



Gender and tourism: Gender, age and mountain tourism in Japan

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Abstract

A new form of tourism is sweeping Japan. Groups of middle-aged women, mostly aged between fifty and seventy, are collecting mountain summits. They hike up mountains in organized groups on one to four-day expeditions. It is not unusual in Japan for men and women to undertake leisure activities separately but hiking up mountains, as contrasted to mountaineering, is definitely a hobby of women. We hypothesize that Japanese women of this older generation are fitter and live longer than previous generations and have reached an age when they have both the time and money to undertake these activities. Reaching the summit is often celebrated with relaxing in baths fed by hot springs. The authors link this new form of tourism to the pilgrimages to sacred sites, often associated with mountains, popular in eighteenth century Japan.

Keywords: gender, Japan, leisure activities, mountaineering, pilgrimage, tourism development

Introduction

Processes of tourism development can be seen as important identifiers of social change of which interest in gender is an important aspect (Kinnaird & Hall, 1994; Swain & Momsen, 2002; Hall *et al.*, 2003; Swain, 2005; Pritchard *et al.*, 2007). Tourism has followed the theoretical trajectory of other social sciences over the last half century from materialist and structural approaches to the cultural and post-structural (Aitchison, 2005). Within this broad trend lie the changing discourses of feminist and gender approaches in tourism studies which Aitchison (2005) suggests may have fractured the coherence of gender and tourism studies as a sub-discipline. At the same time tourism is increasingly seen as an important element in the economic development of less globally accessible nations and regions (Torres & Momsen, 2004 and 2005; Gunasekara & Momsen, 2007; Momsen, 2009). Thus tourism and gender has also been influenced by attitudes to development (Momsen, 2009). This chapter looks at the influence of both general social science and development studies on changing approaches to gender and tourism and illustrates this with a case study from Japan.

Kinnaird and Hall were among the first to look at gender and tourism (1994) specifically. They suggested that 'tourism processes are gendered in their construction, presentation and consumption, and the form of this gendering is configured in different and diverse ways which are both temporally and spatially specific'. Tourism influences economic, social, environmental, political and cultural life and gender relations are embodied in all these aspects. Gendered impacts will also differ according to an individual's role as host or guest in the industry.

In economic terms tourism often exploits underemployment and a reserve army of female labour in rural areas and poor countries. At the end of the twentieth century, using data from 73

countries, women working in the formal tourism sector, including restaurant, catering and hotel sectors, made up 46 per cent of the world tourism workforce (Michael *et al.*, 1999). The proportion of men and women tourism workers was roughly equal in countries where tourism is a more mature industry such as in Italy, Germany, New Zealand and Thailand. The UNED-UK Report (1999) suggests that tourism is a particularly important sector for women as in most countries female employment in tourism was higher than in the labour market in general. The proportion of women tourism workers varied widely, from 77 per cent in Bolivia and 75 per cent in Peru, Botswana and Estonia to under 5 per cent in some Muslim countries. The participation of women in the industry increased steadily throughout the 1990s, especially in those countries with the most rapid expansion of tourism, and probably reflects the influence of visitors and external tourist business partners. Yet, most women's jobs are in the lowest paid sectors of the tourism industry and are seasonal and insecure. Although tourism has grown worldwide in the last decade, the formal employment position of women has changed little. However, they remain important in the informal sector producing and selling souvenirs and providing services from hair braiding to prostitution (Kempadoo, 1999). Gender equality in this sector is now appearing as local men offer their services as gigolos to female tourists, especially in the Caribbean and Thailand (Dahles, 2002).

The employment of women is often seen in terms of their caring skills, the 'managed heart', which was thought to make them superior for hospitality work which involves, more than in most industries, face to face interaction (Momsen, 2009). Although women often hold the least well paid jobs in tourism, they have been able to gain some economic independence in parts of the world where few other jobs are available to them. At the same time, interaction with tourist strangers brings new ideas to individuals and communities and these contacts are important in expanding social capital in isolated areas (Canoves & Villarino, 2002).

