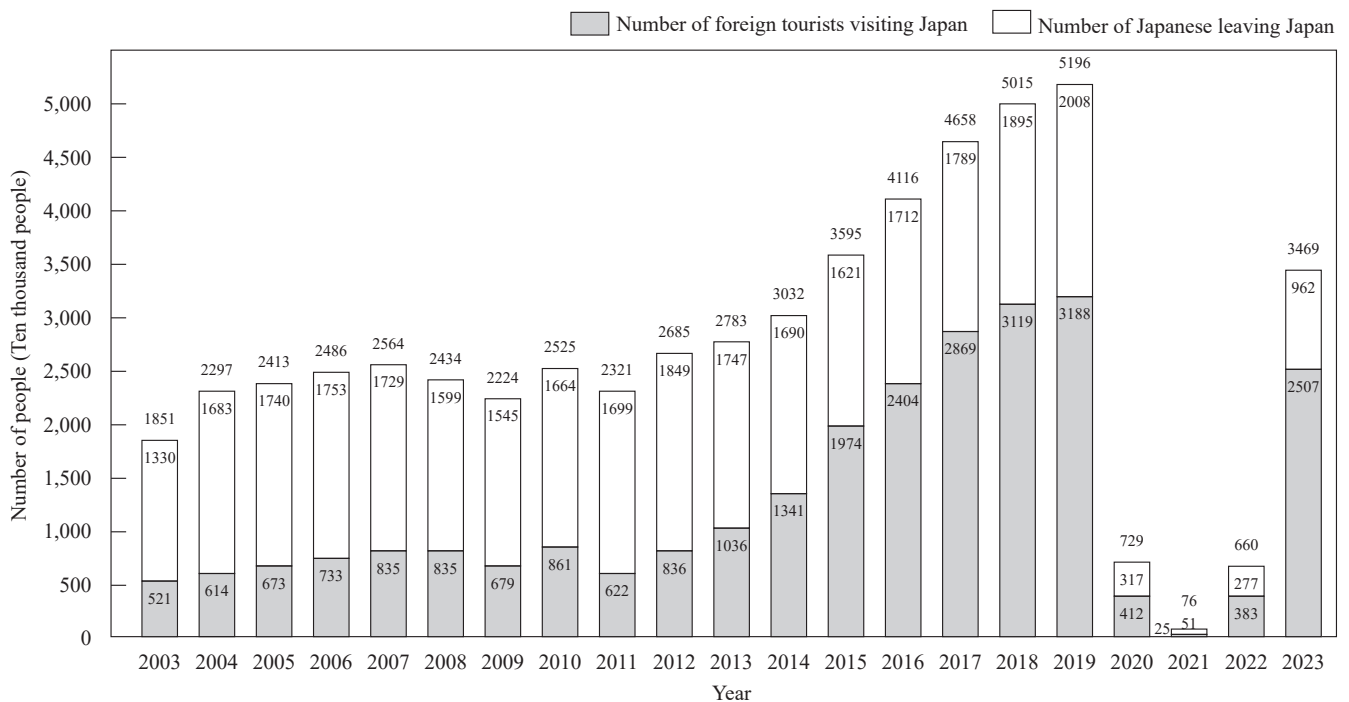


Figure 2: Trends in the number of foreign tourists visiting Japan and trends in the number of Japanese people leaving Japan

Source: Created by the author based on Japan National Tourism Organization, 2023, [https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankochu/siryou/toukei/in\\_out.html](https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankochu/siryou/toukei/in_out.html).

ist guides now demands a variety of supplementary services, with the tourist guide examination requiring diverse additional capabilities.

Nevertheless, in response to the rapid increase in foreign tourists, anyone can now engage in interpreting services for compensation, even without formal qualifications. This allowance suggests a measure taken by the Japanese tourism industry to accommodate the need for inexpensive unqualified interpreters. I will discuss the impact of the drastic surge in foreign tourists and the Japan Tourism Agency's "system reform" on tour guide interpretation. In the final chapter titled "Can tour guide interpreters survive amid rapid advancements in AI and IT?" we will contemplate whether tourist guides can survive amidst the rapid evolution of AI and IT. If survival is plausible, I will propose my views on how tour guide interpretation should evolve to adapt to these changes.

