

Article

# Internationalization Without Historical Education: Teaching Humanities in Modern Japan

Petr E. Podalko\*

## Abstract

In the early 2000s, there were significant changes in the growth of the number of foreigners coming to Japan for a variety of purposes. If in previous times the main interest of the Japanese side was in the "import of knowledge" in the form of trained specialists and young research scientists, now the main goal has become strengthening the economy "from within" through the development of international tourism, student exchanges and the hiring of foreign workers. The appearance of a large number of foreigners in the country increases the risk of problems in relations with the local population, which in the case of Japan is reinforced by the shortcomings of the current educational system, which pays little attention to the teaching of such general humanities subjects as history, geography and a number of others. In recent years, some changes have been outlined in this area, but the measures taken are half-hearted and the general level of knowledge of world history and geography among the Japanese remains very low.

Keywords: international tourism, student migration, foreign workers, history and geography teaching

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\* Professor at the School of International Politics, Economics and Communication, Aoyama Gakuin University

## 1. "Kokusaika" in the 21st century: tourists, students and migrant workers

### a) International tourism: how realistic are the official aims?

In the early 2000s, there were significant changes in the growth of the number of foreigners coming to Japan for a variety of purposes. If in the past, the main interest of the Japanese side was in the "import of knowledge" in the form of trained specialists and young research scientists, now the main goal has become strengthening the economy "from within" through the development of international tourism. After the famous perspective slogan "Give us 10 million [foreign tourists!]" proclaimed in 2003 ("Baizo-senman-nin"), was implemented over the course of ten years, the government set up the new goal of increasing the annual number of foreign tourists to 60 million people in 2023, which is equivalent to half of the population of Japan itself (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, January 01, 2016). Although the Covid-2019 pandemic followed by the accompanying quarantines have changed these plans (as many others), immediately after the restrictions were eased in 2023, the foreign tourists spent 9.9% more money in Japan than in 2019, when a historical maximum of 31, 88 million foreign tourists was achieved (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, January 18, 2024). In the same year, the total number of tourists from 14 countries, including the Republic of Korea, the United States, Spain and others, also reached the record level.

### b) Student exchanges: is doubling really possible?

In 1983, the officially acclaimed government's goal was to increase the number of foreign students coming to Japan to 100,000 per year. This goal was achieved in twenty years by 2003. Nowadays, in 2023, the government set another goal to increase the number of foreign students to 400,000 per year in 2030, what is almost double to the present figure of 230,000 in 2023. It also mentioned the idea of sending up to 500,000 young Japanese to study abroad in 2030: it means increasing about 2.2 times comparing to the present figure of 222,000 in 2023.

Such high-profile plans have been already voiced many times before; for example, in April 2007, a governmental decision was announced, claiming the will to increase the number of foreign students to a million (!) per year

by 2050, but no specific measures were taken then. Now it seems that the government is much more determined than twenty years ago, but the real possibility of implementing all these plans within the stated time frame is very questionable. Currently, only 48% of all universities in the country have student exchange programs. The government plans to raise this figure to 80%, which still seems to be unlikely, especially if we consider the high cost of such programs (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, March 08, 2023). However, the reason for such an active recruitment of foreign students is simple: as a result of the decline in the birth rate in recent decades, the number of high school graduates has de facto equaled the number of student places in Japanese universities, and the admission of foreigners must help to compensate for the lack of funds, strengthening the financial position of Japanese universities, especially those located in province, and also alleviate the labor shortage problem, as all foreign students are very eager to work somewhere, even on the cost of proper studying. However, this policy, at a minimum, will require a revision of existing curricula in the direction of effective globalization, and the promotion of the most “international” subjects.

### **c) Foreign Workers**

According to the Ministry of Labor and Employment, at the end of 2023, over two million foreign workers, with the leading groups consisting of citizens of Vietnam (~520,000), China (~400,000) and the Philippines (~227,000). The largest number of foreigners are employed in the construction business, followed by the service sector and trade (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, January 28, 2024). In a number of industries such as convenience stores and delivery services, the number of foreign workers is now already comparable to the number of Japanese employees, and in some places even exceeds it.

According to official forecasts, in 2030, the shortage of only real foreign workers in Japan will reach around 630,000 people (*AFH News*, November 09, 2023).

At the end of 2023, following a high-level governmental conference, it was decided to introduce new rules under which a foreigner would have the right to obtain permanent resident status and family reunification.

## 2. "Overtourism" and the first bans

Such a massive influx of visitors from abroad creates many problems on the ground. First of all, the existing number of hotels and their staff were not designed for such a dynamic increase in the number of guests, who now arrive almost all year round – contrary to the old Japanese tradition having only few periods of the year packed by lots of visitors to the famous spots, for cherry-blossoms in spring or colorful leaves (*koyo*) in autumn. A similar problem has also arisen in the restaurant business (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, August 17, 2023). In a number of places, the local administrations one by one began to introduce the so-called "lodging taxes" (*shukuhaku-zei*) for the coming tourists, including domestic visitors. Metropolitan Tokyo was the first to start such a new policy far ago in 2002, then been followed by the prefectures of Osaka and Fukuoka, as well as by the cities of Kanazawa, Kyoto, Fukuoka, Kitakyushu, Nagasaki and Kutchancho in Hokkaido (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, April 30, 2023).

Since July 2024, a special fee has been introduced to charge for climbing the symbol of Japan and the main natural attraction, Mount Fuji; similar measures are also planned to be accepted by the authorities of Shirakawa-go (Gifu Prefecture), on the island of Miyajima (Hiroshima Prefecture), Kamakura (Kanagawa Prefecture) and Kyoto (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, August 13, 2023).