Tourism can be a gendered social catalyst. Bringing hosts and guests together at a single location introduces a cross-cultural exposure which may induce changes in perceptions and behaviours on both sides. These cultural border zones within which the interactions between tourist and local take place form new spaces of modernization which may be exploited to mutual benefit but in some cases may just create confusion and misunderstanding on both sides (Momsen, 2002). Individual women travellers may cause problems because of their 'otherness' and their alien behaviour as Hottola notes in his study of the misconceptions of local men in India when faced with Western women backpackers (Hottola, 2002).

Women are often seen as the preservers of traditional cultures and tourism may benefit poor communities by encouraging the survival of local craftwork because of increased demand. It has been argued that these traditional crafts provide the authenticity sought by tourists. Production of souvenirs is flexible work in the informal economy which is often undertaken by women. However, greater financial returns for craftwork may encourage change in gender roles, with men becoming dominant in production as in Peru or taking over the lucrative marketing of crafts as in Malta or Indonesia (Swain & Momsen, 2002; Momsen, 2009). On the other hand, women may be able to exploit the photogenic appearance of their traditional costumes to obtain economic benefits from visitors.

The tourist gaze may also be gendered. Women and men experience holidays differently with women often being more influenced by relations with vacation companions and their responsibility for family members than are men (Selänniemi (2002). Small (2002) in a study of holiday memories shows that age also influences the tourist gaze, especially for children.

Tourism on the Development Agenda

Participation, empowerment and inclusion have become new key words in the field of development studies but they do not always improve gender balance, especially where participation is aimed at household heads, usually men (Momsen, 2003). Many practitioners see tourism as a way to improve livelihoods among hosts as tourism expands into poorer countries. Pro-poor tourism (Torres & Momsen, 2004; Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008) looks at specific

aspects of tourism as a wealth creator but rarely considers the importance of gender balance in tourism related changes. More often it is seen in terms of sustainability of both tourism and the environment.

Tourism may be seen as the key to development in resource poor areas and among minority groups. In a study of the gender impact of a tourism project on a Mayan community in Quintana Roo, Mexico it was found that despite the NGO being led by a woman, participation was considered only at the household level (Momsen, 2003). Husbands, as household heads, committed wives to work on the project although the women did not have the spare time. The benefits were considered only in terms of male needs such as feeder roads. When we held a women's focus group they told us that what they wanted was a clinic and a secondary school in the village rather than improvements to roads but these views had never been presented to the NGO. A study aimed at improving the economy of a Miwok-Maidu Native American community in California's Sierra Nevada through tourism was also led by a woman economist but again ignored gendered views at the grassroots (Momsen, 2002). In both cases the NGOs involved expected women community members to provide cultural performances and crafts for sale to visitors but the communities themselves saw the tourism activity as a reclamation and reaffirmation of a culture that had been almost lost, rather than an exercise in local economic development. The Miwok-Maidu Foundation in California, like the Maya in Mexico, did not see earning money by commoditizing their culture as of major importance and the women in particular did not wish to interact directly with tourists on the ecotourism tours being developed in both countries.

The cultural turn and post-structural ideas of embodiment and sexuality bring new approaches to the study of gender and tourism (Pritchard *et al.*, 2007). However, Aitchison argues that these should not allow for a rejection of the previous materialist analyses. She suggests that a social-cultural nexus should be the basis of a new conceptual framework within which to explore 'the mutually informing nature of the social and the cultural in shaping both materialities and relations of gender and tourism' (Aitchison, 2005:207). Within this a third wave feminism which considers intersections of race, class, age, sexuality, nationality, ability etc as challenging the primacy of gender among social inequalities is leading to an awareness of the need for an embodied and ethical tourism. Pritchard *et al* (2007:9) see the tourism industry as potentially offering 'opportunities for a global revolution in the economic, social and political condition of women. Yet at the same time it can be a force for ghettoization, oppression and inequality –shoring up exploitative practices, objectifying indigenous women and female employees as part of the tourism 'package'. Whether dealing with women as hosts or guests, touristic activities will have gendered impacts and gender stereotypes must be challenged.

Mountain tourism in Japan

A new form of tourism is sweeping Japan which brings to the fore many aspects of gender stereotypes and of intersectionality, especially age and gender, as discussed above. Middle-aged women, mostly aged between fifty and seventy, are 'collecting' mountain summits. They hike up mountains in organized groups on one to four-day expeditions. It is not unusual in Japan for men and women to undertake leisure activities separately (Creighton, 1995) but hiking in the mountains, as contrasted to mountaineering, is definitely a hobby of women.