## 2. Over-tourism

In Japan, where wages have continuously declined over the past three decades, efforts have been directed towards attracting high-spending foreign tourists to stimulate economic activity. Various strategies have been employed, including inviting individuals from the tourism industry abroad, leveraging influencers, disseminating information online, and enticing tourists. To accommodate the increasing number of tourists, hotels and inns have been constructed around tourist destinations and major stations. The rapid construction of such accommodations often surprises observers. Even in rural areas, the price per square meter of land, which has long stagnated in tourist destinations, has begun to rise. Emphasizing Japanese aesthetics, hotels have adorned their corridors and rooms with traditional art-crafts that were previously found only in Japanese homes and tea rooms. Despite being Western-style buildings, some hotels incorporate traditional Japanese elements such as tiled entrances and open-air baths, along with the addition of Japanese gardens, to highlight Japan's unique cultural heritage.

Such strategies include emphasizing hospitality, Japanese aesthetics, and traditional Japanese cuisine. Recently, areas where private homes once stood have been rapidly transformed into restaurants offering *sushi* and *tempura*. For example, in Kyoto's non-war-damaged Machiya district, which was once renowned for *Nishijin* weaving and *kimonos*, and where the patrons supporting the Gion Festival resided, long, narrow townhouses known as "eel beds" lined the streets. These areas retained a true sense of Kyoto's essence with their *tatami* gardens and tea rooms. However, high-rise hotels with rooms offering panoramic city views are often built in low-rise residential areas, altering the urban landscape. During the late Meiji and early Taisho periods, when there were no electricity or automobiles, rickshaws served as the means of transportation for foreigners and the wealthy people. Although they had disappeared for nearly a century, they have been revived in tourist destinations to satisfy the desires of foreign tourists seeking "Japanese aesthetics." In places like the bamboo groves of Arashiyama,

designated paths for rickshaws have been established, allowing visitors to take photographs against the backdrop of the bamboo forest. 'Cosplaying' (costume playing) in traditional attire, for both men and women, has become a trend at tourist destinations. Costume rental shops have proliferated, and even Japanese tourists now enjoy strolling through the streets dressed in *kimonos*.

Observing places like Kamakura, Enoshima, Tsukiji, Asakusa, Kiyomizu Temple, Arashiyama, Fushimi Inari, Shirakawa-go, among others, it becomes evident that the entire region undergoes significant transformations due to the influx of tourists. At Tsukiji's outdoor market, foreign tourists line up daily in search of *sushi*. For them high prices do not matter. Formerly the kitchen of Kanazawa citizens, the Omicho Market now serves as a dining district for tourists, including foreigners, resulting in fewer locals seeking fish at the market. Moreover, premium fresh fish are shipped to Tokyo via the Shinkansen, seemingly diminishing the function of fish markets in this regional city. Similar changes have been noted in Osaka's Kuromon Market, transitioning into a dining district targeting foreigners, thereby the local populace avoid this market. Not exempt from this trend is the once serene Nishiki Market in Kyoto, a familiar site since my student days. No longer the hub for Kyoto residents. It has transformed into bars and restaurants catering to foreign tourists. While Nishiki Street indeed exudes more vibrancy than before, it no longer serves as a place frequented by the general populace for shopping.

Under the guise of attracting repeat foreign visitors, Japanese culture is commodified through a shift from passive sightseeing to active experiential tourism. Catering to affluent foreign tourists, experiences such as tea ceremonies are offered, providing instruction in the art of tea. Activities such as fish handling, knife sharpening techniques, *ninja* shows, *sake* tasting courses, *sushi* making, observing fish market auctions, *sumo* wrestling matches, and visits to *sumo* stables are also incorporated into tourist itineraries. While previously the presence of foreigners in fish markets, taking photographs and touching fish, generated attention, the inclusion of auctions as tourist attractions emerged with the increasing interest from foreign tourists.

