

THE ROLE OF TOURISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of tourism in shaping international relations between South Korea and Japan, two nations with deep cultural ties and a complex historical relationship. While political tensions and unresolved historical disputes have periodically strained official diplomatic channels, tourism has emerged as a vital form of soft power and people-to-people diplomacy. The movement of citizens across borders fosters mutual understanding, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange, often serving as a stabilizing force in times of political discord. The article highlights how tourism contributes not only to economic development but also to the normalization of relations and the promotion of peace in Northeast Asia. By examining past trends, current dynamics, and future opportunities, the study argues that sustained tourism can play a meaningful role in building trust and facilitating reconciliation between the two countries.

Keywords: South Korea–Japan relations, Tourism diplomacy, Soft power, Cultural exchange, People-to-people diplomacy, Historical tensions, Northeast Asia, Bilateral tourism, International relations, Track-two diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

Tourism Between South Korea and Japan: A Resilient Bridge of Culture and Economy. Tourism between South Korea and Japan is a dynamic and evolving facet of their bilateral relationship, shaped by historical ties, cultural exchange, economic interests, and at times, political tensions. Despite ups and downs, people-to-people interaction through tourism continues to serve as a powerful channel for mutual understanding and shared appreciation between the two neighboring nations.

Moreover, Tourism plays a significant and often underappreciated role in shaping international relations, particularly between countries with complex histories and intertwined futures like South Korea and Japan. In the case of these two East Asian neighbors, tourism functions not only as a vital economic exchange but also as a soft power tool that influences public diplomacy, mutual understanding, and cultural reconciliation.

A Close Connection Across the Sea. Separated by the Korea Strait, South Korea and Japan are geographically close—just over an hour's flight from each other. This proximity has made travel between the two countries convenient and affordable, encouraging frequent exchanges. Both countries are also popular travel destinations globally, known for their rich histories, vibrant cities, scenic landscapes, and distinct cultural heritages.

South Koreans have long been enthusiastic visitors to Japan. Tokyo, Osaka, Fukuoka, and Kyoto are common destinations, offering everything from high-end shopping and culinary delights to traditional temples and cherry blossoms. Similarly, many Japanese tourists visit

Seoul, Busan, and Jeju Island to enjoy Korea's modern pop culture, historical landmarks, and unique cuisine.

Furthermore, South Korea and Japan share a fraught history, particularly due to Japan's colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945. Historical grievances—such as issues surrounding wartime labor, comfort women, and territorial disputes—have led to periodic tensions between the two governments. Yet, in parallel with political strains, tourism has often served as a form of people-to-people diplomacy that softens hostilities and keeps dialogue open at the civil level¹.

Tourism Statistics and Trends. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism between South Korea and Japan reached record levels. In 2019, over 5.5 million South Koreans visited Japan, making them Japan's second-largest group of foreign tourists. Meanwhile, around 3 million Japanese visited South Korea the same year. These figures highlight how tourism serves as a key pillar in the broader economic and social relationship between the two nations².

However, the global pandemic and political disputes—including trade tensions and historical issues—led to temporary drops in tourism. In particular, a diplomatic rift in 2019 caused a notable decrease in South Korean tourists visiting Japan. Despite this, the long-term trend suggests a resilient recovery, driven by strong mutual interest and the re-opening of borders in 2022 and 2023.

The background of the expansion of the Korea-Japan conflict into the tourism sector is the recent rapid increase in exchanges between the two countries, especially the increase in Koreans visiting Japan. Until the 2000s, the number of Japanese visiting Korea was greater than the number of Koreans visiting Japan, but since then, the number of Koreans visiting Japan has gradually increased, and starting in 2014, the number of exchanges between the two countries has reversed. The series of discussions surrounding travel to Korea and Japan were based on the expression of 'soft power' from Korea due to the increase in 'tourists', and on Japan's confidence in 'soft power' due to the increase in 'foreigners visiting Japan' in general.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 virus that has spread worldwide since February 2020 has had a huge impact on the entire tourism sector. Free movement of borders is no longer possible, and the number of foreign tourists in both Korea and Japan has decreased by more than 90% compared to the previous year. The tourism industry is being kept alive by government support policies, but it is uncertain how long this life-saving measure can last in a situation where the end of COVID-19 is unclear. In the meantime, crisis management policies have sought to overcome short-term crises through strategies such as corporate support, continued employment support, promotion of tourism (to disaster areas), and market diversification. However, as the spread of COVID-19 continues, the need for policy tools to overcome the crisis is being raised as a common task around the world. The crisis management policies in the tourism sector in each country due to the spread of COVID-19 are being implemented with almost the same frame, although there are differences in degree. This is because borders are closed, but networks between countries are further strengthened. In terms of the transition of

¹ Cha, Victor. "Bridging the Gap: The Strategic Context of the 1965 Korea—Japan Normalization Treaty" *Korean Studies*, 1996, Vol. 20: 129,142.