The number of middle- aged couples who hike mountains together is increasing although they are still not a majority. However, in the case of organized mountain tours which involve more dangerous and higher mountains, usually above 3,000 metres, couples rarely go together. We hypothesize that Japanese women of this older generation are fitter and live longer than previous generations and have reached an age when they have both the time and money to undertake these activities. Reaching the summit is often celebrated with relaxing in baths fed by hot springs.



Source: Wikipedia

Figure 1. *Some of the celebrated mountains in Japan*

In this chapter we look at the development of Japanese mountain tourism from its roots in eighteenth century pilgrimages to sacred sites, often associated with mountains, to its spread in the last two decades through popularization in the mass media. The reasons why middle-aged women, often in a single sex group, are so attracted to this form of tourism are also examined.

The population of Japan today is distinctive because of its longevity. In 2005 one fifth of Japan's population was over 65 years of age. This is the highest proportion in the world. Current life expectancy at 86 years for Japanese women and 79 years for men is also the highest in the world. It means that 76 per cent of women but only 54 per cent of men live to be 80 years old (Ministry of Health, 2003). There are more elderly women than men and the government is considering improving general health care for the elderly (Komatsu, 2003). Women have an 'M' shaped pattern of labour force participation in Japan. Thirty years ago women married straight out of college and did not work after marriage. Today they give up work outside the home when the first child is born and may go back to work part-time when the children are grown. Of the group aged 55-59 most men are still working but only 23 per cent of women are in employment (Komatsu, 2003). Among those over 65, 83 per cent of men are married but only 46 per cent of women. On the whole women have smaller pensions and do most of the caring for the elderly. However, despite having less money than men from pensions in their own right and being responsible for elder care, many of these women have inherited money from their husbands. Their children are grown and they now have time and income to get involved in new leisure activities. In addition, longevity is accompanied by a high level of physical fitness into the third age. This demographic situation is the underlying reason for the growth of tourism by older women to the mountains in Japan.

Women mountain tourists

Most of the women involved in this type of tourism are 'Sengyo Shufu' or full-time housewives with a husband who is a salaried worker. The group of *Sengyo Shufu* emerged during the unprecedented expansion of the Japanese economy in the 1960s (Suzuki, 2000: 105). In order to accomplish a rapid economic expansion, men were expected to devote all their time wholeheartedly to their paid work. In turn, the women's role was to take over all the responsibilities at home, as full-time housewives, in order to support their husband's contribution to the growth of the national economy. The 'Sengyo Shufu' had to undertake childcare, oversee their children's education, do the housekeeping and care for their parents-in-law. The proportion of *Sengyo Shufu* reached its peak in 1975 when the baby boomers (born in the years 1947 to 1949) began to marry and declined with the slowdown of the economy in the 1980s (Suzuki, 2000:110). The typical profile of the *Sengyo Shufu* is that of a big city urban dweller, highly educated, affluent because her husband's income is above the national average, and with fewer children than the Japanese

norm (Suzuki, 2000: 104-105). They live in small houses well equipped with many labour-saving devices which help to reduce the time spent on housework. Most *Sengyo Shufu* now have control of the household finances (Suzuki, 2000: 103). These women are also healthier than their mothers and in their middle-age have time for leisure activities as their children are grown-up. These characteristics explain the numerical dominance of such middle-aged housewives among tourists climbing Japan's mountains today.

Mountain tourism in Japan

Japan is a country of mountains and there are many poems and artistic portrayals of mountains in the classical literature (Fukada, 1964). The major summits of Japan became accessible through the founder of Shugendo, a mountain religion linked to both Buddhism and Shinto, and his followers. The founder of Shugendo climbed Mt Fuji in 633AD. Modern mountain climbing (alpinism) was invented by the British in the late eighteenth century and introduced to Japan in the late nineteenth century when a few British mountaineers came to climb Japan's high peaks. The first Japanese alpine club was founded in 1905.