The phenomenon of inbound tourism undeniably has adverse effects on cities and cultures. The common assets possessed by traditional Japanese cities are fragmented, leading to soaring dining costs and alienation of citizens. Previously, the teahouse districts in cities like Kanazawa, once venues for citizen entertainment such as *geigi* (*geisha*) performances, resonated with the sounds of drums and *shamisen*. Presently, houses in traditional teahouse style with lattice doors have been replaced by souvenir shops, gold leaf outlets, cafés, and dining districts. When I first moved near the teahouse district in Higashiyama in Kanazawa, teahouses were in decline, existing merely as a corner of ordinary residential areas. The main street was converted into tourist establishments with the installation of gas lamps, gradually transforming into a tourists' area, diverging

from the essence of teahouse culture. Initially, such businesses were limited to main streets, but they spread to back alleys and lanes. Nearby, expansive parking lots have been constructed. Now touted as representative tourist attractions preserving “teahouse culture,” these areas have become emblematic of Kanazawa, attracting a steady stream of tourists.

The *gassho-zukuri* (thatched-roof) houses spanning from Gokayama to Shirakawa-go were once sustained by sericulture. However, with the decline of this industry and subsequent population outflow, *gassho-zukuri* buildings gradually faced demolition. Upon recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, substantial transformations ensued. Entrepreneurs recognizing the tourism potential began constructing new *gassho-zukuri* buildings, alongside the erection of massive hotels. What was originally a tranquil, secluded area is now inundated with buses and private vehicles. *Gassho-zukuri* houses scattered across Toyama and Gifu Prefectures, especially those situated off the beaten tourist path, faced extinction. Shirakawa-go was initially remote, accessible only via a single road. However, with the construction of the Tokai-Hokuriku Expressway’s Shirakawa-go Interchange, accessibility drastically improved. Consequently, numerous tourist buses and private vehicles visit, straining the limited valley parking. Traffic congestion plagues this “hidden gem” on weekends and holidays, exacerbating tourism-related environmental pollution. A restaurant located at a scenic overlook point, recently closed its parking lot due to deteriorating behavior of tourists. Situated en route to Amo Pass, the setting for Izumi Kyoka’s work “*Koyahijiri*,” this restaurant was originally not designed to accommodate heavy traffic.

This is referred to as the phenomenon of over-tourism, and as a solution, the Japan Tourism Agency advocates redirecting tourists to regions that have not yet been extensively developed. Without proper infrastructure development, attracting tourists can lead to the transformation of cities into theme park-like environments. Personally, I avoid visiting places such as Shirakawa-go and the teahouse districts in eastern Kanazawa because I cannot accept their transformation into theme parks. Accommodation facilities are erected in peaceful residential areas, attracting numerous tourists and leading to the construction of restaurants and souvenir shops, ultimately resulting in the displacement of residents and the loss of tranquility. This phenomenon has become commonplace in cities like Kyoto, Kamakura, Shirakawa-go, Takayama, and Kurashiki. Once characterized by serene residential areas with temples and gardens, districts exuding a sense of traditional Japanese “*wa*” (harmony) are excessively consumed, leading to the loss of their charm and exacerbating tourism pollution. Hotels proliferate in quiet tourist destinations, bringing in unrelated goods and souvenirs to fulfill tourists’ desires, raising doubts about whether items sold in places truly represent Japanese culture.

With the increase in foreign tourists, it has become commonplace for business hotels to exceed 15,000 yen per night. Consequently, Japanese business travelers, whose travel budgets

typically do not allow for such expenses, are reluctantly driven towards ‘capsule’ hotels or shared accommodations in areas frequented by foreigners. Furthermore, not all foreign tourists engage in high-spending activities, leading to heightened pressure for affordable lodging options. For instance, in Osaka’s Airin district, previously utilized by cheap laborers from the construction industry, inexpensive hotels have transitioned into foreigner-centric accommodations. Even in places like Kyoto, the proliferation of private lodging facilities has resulted in opposition from residents, evident in flyers decrying the presence of foreign loiterers in residential areas. The surge in foreign travelers has prompted an incremental acceptance of private lodgings. Failure to develop adequate hotel infrastructure risks compromising the charm of towns. Moreover, soaring land prices may displace lower-income residents. While make-shift accommodations and private lodgings are mandated to facilitate guest stays and ensure prompt assistance within ten minutes, such measures are ad hoc and potentially hazardous. If the Japanese government and tourism stakeholders condone this situation, tourism cannot be deemed sustainable. This phenomenon is not unique to Japan but is rather global in nature. Reports from Venice indicate a 22 % decline in essential shops and services over a decade, impacting residents’ daily lives.<sup>(1)</sup> The notion that transforming regions for profit disregards long-term sustainability; it risks alienating residents and ultimately turning into abandoned theme parks due to over-consumption and disinterest. It is imperative to involve local residents as stakeholders in tourism development, preserving their livelihoods and cultural heritage while striving for compatibility with tourism.

