

Hong Kong Young People and Cultural Pilgrimage to Japan: The Role of Japanese Popular Culture in Asian Tourism

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Introduction

In addition to the principal forms of tourism such as beach tourism, heritage tourism, cultural tourism and nature tourism, other niche forms such as pop-culture tourism, sex tourism, study tourism and ecotourism have also mushroomed. The rise of pop-culture tourism is perhaps one of the most significant recent developments; it refers to tourists who visit locations featured in popular movies, novels, television dramas or other forms of popular culture. For example, the fans of *The Da Vinci Code* visit the Louvre, whereas *Brokeback Mountain* fans go to Wyoming (where the fictional Brokeback Mountain is featured in the novel and movie) and Alberta (where the movie was actually filmed) to pay their tribute (Metcalf, 2006). Pop-culture-related attractions such as theme parks, amusement parks, fashion streets, live concerts, *manga* (comic) museums, and film locations are becoming increasingly popular in both domestic and international tourism (Cooper & Eades, 2006; Christenson, 1998), and academia and the business sector have begun to pay attention to this phenomenon, as they begin to understand that it can be as influential as natural landscapes or historic sites.

Japanese popular culture is now an integral part of global culture and plays a significant role in attracting tourists from other parts of Asia to Japan, especially Asian youths, who have distinctive tourism preferences and patterns of consumption. Unlike their parents, who prefer package guided tours to attractions such as Mt. Fuji, Kiyomizu Temple, Meiji Shrine and Himeji Castle, as well as enjoying hot-springs and Japanese traditional cuisine in Izu or Hakone, Asian youths mostly travel independently to Japan for their cultural pilgrimage. They visit famous places featured in Japanese television dramas in

Odaba and Aoyama, buy the latest fashions in Daikanyama and Uraharajuku, have a good time at Hello Kitty Land (formally Sanrio Puroland) or Osamu Tetsuka Manga Museum, go to live concerts to support their favorite Japanese idol singers, or buy ACG (Animation-Comic-Game) products in Akihabara (the best-known place to buy Japanese ACG products) and attend Comic Market (the world's largest comic convention) in Tokyo's Big Sight international exhibition center.

In the age of globalization, transnational and cross-cultural tourist flows have become increasingly active, multi-dimensional and reciprocal. An example of this in the Asian context is of Asian tourists performing cultural pilgrimages to Japan, whereas Japanese fans of Korean and Taiwanese television dramas and Hong Kong movies visit their dreamlands throughout Asia. Transnational tourist flows jumpstarted by popular culture — a relatively new and powerful trend — deserve empirical and theoretical investigation through the lens of globalization. Through ethnographic and anthropological research methods, this chapter examines cultural pilgrimages to Japan by Hong Kong youths. Using Hong Kong as the main reference, it discusses the rise of pop-culture tourism in Asia and identifies the changing pattern of outbound tourism to Japan from package guided tours to independent, self-guided tours. It aims to deepen understanding of the importance of Japanese popular culture in Asian tourism, and will have important implications for new business strategies and tourism studies.

Making Cultural Pilgrimages to Japan

From 2004 to the present, Japan has been one of the top tourism destinations among Hong Kong people (UNWTO, 2006), with more than half a million Hong Kong citizens visiting Japan each year, making Hong Kong the fifth largest source of overseas tourists to Japan (Table 15.1).

There are several reasons for this 'Japan travel boom'. First, it is a continuation of the growth of outbound tourism to Japan. In the first decades after the Second World War, few Hong Kong people visited Japan because applying for a visa was troublesome and travel was costly; most visitors were businessmen and from the middle-class. Later, however, following the strengthening of bilateral economic and cultural ties and the rapid growth of

Table 15.1: Hong Kong visitors to Japan, 2000–2005.