In the 1980s there was a remarkable change in both the age structure of Japanese mountaineers and in the style of mountaineering in Japan. Middle-aged people have replaced the young and the majority of these new mountaineers are female. This is an unprecedented situation not only in Japan but worldwide (Fujita, 1997: 4 and 201). The new style of mountaineering is sometimes called *Junrei Tozan* (Pilgrimage Mountaineering) (Kikuchi, 2001:3).

Junrei Tozan has its roots in the tradition of pilgrimages in Japan. There were three main types of pilgrimages: those to Shinto shrines; those to sacred mountains for Shugendo; and thirdly pilgrimages to a circuit of Buddhist temples. It was stimulated by the 1964 publication of a book *Nihon Hyaku Meizan* (One Hundred Famous Mountains in Japan) by Kyuya Fukada. He selected these mountains after climbing more than two hundred and thought that a famous mountain should be distinctive and have a history which made it revered. Leading mass media in Japan endorsed the book as a kind of text book for the general public to re-discover Japan through the climbing of Fukada's hundred mountains as a pleasurable pursuit. Fukada began to write about these mountains in 1959 in the form of a series published in a small magazine and later it was made into a television programme and became very popular. Most of the sacred mountains of the Shugendo religion are included in Fukada's hundred mountains. The way in which tourism to the mountains has diffused is analogous to the pattern seen two to three hundred years ago in the circuit of Buddhist temples. Carrying a stick as a symbol was one of the rites of pilgrims doing the circuit of Buddhist temples. Contemporary mountain tourists also usually carry a stick. Just as with the Buddhist temples the list of a hundred mountains to be climbed has been developed at various scales from national to district.

In the past women had not been allowed to climb the sacred mountains above a certain height. In 1872 the Meiji Government abolished this restriction under government decree No. 98 (Sakakura, 1992:14). Although women were allowed to join the Japanese Alpine Club very few did so. In Japan mountaineering was regarded as a male activity and it was difficult for women to become involved. This impediment is still in existence to some degree, largely because women do not like to be associated with a male dominated club. There appears to be no link between women's participation in organized Alpine climbing and the current dominance of middle-aged women in *Junrei Tozan*.

After Fukada's sudden death in 1971, a Fukada club was founded by his supporters. The activities of the club in addition to climbing the mountains were to exchange information on the mountains between members and to advocate for the conservation of mountain environments (Fujita, 1997:85). The Fukada Club selected an additional 100 famous mountains according to the criteria laid down by Fukada. This second set of famous mountains became targets for more advanced mountaineers. In 1978 the Alpine Club of Japan, of which Fukada had been Vice-President in the 1960s, selected a further group of 100 mountains which became the targets for

the most advanced climbers. Thus a hierarchy of mountains was developed on the basis of the difficulty of their ascent.

In 1980 a different list of 100 famous mountains was introduced called ‘One Hundred Mountains famous for their Wild Flowers’. This list was based on a best selling book by a woman playwright Sumie Tanaka (1980). Many middle-aged women began to climb the mountains listed in the Tanaka book attracted by the search for wild flowers. Some 35 of Tanaka’s mountains were included in Fukada’s 100 mountains. In the 1990s many local areas identified their own 100 mountains and published books about these. In 1994 the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) a non-commercial and semi-government corporation whose networks cover the country, broadcast programmes on Fukada’s 100 famous mountains on its educational TV channel. This programme was broadcast on weekday afternoons and so appeared to be aimed at housewives who could watch at that time. The series of programmes continued for a year and was followed by a series on Tanaka’s mountains with wild flowers. These television programmes seem to have triggered the boom in mountain tourism among middle-aged women. The number of mountaineers over 40 years of age increased from 1.32 million (36.4%) in 1976 to 2.03 million (53.8%) in 1988 and 3.06 million (64.4%) in 2000 while the number of younger mountaineers has declined. In 2000 there were an estimated 4.75 million mountaineers in Japan of whom almost two thirds were over 40 years old. Women made up the majority of this older group, according to a survey of wardens of mountain huts in 2002 (Ministry of Science and Education).