### 3. How to improve the status of tourist guides

In response to the increasing number of foreign tourists visiting Japan, efforts have been made to expand the number of tour guide interpreters. To achieve this, various new systems for interpreters have been introduced. In 2006, the “Region-Specific Tour Guide Interpreter” system was introduced. This system aimed to increase the number of interpreters specializing in specific regions by implementing region-specific interpreter exams for those unable to cover the entire country. Successful candidates are granted interpreter guide qualifications limited to the particular regions. Another system introduced in 2011 is the “Comprehensive Special Zone Tour Guide Interpreter.” With proficiency in languages and completion of regional training, individuals are permitted to work as guides exclusively within that region. This system offers more lenient qualification criteria compared to the “Region-Specific Tour Guide Interpreter” system. The pinnacle was reached in 2018 with the abolition of the exclusive regulation of tour guide interpreter duties. This change allows anyone, regardless of qualifications, to engage in guiding activities for remuneration.

Previously, according to the system design, only individuals holding the national qualification of tour guide interpreter (National Tour Guide Interpreter) were allowed to engage in tour



guide interpreter work. However, it was more profitable to entrust work to individuals operating in the shadows, leading to the prevalence of unregistered guides. However, with the abolition of the exclusive regulation of tour guide interpreter duties in 2018, albeit crudely put, unregistered guides have gained official recognition. Despite some protests from tour guide interpreters (National Tour Guide Interpreters), those working as independent contractors were unable to organize unified action. Individuals receiving work from travel agencies, particularly those with qualifications, often did not feel affected and showed little interest in engaging in tour guide interpreter work due to various reasons. The tourism industry perceives this situation as an opportunity and hence, there is little observable movement. The only aspect retained for tour guide interpreters (National Tour Guide Interpreters) is the exclusive use of the title, meaning that only those officially recognized as National Tour Guide Interpreters can use the title. Whether individuals performing interpreter guide duties possess a National Tour Guide Interpreter registration card depends on the awareness of tourism operators regarding the preference for assigning tour guide interpreter work to individuals holding this qualification.

Let us examine the actual situation of National Tour Guide Interpreters. The issue arises from the observation, as highlighted by Ayami Murakami (p. 9),<sup>(2)</sup> that while 70 % of foreign tourists visiting Japan originate from East Asia and Southeast Asia, 70 % of registered guides are English-speaking guides. Murakami draws upon the statement by the Japan Tourism Agency in 2014 regarding the “Employment Status of Tour Guide Interpreters,” which addresses the regional and linguistic disparities among tour guide interpreters. According to the findings of this study, there is a concentration of registered guides in major tourist destinations such as Tokyo (30.3 %), Kanagawa (13.1 %), and Osaka (8.7 %), with a scarcity of work opportunities in rural areas. Furthermore, due to the low an-

nual work-rates among tour guide interpreters, many fail to achieve sufficient income, resulting in a significant number of unemployed individuals in this field.

According to the findings of the survey conducted by the Japan Tourism Agency in 2014, approximately 40 % of tour guide interpreters utilized their qualifications for work engagements less than 10 times annually. Furthermore, it has been revealed that approximately 46 % of employed individuals earned an annual income of less than 1 million yen, with approximately 75.7 % being unemployed (see Figure 3). It is pointed out that many of these circumstances stem from the inability to secure consistent income. In other words, the issue lies not in the shortage of tour guide interpreters, but rather in the lack of available work opportunities, leading to under-utilization of the qualifications possessed by individuals. As of April 2019, the total number of registered National Tour Guide Interpreters across the 47 prefectures in Japan amounted to 25,239 individuals, yet only 24.3 % of them were actually engaged in active employment.<sup>(3)</sup>

The high prevalence of individuals without formal training and the scarcity of full-time professionals may suggest inherent flaws in the system design. Essentially, it implies that many individuals may have taken the interpreter guide qualification exam not out of genuine interest in pursuing the profession, but rather as a means of simply undergoing a language proficiency test. This phenomenon raises questions about the efficacy of addressing the issue solely through the relaxation of examination standards by the Japan Tourism Agency in order to increase the number of qualified guides. Furthermore, in rural areas where job opportunities are limited, there are instances of internal monopolization of work among a close-knit group, where jobs are exclusively reserved for members of this group and distributed internally, while external individuals are excluded.