Year	Arrivals
2000	460,283
2001	484,510
2002	521,200
2003	479,804
2004	586,380
2005	578,140

Source: Hong Kong Tourism Board (2007).

the Hong Kong economy after the 1980s, Japan became one of the most popular tourist destinations amongst Hong Kong people. In the late 1990s, Hong Kong experienced a craze for Japanese popular culture and as a result, many young people went there to seek their 'Japanese dream'. The lifting of visa requirements for Hong Kong residents in April 2004 (which was implemented in part as a response to poor arrivals in 2003) gave the sector an immediate boost: Hong Kong passport holders can now visit Japan without a visa for up to three months.

In order to understand the relationship between Japanese popular culture and tourism, a survey was conducted in June 2006 to investigate tourism consumption and motivation among young Hong Kong tourists to Japan. The respondents were 100 Hong Kong residents, aged between 18 and 29 years old, who had visited Japan.¹ The following are the key answers and their results.

On Question 3: 'Do you like Japanese popular culture?', 99 percent replied that they liked it to a certain extent. Only 1 percent replied 'not at all'. 56 percent of the respondents admitted that they liked Japanese popular culture 'very much'. The result clearly shows that young Hong Kong tourists to Japan are mostly lovers of Japanese popular culture. Investigating this further, Question 12 asked: 'What is the major attraction for you to go to Japan for vacation?' 55 percent replied that they wanted to get in touch with and purchase pop-culture-related products, 28 percent wanted to visit historic sites and experience Japanese traditional culture, while only 4 percent went to Japan primarily for its natural beauty.

It seems that to Hong Kong youths, pop-culture tourism is more important than heritage tourism and nature tourism, and they care more about Akihabara or Shinjuku (a famous shopping area in uptown Tokyo) than Osaka Castle or Mt. Fuji. Many of the tourists also included temples, shrines and castles in their itineraries but when asked why, they usually replied that it was because they watched certain comics or animated series about these places and thus wanted to pay tribute to them. Hence, visiting historic sites is not immune to the pop-culture factor, and the boundary between pop-culture tourism and heritage tourism has become blurred. For example, one tourist said:

I visited the Seimei Shrine in Kyoto because I like Onmyoshi [a popular comic about the ancient diviner Abe Shimei] very much. I also wanted to visit the Japanese Go Academy to see whether Hikaru no go [a famous comic and animation about the 'go' board game] is right about it. (Mr B, 12 June 2006)

Urry's notion of the 'tourist gaze' and MacCannell's discussion of 'staged authenticity' help us understand how young tourists from Hong Kong and other parts of Asia go to the 'real' Japan to look for the 'imaginary' Japan as formulated by the movies, television dramas, comics, animated works, magazines and pop songs they have consumed (Urry, 1990; MacCannell, 1973). Japanese souvenirs for foreign tourists (such as T-shirts, samurai swords, toys, kimono, etc.) have been designed to suit the taste of foreigners. In a sense, many of

¹A survey form was posted on the Internet on 12 June 2006, asking Hong Kong residents aged 18–29 who had visited Japan to fill it in. There were no other requirements such as gender, educational background or the length and nature of their stay in Japan. The target of 100 was reached on 15 June.