² The Japan Foundation Annual Report 2019/2020 URL: <https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/about/result/ar/2019/pdf/index.html>

crisis management policies due to the prolonged COVID-19 situation, the need for cooperation between Korea and Japan to share tasks and overcome them will increase even more³.

Cultural Exchange Through Travel. Soft power—the ability to influence others through cultural or ideological appeal—has become a key element in modern diplomacy. Both South Korea and Japan wield considerable soft power, with Korean pop culture (K-pop, K-dramas, Korean cuisine) and Japanese cultural exports (anime, fashion, traditional arts) enjoying strong appeal across borders.

Tourism facilitates this exchange by allowing citizens from each country to experience the other's culture firsthand. A South Korean tourist wandering through Kyoto's temples or a Japanese traveler exploring the cafes of Seoul experiences cultural diplomacy in action. These personal experiences help to humanize the "other" and can gradually reshape public attitudes, which in turn influence policy direction over time.

Tourism fosters greater cultural exchange and breaks down stereotypes. K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean beauty products have huge followings in Japan, while Japanese anime, cuisine, and fashion have had a lasting influence in South Korea. Travelers from each country often return home with a deeper appreciation of their neighbor's customs, language, and way of life. Programs such as sister city partnerships, educational exchanges, and special tourism promotions have further strengthened ties. Low-cost carriers and frequent ferry routes make travel accessible to a wide range of people, including students and young travelers on a budget.

Economic and Diplomatic Dimensions. Economically, tourism contributes to mutual prosperity. Millions of South Koreans and Japanese travel to each other's countries annually. This flow supports local economies, particularly in transportation, hospitality, retail, and entertainment. As both countries are also major global economies, encouraging bilateral tourism strengthens regional economic stability.

Diplomatically, governments have occasionally used tourism to signal openness or de-escalate tensions. For instance, joint tourism initiatives, student exchange programs, and cultural festivals have been used to foster goodwill even when official relations are strained. High-profile diplomatic visits often include cultural gestures—such as attending a traditional performance or visiting a historical site—that resonate with the broader public.

Public Sentiment and Grassroots Diplomacy. Tourism allows citizens to act as informal ambassadors. Ordinary people engaging in cross-border travel contribute to what is sometimes called "track-two diplomacy"—unofficial interaction that complements formal diplomatic channels⁴. Friendships formed through tourism, student exchanges, or business travel can build trust and empathy that high-level diplomacy alone cannot achieve.

However, tourism is also vulnerable to the emotional pulse of international politics. In 2019, following trade disputes and court rulings over historical issues, South Korea saw a sharp drop in its citizens visiting Japan, fueled by grassroots boycotts. Such incidents show how quickly public sentiment can affect tourism and, by extension, bilateral relations.

³ 한일관광 변화와 전망: 일본수출규제에서 코로나 19 확산까지 조아라 - 일본비평 (Korean Journal of Japanese Studies), 2021 - s-space.snu.ac.kr

⁴ Roehrig, Terence. "The Rough State of Japan–South Korea Relations: Friction and Disputes in the Maritime Domain" Maritime Awareness Project, January 15, 2021:1-2. https://www nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/analysis_roehrig_011521.pdf

Challenges and Opportunities. Despite the positive trends, challenges remain. Political tensions over historical grievances sometimes lead to boycotts or travel advisories. Additionally, cultural misunderstandings and nationalist sentiment can flare up and influence public opinion. Yet tourism has often proven resilient, bouncing back as people prioritize personal experience and cultural curiosity over politics.

Looking ahead, both governments and private sectors are working to further promote bilateral tourism. Initiatives include easing visa restrictions, joint tourism campaigns, and cultural festivals aimed at bridging differences and deepening connections.

CONCLUSION

Tourism between South Korea and Japan is more than just travel; it is a window into shared histories, modern aspirations, and a common future. While geopolitical issues may ebb and flow, the strong people-to-people ties fostered through tourism continue to promote understanding, cooperation, and peace in Northeast Asia. Moreover, in the complex arena of South Korea–Japan relations, tourism is far more than leisure—it is diplomacy on the ground. It has the power to foster mutual respect, heal historical wounds, and create a foundation for more stable and constructive bilateral relations. As such, nurturing and protecting tourism links should be a strategic priority for both countries, not only for economic reasons but for the promise of deeper peace and partnership.

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