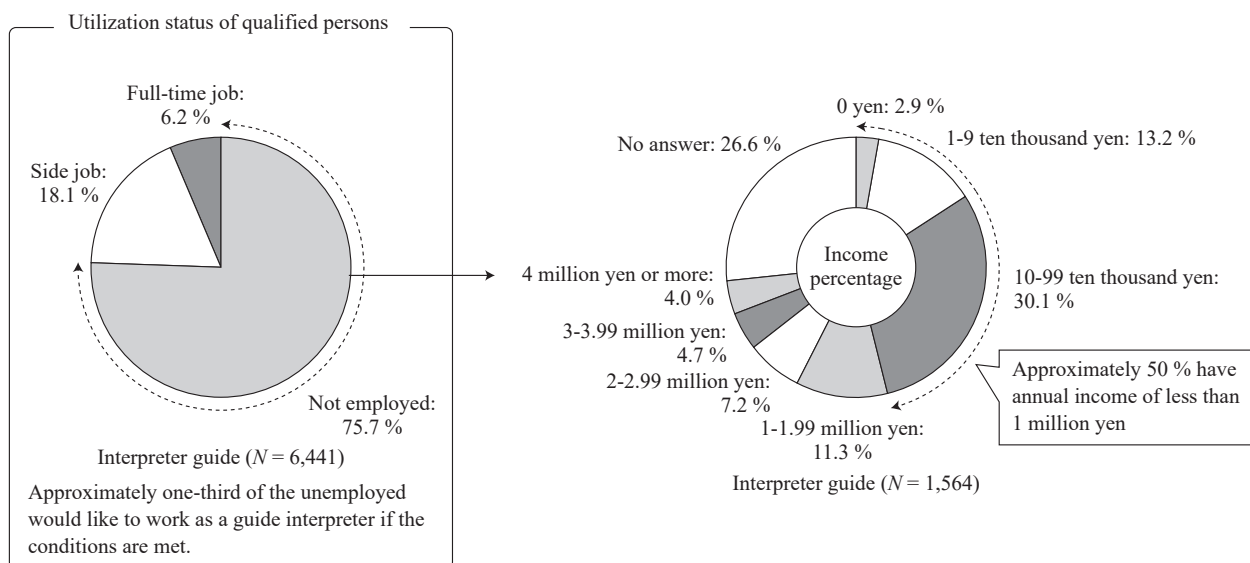


Figure 3: Current status of employment conditions for interpreter guides, published by  
 Source: Created by the author based on JNTO on December 2014.

Since 2018, the examination for tour guide interpreters has included a component on “Practical Tour Guiding,” and individuals who obtained their certification prior to this inclusion are now obligated to undertake this examination component. The rationale behind this examination adjustment is to mandate that tour guide interpreters (national certified tour guide interpreters) possess knowledge akin to that of travel business handling managers. Consequently, the aim is to equip them not only with the ability to provide tourist guidance while on board tour buses but also to imbue them with the knowledge required to ensure the smooth execution of travel itineraries in accordance with the responsibilities of travel business handling managers. Additionally, as of April 2020, a modification was made to the system whereby once tour guide interpreter certification