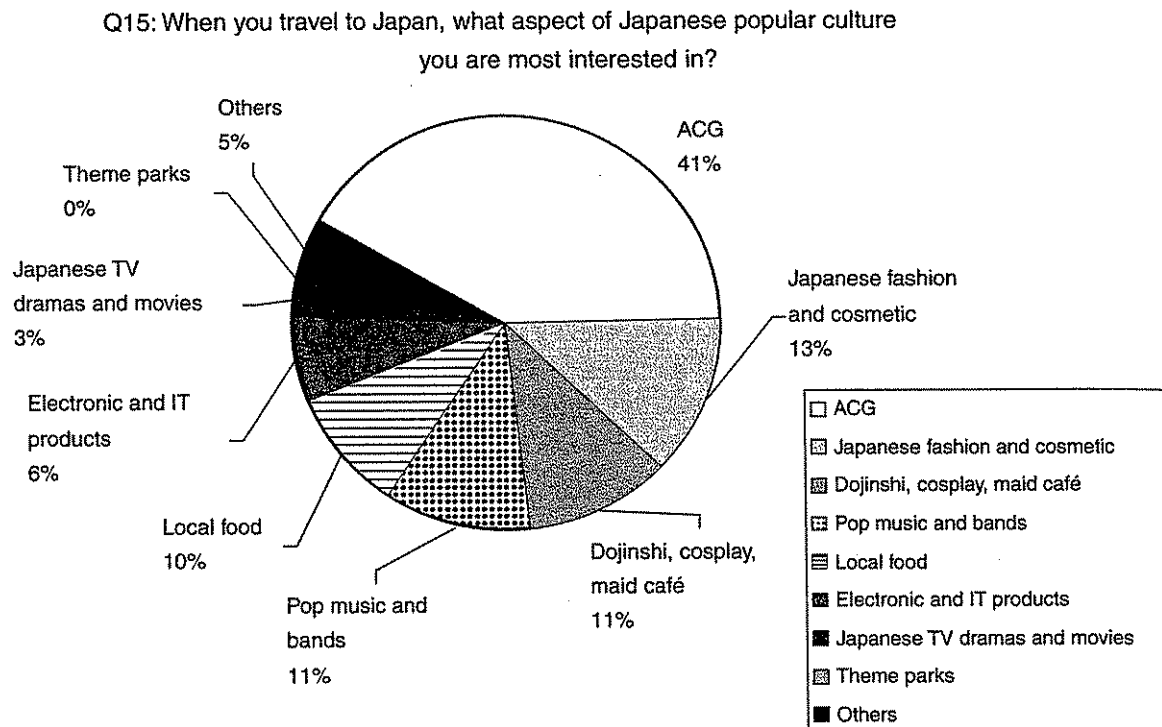


Figure 15.1: Principal motivation for travel to Japan.

these pop-culture-related works have become ‘para-tourist arts’ that have a great appeal to international tourists (Wollen, 1993).

On Question 15: ‘When you travel to Japan, what aspect of Japanese popular culture are you most interested in?’ 41 percent replied ACG, ahead by a very wide margin of the second largest group (13 percent) who cited Japanese fashion and cosmetics as their principal reason. In fact, the third most important reason, *dojinshi* (self-published fan comics), cosplay (dressing as ACG characters) and maid café,² is also ACG-related. If we combine ACG and *dojinshi*, cosplay and maid café, then ACG-related factors occupy 52 percent of the replies (Figure 15.1).

For the research, in-depth interviews were also conducted with a number of Hong Kong young people who have visited Japan primarily to consume Japanese popular culture. Some of the most interesting highlights are presented below.

I have been to Tokyo twice. The first time, I went to the University of Tokyo, because Akamatsu Ken's Love Hina [an animation about the efforts of a young man to enter the University of Tokyo] was very hot during that time. As for the second time, my main purpose was to attend Comic Market 69. [Comic Market is the largest comic convention in the world, held twice a year in Tokyo]. I went to the first day, only to find that the day was only for female-oriented works. (Mr S.)

²Maid cafés target Japanese comic fans who like comics about maids serving their master. All waitresses dress as maids and treat their customers as ‘masters’. This kind of role-play has become very popular.

I went to Koshien (a baseball stadium in Kansai) to watch high school baseball. The cheering was great, just like Adachi Misturu's Touch [an animation about high school baseball] had depicted. I was moved. (Mr W.)

One place that I would like to go to pay tribute is Matsusakicho in Izu, the location for the television drama, Crying out Love in the Center of the Earth. I plan to call out loud the name Aki [the heroine in the drama]. (Mr F.)

I am not rich, but I try my best to save money to go to Japan several times a year just to attend live concerts. Sometimes, I cut class and borrow money for this purpose. I am just crazy about J-pop [Japanese pop music, in particular referring to idol pop] and I cannot help it. (Ms F.)

