

TRAVELER FLOWS AND SPANISH-JAPANESE TOURISM RELATIONS

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The aim of this paper is to offer a general overview of several basic aspects regarding the tourism industry and its role within the field of Spanish-Japanese relations. According to the 2010 data published by the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), the number of foreign tourists visiting Spain reached 52.7 million this year, which placed it as fourth in the global ranking, just behind France, the US and – for the first time ever – China. This figure, broadly exceeding that of Spanish tourists travelling abroad (around 13 million), gave us a positive tourism balance. In opposition to this, Japan showed a negative tourism balance in 2010, with about 8.6 million foreign visitors (29th place in the global ranking), a figure well below the number of Japanese tourists travelling abroad (JNTO 2009). It is thus obvious that, within today's international panorama, Spain is placed as one of the leading tourism destinations throughout the world, while Japan still has a lot to do in this field. Taking this into account, and without forgetting that there is a real lack of understanding regarding many aspects of the Spanish-Japanese bilateral relations, we will try to clarify, from the point of view of tourism, three of these specific aspects: Japanese tourists visiting Spain; Spanish tourists visiting Japan; and last but not least, local and regional cooperation strategies between Japan and Spain.

The data referred to in this paper have been mainly obtained through the gathering of information about the tourism industry in Japan and in Spain. More specifically, documents published by the public administrations, research reports and statistical studies have been examined. Direct information has also been obtained by interviewing experts from both countries in the field.

The way Japanese tourists travelling to Spain behave has changed constantly throughout the past years, despite the efforts made by the Spanish Government to attract this market and the increasing cultural investment, whose main goal is to capture the attention of potential Japanese clients. One of the issues worth highlighting to explain this behaviour

is the economic crisis that Japan has been experiencing for years now, as well as certain safety issues which deteriorated the perception that Japanese tourists had of Spain, and the poor or scarce direct flight possibilities. Looking at the near future, it may well be that the huge growth capacity shown by China results in more efforts focusing on the mainland at the expense of the archipelago.

In any case, Japanese tourists are noted for their cultural motivation and their multi-destination urban stays. That is quite as much as we know. Our paper will contribute some data regarding the Tourism Observatory of Santiago de Compostela, the profile studies of visitors to the Prado Museum and the reports drawn up by the Tokyo Institute for Tourism Studies and the Tokyo Tourism Office. We will also refer briefly to idiomatic tourism, which in the past few years has become a significant line of action for the Ministry but which, in the case of Japan, has experienced a steady drop in the number of students participating in language learning courses in Spain, mainly as a result of the competence from Latin American countries such as Mexico or Argentina.

Regarding the flow of Spanish tourists visiting Japan, we also lack very precise data, although the final balance is quite favourable to Spain. It is important to note here that the Japanese government has only recently started to acknowledge the importance of tourism and the tourism industry, and thus implement development strategies in this field. Seen as a leading industrial and technological country, with no particularly serious economic or social problems, the Japanese have traditionally regarded tourism as 'something rather informal' compared to the 'serious' industry. Since the 1990s though, as a result of the worsening socioeconomic situation and the intensifying competition within the field of industrial technology, Japan's view on tourism has gradually changed. Today, well into the 21st century, the tourism industry is perceived as one of the key drivers of economic development in Japan. And China becomes once again the element causing distortion – on the one hand, because it is playing and ever growing leading role in long-distance trips for Spanish tourists; on the other, because most of the Japanese promotional efforts, based on the proximity of such a powerful market, are focused on it.

Toward the end of our paper, we will also look at the possible cooperation between Japan and Spain in the field of tourism development. We will particularly focus on the parallelisms between the pilgrimage routes to Santiago and Kumano, both of them declared World Heritage by UNESCO and potentially interesting in terms of strengthening ties regarding flow emission and knowledge transfer.

By way of conclusion, it is worth noting that there is a significant lack of data – particularly qualitative data – as regards tourism relations between Spain and Japan. Japan is not a particularly interesting destination for Spanish tourists, mainly because when it comes to long-distance destinations America – particularly Latin America – takes up most of the trips. And, in any case, China is also emerging as an increasingly popular destination in Asia. As regards the Japanese, despite their interest in the Spanish culture there are several aspects which prevent the consolidation of the Japanese tourism far beyond the limitations imposed by the physical distance between both countries. Flight connections, the long economic crisis or the feeling of lack of safety are all key restrictions to tourism. And once again China comes on stage, since it has become the focus of all promotions in Asia.

Still Japan is relatively well placed within the ranking of countries receiving tourists from Spain. It is one of the top countries outside Europe, ranking only behind the U.S. – at least if we consider the data produced by the Spanish National Statistics Institute, the INE. If we want to increase the flow of tourists we need to reinforce our image as a cultural destination. In this respect we should highlight the work done by the Prado Museum, as well as other artistic expressions exported to Japan. Recovering the idiomatic tourism and facing the strong competition from Latin America is another key point.

In terms of tourism, it is worth noting the cooperation possibilities around the management of cultural spaces such as historic cities or pilgrimage routes. As mentioned above, these open a channel for the exchange of knowledge which may be of great interest when creating new flows in both directions. Still, we should insist on the distorting role played by China, with a huge potential not only as a sender of tourists abroad but also as a receiver of both long-distance visitors – like in the case of Spain – and short-distance visitors – such as those already travelling from Japan.