Table 1: Number of applicants, number of successful applicants, and pass rate

| Year | Number of applicants | Number of successful applicants | Pass rate (%) |
|------|----------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|
| 2023 | 3,638                | 436                             | 12.0          |
| 2022 | 3,472                | 571                             | 16.4          |
| 2021 | 3,834                | 347                             | 9.1           |
| 2020 | 5,078                | 489                             | 9.6           |
| 2019 | 7,284                | 618                             | 8.5           |
| 2018 | 7,651                | 753                             | 9.6           |
| 2017 | 10,564               | 1,649                           | 15.6          |
| 2016 | 11,307               | 2,404                           | 21.3          |
| 2015 | 10,975               | 2,119                           | 19.3          |
| 2014 | 7,290                | 1,658                           | 22.7          |
| 2013 | 4,706                | 1,201                           | 25.5          |
| 2012 | 5,000                | 713                             | 14.2          |
| 2011 | 5,485                | 894                             | 16.3          |
| 2010 | 7,239                | 932                             | 12.9          |
| 2009 | 8,078                | 1,225                           | 15.2          |
| 2008 | 8,972                | 1,558                           | 17.4          |
| 2007 | 9,245                | 1,905                           | 20.6          |
| 2006 | 8,695                | 1,137                           | 13.1          |
| 2005 | 7,043                | 789                             | 11.2          |
| 2004 | 6,066                | 408                             | 6.7           |
| 2003 | 6,300                | 331                             | 5.3           |
| 2002 | 5,712                | 316                             | 5.5           |
| 2001 | 5,700                | 397                             | 7.0           |
| 2000 | 5,687                | 397                             | 7.0           |
| 1999 | 5,942                | 392                             | 6.6           |
| 1998 | 5,897                | 393                             | 6.7           |
| 1997 | 5,561                | 333                             | 6.0           |
| 1996 | 5,316                | 347                             | 6.5           |
| 1995 | 5,087                | 408                             | 8.0           |
| 1994 | 6,501                | 497                             | 7.6           |

Source: Created by the author based on the data published by JNTO.

is obtained, it is subject to a finite validity period rather than being indefinite. National certified tour guide interpreters are required to undergo tour guide interpretation training provided by registered training institutions and pass an examination every five years. Failure to attend this tour guide interpretation training renders the registration of the tour guide interpreter subject to cancellation by the prefectural authorities, with a subsequent two-year period during which re-registration is prohibited. It is conceivable that in the near future, there may be intentions to confer upon tour guide interpreters (national certified tour guide interpreters) the qualification of chief tour conductor. It is inferred that the lack of this qualification may diminish opportunities for tour guide interpreters to engage in their profession. Reforms have been enacted in alignment with the tourism industry’s desire to legalize illicit guiding practices and to equip tour guide interpreters with the qualification of chief tour conductor, thereby facilitating cost-saving measures. Table 1 shows a chart illustrating the fluctuation in the pass rates of tour guide interpreter examinations over time. Observing this trend reveals a notable increase in pass rates since 2007.

In the year 2010, coinciding with the Tokyo Olympics, which were actually held a year later, there was a notable surge in inbound foreign tourists, reaching nearly 32 million from 2013 to 2019. This observation highlights a subtle correlation between the pass rates of examinations and the influx of foreign tourists visiting Japan. Criticism emerged from organizations with a significant number of tour guide interpreters addressed to the Japan Tourism Agency, pointing out a sharp decline in pass rates and an increase in difficult and unconventional questions, coinciding with the cessation of foreign arrivals due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I have examined this issue, but it appears that there may be some arbitrary adjustments to the number of successful candidates.

To propose a solution for alleviating the unattractive and precarious state of Japan’s tour guide interpreters, it is suggested that recruitment systems should be made more transparent. Additionally, tour guide companies should require various paid training programs for tour guide interpreters, and failure to participate in such programs should not result in withholding job opportunities. Such measures only exacerbate the financial strain on tour guide interpreters already struggling with low incomes. Instead, it would be more beneficial for the Japan Tourism Agency to utilize its resources to provide free career support and training opportunities for tour guide interpreters.

Improving Working Conditions: By enhancing the working conditions of tour guide interpreters and providing measures such as stable employment and adjustments in working hours, it is possible to enhance the quality of life for professionals in this field. When freelancers experience accidents or incur damages, attributing these solely to their freelance status, thus absolving the companies that contracted their services of any responsibility, would be akin to the situation observed with Uber. Freelancers are compelled to take out insurance at their

own expense, in order to mitigate risks. Rather than continually burdening low-income tour guide interpreters as seen earlier, it should be incumbent upon the travel agencies that contracted their services to cover any losses incurred. Some agencies even enforce excessive working hours without setting upper limits, effectively coercing freelancers into over-working. It is imperative that agencies compensate freelance tour guide interpreters, who often hold weaker bargaining positions, for any overtime worked.