My father and I love cars and comics, and we went to Japan to try the famous Mt. Akina course [featured in Initial D, an animation about illegal car racing]. It was a fun ride. (Mr L, July 2005)

In the past, popular culture was consumed in the guise of pilgrimage (Reader & Walter, 1992). Today, pilgrimage is performed in the process of consuming popular culture; indeed, the spirit of modern tourism is said to be in agreement with ancient pilgrimage (MacCannell, 1973, 1999). Cultural pilgrimage to Japan made by international tourists also reflects the formation of a transnational and cross-cultural *otaku* (Japanese ACG fanatics) identity and community, showing that international tourism and identity are closely related (Lanfant, 1995).

The Rise of Self-Guided Tourism to Japan

Exploring independently is emerging as another significant trend in Asian tourism. Although the figures for Hong Kong outbound tourists on independent (or self-organized) tours to Japan are not available, from observation and research it is clear that most young people travel to Japan independently. The Japanese National Tourism Organization (JNTO) did a survey in 2004 on 238 tourists from Hong Kong and found that 162 (or 68.1 percent) went to Japan as FITs (JNTO, 2005). The June 2006 survey indicates the same trend. On Question 8: 'How do you travel to Japan?', 64 percent of respondents replied that they went on self-guided tours, whereas only 31 percent were on package tours. Most of the interviewees confirmed that they would definitely choose to go to Japan independently, and would only join package tours if they went with their families. The reason is simply that in the latter case, their parents would pay for the trip, and thus they were willing to compromise. Many wanted to explore Japan by themselves following their self-made tourist maps. Young people from Hong Kong usually go to Japan with friends, and planning for the trip is a pleasant and exciting experience for them.

Most self-guided tourists to Japan from Hong Kong seem, to a greater or lesser extent, to be motivated by their passion for Japanese popular culture. Some Japanese comic and animation fans go to Japan every year to attend the Comic Market in Big Sight. Die-hard

J-pop fans go to Japan for live concerts. Japanese television drama lovers go to visit famous film locations in Tokyo (Lee, 2004). ACG-related theme parks such as Hello Kitty Land, Anpanman Land, Miyazaki Hayao Museum and Osamu Tetsuka Manga Museum are always popular among foreign tourists. Fashion-conscious people go to buy the latest Japanese youth fashion in Shibuya and Harajuku. Many go to Japan with a well-planned and unique itinerary to pay special tribute to their favorite Japanese cultural icons.

Why do Hong Kong young people prefer self-guided, independent tours to package, escorted tours? According to the interviews and observation, the most important reason is flexibility. They find organized tours too rushed, regulated and old-fashioned. Some said that they had already been to Japan on package tours and thus wanted to try something different. Others pointed out that guided tours cannot cater to their specific interests, such as live concerts, ACG activities or maid cafés, and that they do not include places of specific interest to them, such as Miyazaki Hayao Museum in Tokyo and Takarazuka in Kansai. This reflects the increasing maturity of the Hong Kong market in its travel patterns (UNWTO, 2006) and in its consumption of all things Japanese.

The Internet has changed the landscape of global tourism, and the rise of independent travel is one of its byproducts. It has become the major source of travel information for travellers, making people more independent and informative in their tourist consumption (Mills & Law, 2005). Tourists often do a 'virtual tour' prior to the actual tour, and because of this, going to Japan nowadays on an independent tour is easy; information about travelling there is abundant. According to a 2005 JNTO survey, 54 percent of foreign tourists (5161 respondents) to Japan acquired information from the Internet, making it the largest source of travel information about Japan (JNTO, 2006). The same trend can also be seen in Hong Kong. In the past few years, websites, discussion forums and blogs set up by and for Hong Kong people about travel to Japan have mushroomed. For example, ec2Japan (<http://www.ec2japan.com>, since 1999, currently with 7000 registered members) and Nobita World (<http://www.nobitaworld.com>, since 1993) provide useful and comprehensive information for FITs to Japan, offering a platform for people to exchange ideas, share experiences and organize activities. Some of their members are ardent travellers who have visited all 47 prefectures in Japan.