The expansion of *Junrei Tozan* was helped by the growth of tour operators specializing in tours to the 100 famous mountains. Most of the applicants for guided tours are middle-aged and 70-80 per cent of participants are over 50. They are generally inexperienced in mountain walking but are mountain lovers. They tend to use guided mountain tours when the targeted mountains are a little bit difficult for them to tackle by themselves. For these tours participants have to be less than 70 years of age. The guided mountain tours usually have between 10 and 20 participants. Participants usually sign up individually or in groups of two or three. These tours are often combined with visits to hot springs which are one of the biggest tourist attractions in Japan (Matsuda, 2002). There is no information on the total number of mountain tour operators but an association was founded in 2003 with 65 operators as members. Estimates of the number of participants in guided mountain tours annually range from 200,000 to 500,000 (Kurokawa, 2003; Kikuchi, 2001). These tours vary in difficulty. Some involve two or three days climbing with a night or two in a mountain hut. The distance walked can be more than 40 kilometres and cover several thousand metres in altitude. When compared to the difficulty rating applied to California Sierra Nevada hiking most of the Japanese mountain tours would be classified as of very high difficulty (Nakata, 2004). It is clear that participants have to be very fit to undertake such strenuous hikes.

Table 1. Percentages by gender and age group of mountain hikers in Japan

Age group	Male (N=828)	Female (N=264)
Under 30 years old	4	6
30-39 years	11	17
40-49 years	23	17
50-59 years	34	46
60-69 years	23	13
70-79 years	5	1
Totals	100	100

Source: adapted from *Gakujin*, (A Leading Monthly Magazine for Mountaineers in Japan) October 2003, Tokyo: Tokyo Shimbun Shuppan.

A growing number of accidents among mountain hikers in recent years has become an issue of public concern. Table 2 shows the steady growth of these accidents with a very high proportion of those injured being between the ages of 50 and 70 (80 per cent in 1999, 78 per cent in 2003 and 81 per cent in 2008). Among those killed or missing in accidents on Japanese mountains the middle-aged made up 87 per cent in 1999, 93 per cent in 2003 and 91 per cent in 2008. Two accidents occurred on July 13 and 14th, 2009 in the mountains of Hokkaido Island because of bad weather. Ten people, aged 50 to 69 of whom eight were female and two male, froze to death in the central highlands of Hokkaido. They were participants on two separate guided mountain tours. One tour involved three women participants of which one died. The other tour involved thirteen participants (ten female and three male) and nine tour members died, seven women and two men. This is the worst disaster in the history of guided mountain tours in Japan.

Table 2. Accidents among mountain hikers

	1999	2003	2008
Number of accidents	1195	1358	1631
Total number injured	1444	1666	1933
<i>Middle aged injured (50-70yrs)</i>	<i>1158</i>	<i>1298</i>	<i>1567</i>
Total dead or missing	271	230	281
<i>Middle aged dead or missing (50-70yrs)</i>	<i>235</i>	<i>213</i>	<i>256</i>

Source: Japanese Police Agency, 2009. www.npa.go.jp/safetylife/chiiki28/h20_sangakusounan.pdf

Infrastructure development has also helped to support the growth of this type of tourism. The spread of motorway networks and convenience stores throughout the country has encouraged domestic tourism. The building of mountain huts where people can sleep overnight has also facilitated such tourism. At the same time mountain tourism is relatively cheap and environmentally friendly so appealing to a wide range of tourists, perhaps especially urban women amongst those looking for the wild alpine flowers.

This new type of tourism has its roots in Japanese cultural traditions of pilgrimages to temples and shrines usually associated with mountains. It has also built on the long tradition of bathing in hot springs. There are currently about 3000 hot springs used for bathing in Japan (Yamamoto, 1999:102) and the tours take advantage of these with a relaxing bathe after the climb being included in most tours. The hundred mountains of special touristic interest are distributed throughout Japan but 83 of them are located in Honshu, the largest and most densely populated island. This contiguity of people and mountains has encouraged mountain tourism.

Conclusion

This case study of Japanese mountain tourism has illustrated the importance of age, class and gender in characterizing a particular form of tourism. It reflects the importance of Japanese cultural traditions linked to pilgrimages brought up to date through the mass media and the existence of a society with a considerable number of relatively wealthy, healthy, older women with plenty of leisure time. How far the growing levels of employment among Japanese women of all ages and the social crisis of the increasing numbers of accidents among older mountain climbers will change the nature of this form of tourism is yet to be seen.

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