**Diversification of Contracts:** It is imperative to secure multiple clients and sources of work rather than relying solely on a single client. Collaborating with different tour operators and event planners facilitates stabilization of work opportunities.

**Strengthening Industry Regulations:** Enhanced industry regulations are necessary to exclude individuals providing substandard interpretation services or guiding activities. This would result in a reduction of interpretation services offered by unqualified individuals and an increase in demand for certified tour guide interpreters.

#### 4. Can tour guide interpreters survive amid rapid advancements in AI and IT?

The description of tourist destinations, even if written in Japanese, can be instantly translated into one's preferred language by capturing the image with a camera, thanks to available applications. Regarding tourist attractions, information in Japanese such as guidance about sightseeing spots and nearby dining options can also be swiftly converted into one's native language. It is anticipated that a growing number of individuals will consider listening to explanations from mediocre guides as a waste of time. Furthermore, it has become easier to communicate in one's native language with tablets without the need for typing; by simply speaking to the tablet, it can instantly translate into the interlocutor's language and convey the message through audio. Interpreters are no longer necessary, as tablets equipped with such capabilities are being installed in Japanese tourist information centers and stations. In this context, ChatGPT is exemplified. With the incorporation of GPT-4, the paid version of ChatGPT, into mobile devices, users can request explanations of, for example, Kiyomizu Temple in their native language or ask about its highlights via voice input, and receive instant responses in their native language. This service is available for a monthly fee of 20 US dollars (approximately 3,000 yen).

The response of ChatGPT to the following question is documented. Whether requested by text or by voice, the response remains the same. My question is: Please explain to me the touristic important points about the Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto! Only after three or four seconds, I received the following answers.

ChatGPT:

Kiyomizu-dera, officially Otowa-san Kiyomizu-dera, is one of the most celebrated temples in Kyoto, Japan. Here are

some key points about its significance:

**Historical Importance:** Kiyomizu-dera was founded in 778 AD during the *Heian* period. The temple has a rich history spanning over a thousand years and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

**Architectural Marvels:** The temple's main hall, known as the Hondo or Kiyomizu Stage, is particularly famous for its impressive wooden structure. It's constructed without the use of nails, and it offers stunning views of Kyoto City, especially during cherry blossom and autumn foliage seasons.

**Otowa Waterfall:** One of the most iconic features of Kiyomizu-dera is the Otowa Waterfall. Visitors can drink from three separate streams of water, each with a different benefit- longevity, success in school, or a fortunate love life. However, it's customary to choose only one, as drinking from all three is considered greedy.

**Cherry Blossom and Autumn Leaves:** Kiyomizu-dera is renowned for its breathtaking views during the cherry blossom season in spring and the vibrant autumn foliage season in November. The surrounding hillside, adorned with cherry and maple trees, creates a picturesque setting.

**Jishu Shrine:** Located within the temple grounds, Jishu Shrine is dedicated to *Okuninushi*, a deity of love and match-making. It's believed that if you can walk safely from one stone to another with your eyes closed, your wish for finding love will come true.

**Cultural Performances:** Throughout the year, Kiyomizu-dera hosts various cultural performances and events, such as traditional tea ceremonies, *ikebana* (flower arranging), and meditation sessions, offering visitors a deeper insight into Japanese culture and spirituality.

**Surrounding Area:** The temple is situated in the Higashiyama district of Kyoto, which is known for its preserved historic streets lined with traditional wooden houses, shops, and cafés. Exploring the surrounding area provides a glimpse into the old-world charm of Kyoto.

Overall, Kiyomizu-dera is not only a significant religious site but also a cultural and architectural gem that attracts millions of visitors annually, offering them a memorable experience steeped in history and natural beauty.

No matter how excellent an interpreter guide may be, there is likely no one who can generate a document as swiftly as this in just a few seconds.

Since the previous question lacked an explanation about the stage of Kiyomizu Temple, I further inquired as follows: Please explain more about Kiyomizu wooden terrace!