The Japanese government also makes use of the Internet to promote tourism: for instance the JNTO has a very good website (<http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/>) that provides travel information in Chinese and English. Recognizing the significance of 'soft power' in tourism, JNTO has a special section on *otaku* tours to Japan, telling overseas *otaku* where to go for ACG products, maid cafés and related events. Alternatively, Hong Kong people can visit JNTO's Hong Kong Office to gather travel information. The Japanese Consulate General of Japan in Hong Kong also gives travel tips in its homepage, and representative offices of Japanese Prefectures in Hong Kong try their best to lure Hong Kong people by organizing exhibitions and even occasional chartered flights (such as to Okinawa in the mid-summer and to Hokkaido in the winter).

On top of Internet sources, independent tourists can access travel information from guidebooks, magazines and newspapers. Travel guidebooks on Japan target independent tourists, with special emphasis on pop-culture attractions. Since Japan is the most popular tourist destination, about one quarter of travel guidebooks sold in local bookstores are about Japan. Some are especially written on how to visit famous locations of Japanese

television dramas, whereas others introduce Japanese animation locations and museums. Popular youth magazines and major newspapers frequently report on the 'hottest' tourist spots and latest trends in Japan.

Having gathered travel information about Japan, how do Hong Kong young people actually make their travel arrangements, such as air tickets, JR (Japan Rail) passes, hotels, travel insurance and theme park tickets? A surprising finding was that the majority of respondents (53 percent) made their arrangements through travel agencies in Hong Kong. Arranging flights and hotel bookings has become very big business, large enough to make up for the loss caused by the declining popularity of package guided tours. Jumping on the bandwagon — and responding to market conditions — most travel agencies have set up an independent division to cater to the needs of FITs. For example, Hong Tai, one of the largest travel agencies in Hong Kong, has launched the so-called YO2 (Your Own Tour) to make travel arrangement for independent tourists. To make things easier for youngsters, it operates a telephone hotline open 7 days a week for customers to make bookings and consult with travel advisors.

39 percent of the independent tourists in the survey made their booking through the Internet. Usually, on-line bookings offer a better deal than booking through travel agencies. At low season, an airfare plus a 3D2N (three-day-two-night) hotel package can be purchased for less than 4000 HKD (US\$510). Hong Kong university students enjoy the longest summer vacation — May to August — in the world, which coincides with the low season, and many go to Japan at that time, spending as little as possible on the airfare and hotel, so that they have more money to spend on pop-culture products such as concert tickets and games.

The research showed that there are two groups of Hong Kong youths, namely J-pop fans and ACG fans, who go to Japan on a regular basis. J-pop fans mainly go just for live concerts, buying tickets through Yahoo Auction on the Web. The Sakai Noriko Official Fanchub in Hong Kong, for example, has organized several tours to Japan for Sakai's concerts. A graduate student interviewee, Ms Y, who is doing research on *seiyu* (voice acting), often goes to Japan for concerts by her favorite *seiyu* singers. Ms F, a former student of the author's and an ardent J-pop fan, likes the Japanese singer Fayray so much that she has attended live concerts more than ten times, following her idol to Tokyo, Osaka, Fukuoka and Sendai. She successfully asked Fayray to sing the birthday song and sign her autograph for her.

ACG enthusiasts go to Japan for ACG-related events and activities, including the most popular Comic Market in August and December, or to buy the latest products such as new game consoles and software in Akihabara. One interviewee, Mr C, only gets 10 days' annual leave in his current job, and always uses the entire allowance to go to Japan in mid-August to attend the Comic Market.

As the survey was conducted on a random basis and the respondents were not necessarily ACG or J-pop lovers, the 27 percent who had been to Japan for ACG-related activities and the 17 percent who had been for live concerts is relatively high.