Due to the growth of complaints from the local inhabitants about the behavior of foreigners, and their excessive overall number, the government promised to intensify work on explaining to foreign tourists the rules how to behave on excursions, having prepared the relevant materials for distribution upon entry into the country at such places as airports, customs and so on. However, no specific measures to limit the tourist flow or adjust the previously announced official plans and figures have been announced to the public at the moment, and the government is limited to only the most general wishes of "achieving general harmony" (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, August 07, 2023).

It seems that the Japanese leaders, while actively stimulating the influx of foreigners of various categories and statuses, pointedly ignore both the risks associated with the peculiarities of the mentality of guests from abroad, and the lack of domestic preparation in this matter, namely, the general poor knowledge of the Japanese about the world around them, the similarities and differences of various national cultures of the peoples of different countries.

The level of competence of the so-called "average Japanese" in terms of the political and cultural history of the outside world is almost always distinguished by naivety of judgments and a very limited basic knowledge of almost all countries and regions, including the closest geographical neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region. This leads to serious doubts about whether the Japanese are ready for their possible transformation into a multicultural and multinational society of the European or North American type? One may safely say that at the moment this readiness is close to nearly zero, and not least of all this is due to the peculiarities of Japanese school education, which has so far been almost untouched by the notorious "internationalization." Below we will try to consider how knowledge about the world is formed in modern Japanese youth's mind.

### **3. What kind of historical knowledge, and in what amount, does the people need?**

The beginning of the modern approach to teaching the humanities in Japan dates back to the Imperial Decree on Education of 1890. The reforms of the post-war period, caused by the need for a radical revision of educational programs after the adoption of the new "democratic" constitution (1946), formalized the inclusion of history and geography in the high school program (*koto gakko*) in the general humanities subject "Shakaika" (social studies). In 1994, this compulsory subject was divided into two new subjects, one of which combined courses in geography and history (*chiri-rekishi-ka*), and the other was "Foundations of State and Law" (*komin-gaku*). At the same time, the history and geography courses, in turn, offered students a choice of four options, equal in status, but different in content, for studying topics: "World History," "History of Japan," "World Geography," "Geography of Japan," each of which had two levels of difficulty - A (easier) and B (advanced). Although the study of both history and geography by high school students was eventually recognized as a compulsory requirement, the direct choice of both the subject itself (with an emphasis on the global or domestic scope of the material being studied) and its level remained formally "free to choose"; but in fact, it depended, first of all, on which particular subjects were offered by the program of a particular school, and then on the wishes of the students themselves and the position of their parents. The result of such a "multi-variant" approach was a significant

discrepancy in knowledge on the most important general humanitarian issues among high school graduates: those who attended classes of Japanese history or/and geography, had difficulties when navigating everything related to foreign affairs, and vice versa. The situation was aggravated by the presence of two levels of difficulty for each subject, since with this approach even those who formally studied the same subject received different amounts of knowledge on it. The national “Central Entrance Exams” held annually in mid-January, which are necessary for admission to state and municipal universities (the Japanese equivalent of the Russian Unified State Exam, or USE), took into account this discrepancy in knowledge among school graduates: each applicant can choose for himself exams with questions on the subjects and levels that he or she studied in school. However, such tolerance in entrance exams turned into a headache for university teachers, putting them in an extremely difficult position of having to “patch up the holes” left by school education from the first day of school. One of the results of this strange and confusing approach to history education has been the high dependence of the population on official media in terms of making assessments and forming their own opinions concerning most of the international issues. To this day, three quarters of the adult population (74% in 2023, a record among the G7 countries) form their knowledge of the world around them by reading daily newspapers and watching television news, thereby compensating for the lack of basic knowledge they did not receive at school. It cannot be said that the government is not trying to change this situation at all. Thus, already in 2006, when after a series of studies it was revealed that students were massively unwilling to enroll in the subject "World History," opting instead for "History of Japan" (which was quite logical if we compare the degree of ease and "understandability" of the content of these two courses, the different volume of material for mechanical memorization, etc.), a decision was made to combine the teaching of world and Japanese history within the framework of a single subject "Fundamentals of History" ("Rekishi Kiso"), making it mandatory for all high school students in 2011. However, for a number of reasons, primarily the lack of both new teaching materials and teaching staff, the implementation of this plan was postponed first to 2015, then to 2022. Three new subjects were eventually formed from the four previous “historical” subjects: “World History” and “History of Japan” of the “A” levels

merged into one subject, “Rekishi Sogo” (“Everything about History”), and the previous “B” levels in world and Japanese history became known as “Sekai-shi tankyu” (“Studies in World History”) and “Nihon-shi Tankyu:” (“Studies in Japanese History”).

### **Instead of a conclusion:**

To what extent all these transformations are productive, and whether they are in fact perhaps just a re-fashioning of the same old suit – only time will tell, since the first graduation of those who are mastering new subjects and new programs, is expected to take place in March 2026. At the moment, the general level of knowledge of world history events in Japan remains very low. The spread of the Internet and the new opportunities it supposedly offers for gaining knowledge about the distant and recent past has also not yet borne any special results; the Internet is not able to compensate for what was not taught in school. Any unexpected question on a historical or political topic, as a rule, causes a “quiet panic” among the Japanese audience, depriving the opportunity to conduct not only a more or less heated discussion, but also an ordinary international dialogue.