Similarly, after three or four seconds, the following response was received:

ChatGPT:

The Kiyomizu Stage, also known as the Kiyomizu wooden terrace, is one of the most iconic features of Kiyomizu-dera Temple in Kyoto, Japan. Here's more detail about this re-

markable structure:

**Architecture:** The Kiyomizu Stage is a massive wooden veranda that juts out from the main hall of the temple, known as the Hondo, supported by a framework of wooden pillars. It is constructed entirely without the use of nails, using a traditional Japanese method of joinery known as “*kakezukuri*” (a structure that hangs over a cliff).

**Location:** Situated on the steep slope of Mount Otowa, the Kiyomizu Stage offers breathtaking views of the surrounding scenery, including the city of Kyoto. The elevation of the stage provides visitors with a unique perspective, particularly during the cherry blossom season in spring and the colorful autumn foliage season.

**Symbolism:** The Kiyomizu Stage is often seen as a symbol of faith and courage due to its precarious location and the daring construction methods used to build it. The name “Kiyomizu” itself means “pure water,” derived from the Otowa Waterfall that flows beneath the stage, emphasizing the temple’s spiritual significance.

**Visitors’ Experience:** Visitors to Kiyomizu-dera can walk out onto the Kiyomizu Stage to enjoy panoramic views of Kyoto and the surrounding landscape. The experience of standing on the wooden terrace, suspended high above the ground, provides a sense of awe and wonder, making it a highlight of any visit to the temple.

**Renovation and Preservation:** Over the centuries, the Kiyomizu Stage has undergone several renovations and reconstructions to maintain its structural integrity and ensure visitor safety. The most recent major renovation took place in 2003, using traditional building techniques and materials to preserve the authenticity of the structure.

**Cultural Significance:** The Kiyomizu Stage is not only an architectural marvel but also a symbol of Japanese cultural heritage. It has been featured in numerous works of art, literature, and media, cementing its status as an iconic landmark of Kyoto and a must-visit destination for tourists from around the world.

Overall, the Kiyomizu wooden terrace is a testament to the ingenuity and craftsmanship of traditional Japanese architecture, offering visitors a unique and unforgettable experience at one of Japan’s most revered temples.

The news of ChatGPT’s debut on November 30, 2020, caught my attention, and I delivered a lecture about it at university in February 2023. What particularly intrigued me was how ChatGPT would make judgments when prompted to decide which party to impeach or support in an armed conflict based on principles of justice and ethics. I was surprised to discover that ChatGPT is designed to suspend judgment on matters of ethical correctness or value judgments. It alarmed me to think that an AI with an information capacity surpassing that of humans might autonomously make judgments. Especially when considering its speed and vocabulary proficiency in explanations about peaceful tourist destinations, it becomes evident that it

surpasses what a human being can achieve. Furthermore, when requested to elevate its vocabulary level, for instance, akin to crafting an academic paper, it responds with answers employing a sophisticated lexicon, a point I have yet to address.

What this suggests is that perhaps interpreter guides are no longer necessary, or if they are still needed, it is time to find answers to what they can do. When encountering differences in perspectives between oneself and others, the ability to explain and overcome these differences, the capacity to relativize values, and the importance of not resorting too readily to theories of Japanese culture but instead fostering a sense of transcultural humanism and empathy, and advocating for a broad worldview, seem necessary. Meeting a machine does not spark joy. However, if there is empathy towards different worldviews, mutual respect, and if cross-cultural understanding can be facilitated through interpreter guides, then the profession of interpreting and guiding can become an attractive one.

#### Notes

- <sup>(1)</sup> Abe, D. (ed.): *Posuto ōbātsūrizumu* [Post-over-tourism], p. 61, Gakugei Shuppansha.
- <sup>(2)</sup> Murakami, A. (2021). *Nihon ni okeru tsūyaku gaido no genjō to kadai* [Current status and issues of interpreter guides in Japan]. *Morishita Foundation Bulletin*, Vol. 6, pp. 4-15.
- <sup>(3)</sup> Both of these figures are reproduced regarding the current status of the Japan Tourism Agency’s certified guide interpreter examination. <https://www.mlit.go.jp/common/001218453.pdf>.

Published April 30, 2024



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