The Changing Itinerary of Package Guided Tours to Japan

As mentioned above, Hong Kong travel agencies have changed their business strategies to cater to the interest of young tourists to Japan. In addition to providing services for independent tourists, they are changing the itinerary of package guided tours. The escorted

tour has good reasons to exist and will not disappear; many families, couples and older people prefer this mode of travel, but the content of package tours to Japan has altered tremendously in the past decade to cater to changing consumer tastes. In the past, the major attractions were historic and natural sites such as mountain and hot-spring resorts, temples, shrines and castles. Nowadays, the major attractions are places such as the locations of television dramas, theme parks and shopping arcades. Some travel agencies include concerts, J-league (professional Japanese soccer league), baseball tournaments or horseracing in their itineraries to attract young customers. The research included checking all the itineraries of Japan tours offered by six major travel agencies in Hong Kong; Table 15.2 shows the itineraries of one major agency as an example of the kind of packages offered.

As illustrated in the table, the top three most popular places in Japan for Hong Kong tourists are Tokyo, Hokkaido and Osaka. The itineraries are quite standardized: for instance, almost all tours to Tokyo include Hello Kitty Land, Rainbow Bridge, Fanci Square and Akihabara, while Tetsuka Osamu Shop and Hello Kitty Café are standard items in the tours to Osaka and Hokkaido, respectively.

Travel agencies are quick to exploit the latest craze. Wing On Travels asked the famous J-pop DJ and Japanese street fashion spokesman, Cheng Kai-fai, to lead a shopping tour to Tokyo in 2005, and the famous model, Kathy Chou, to take a group of young women to Tokyo to study make-up and buy cosmetics in 2006. When a certain Japanese work is 'hot' in Hong Kong, then travel agencies will add related sites to attract customers. For example, in late 2005 when the Japanese television drama, *Oku* (a TV drama about palace politics

Table 15.2: Typical itinerary of package tour from Hong Kong to Japan.

Tour	Itinerary
Tour to Tokyo	Hello Kitty Land Rainbow Bridge Namja Town (Ikebukuro) Fanci Square (Ginza) Burberry Blue Label Boutique (Ginza) Battleship Yamato (cruise) Toys Museum (Ginza) Ramen Museum Bandai Gundam Museum Akihabara
Tour to Osaka (Kansai)	Tetsuka Osamu Shop Hello Kitty Shop Anpanman Museum Herbis Mall (Beauty Tour) Shinsaibashi
Tour to Hokkaido	Oku Village White Lover Chocolate Factory Nostalgic Toys Museum

Source: EGL tours (travel agency specializing in tours to Japan).

in the Tokugawa period), was screened in Hong Kong, many related historic sites were quickly included in the package guided tour. All these destinations reinforce the 'tourist gaze' for Hong Kong tourists.

Concluding Remarks

Pop-culture tourism is undoubtedly becoming a major form of modern tourism. Compared to traditional cultural tourism, which puts the emphasis on traditional art forms, it uses pop-culture-related sites and modern cultural products to attract young tourists.

This case study of tourists from Hong Kong visiting Japan has identified three important developments in Asian tourism which depend on the popular culture factor: first, many Asian youths go to Japan on a cultural pilgrimage; second, Asian youths to Japan are almost all independent tourists; and third, Asian travel agencies include pop-culture-related sites in their package tours to Japan. Tokyo has become a Mecca for youths from other parts of Asia, and Japanese popular culture has thus changed the landscape of Asian tourism. Making cultural pilgrimages to Japan has become a powerful niche trend that the tourism industry, government agencies and academia cannot afford to overlook.

In Hong Kong, many travel agencies see this trend as a business opportunity rather than a threat, and have readjusted their business strategies to cater to the needs of young customers. The Japanese government and entrepreneurs, meanwhile, try to make use of popular culture to attract international tourists. For example, shops in Akihabara have recruited staff who can speak English, Chinese and Korean and most 'hot' tourist spots have written explanations in different foreign languages. Other Asian nations are building Japanese pop-culture-related theme parks, such as the Ultraman theme park in Bangkok, the Pokemon theme park in Taipei and the Hello Kitty park in Macau. Pop-culture tourism is thus emerging as a key driver that promotes transnational tourist flows, an important but little-studied topic in Asian tourism that is in need of more public and scholarly attention.

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