

Japanese Wedding Tourism to Canada: re-thinking the Japan-Canada relationship in the age of globalization

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Since the theme of this year's conference is "Japan at our doorstep and in the changing global community," I felt it was a fitting opportunity to present a paper aimed at questioning the kinds of relationships that are being forged transnational between Japan and Canada today through tourism encounters. Tourism sites are often overlooked as areas for serious scholarly inquiry simply because tourism is a leisure activity. Yet tourism cries out for critical gaze since it is one of the world's largest industries whose impacts are profound and multifaceted in contemporary settings (Burns 2004:6-7). As everyone is aware, Japan is not only on our doorstep, but frequently invited inside as our guest. As such it is worthwhile to pause for a moment to consider the nature and significance of these "host" and "guest" roles that we adorn in our cross-cultural exchanges, particularly because nearly 424,000 Japanese traveled to Canada in 2005 (Japan Tourism Marketing 2006), which obviously creates a sizable number of interactions between Japanese and Canadians. For the purposes of this paper, I will explore a specific form of tourism, Japanese wedding tourism in Canada, to bring into focus some of the intersecting issues relevant to the tourism encounter. This paper should hold some interest for those interested in issues of tradition, modernity, authenticity, hybridity, space and place, and transnationalism. I hope to show how these processes help inform our understanding of how, for instance, a Japanese couple traveling to Vancouver for their wedding relates to more global networks of meaning. I will argue that the anthropological lenses on the social significance of tourism and globalization theories on transnational movements of people and global cultural flows provide a fruitful vantage point to help contextualizing Japanese tourism in Canada. Understanding contemporary Japan-Canada relations today must incorporate popular culture encounters such as tourism since it is precisely within these informal activities that cross cultural encounter and exchange occur. Yet, before I begin I need to explain a little about the origin of contemporary Japanese wedding practices in general.

Context

Prior to the Second World War most weddings in Japan took place in the home. Yet by the 1950s they began to become commercial affairs with the emergence of wedding halls that provided a venue for a Shinto ritual and wedding reception under one roof (Edwards 1989). The wedding halls offered a standard package that has changed over the years but has broadly taken the form of a Shinto ceremony for the immediate family, followed by a larger reception for friends, family, and colleagues. During the reception there are usually formal speeches, a cake cutting ceremony, a candle service where the bride and groom visit each table and light a candle, entertainment and a flower ceremony where the bride and groom exchange flowers with their parents all orchestrated through spotlights, music, and a professional emcee. Once the activities of the wedding were taken out of the home, commercial specialists were able to take ever-increasing control of the wedding's form. "The result has been a remarkable uniformity in

contemporary weddings that contrasts sharply with the diversity of customs of the pre-war period” (Edwards 1989:42). In its initial construction the commercial wedding was designed as a blending of a ‘traditional-Japanese’ Shinto ceremony with a ‘modern western’ reception. It is important to point out that the wedding ceremony was very much consciously constructed to further the business interests of the purveyors of the product, who have remained tremendously influential in dictating trends (Goldstein-Gidoni 1997:3).

By the early 1990s 80% of urban Japanese chose to hold their weddings in commercial establishments (Goldstein-Gidoni 1997). At the same time wedding consumers were presented with the option of having either a Shinto ceremony in front of a Shinto shrine, dressed in *Hakama* and *Kimono*, and officiated by a local priest or employee of the establishment assuming the role and dress; or having a western-style ceremony in a chapel, costumed in a white wedding dress and tuxedo, officiated by either a local minister or someone assuming the role and dress of a generically Christian minister, preferably a foreigner. By 1998, the chapel ceremony had become more popular than the Shinto ceremony (Goldstein-Gidoni 2001).

It is around this time period that the trend of traveling overseas to have a wedding ceremony began. The Japanese overseas wedding industry offers all inclusive travel packages that seem to almost exclusively offer the “Western-style” chapel wedding. The industry is well established in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and in the South Pacific, and continues to move elsewhere. In 2004, approximately 44, 000 Japanese couples (Watabe 2005:7) spent an estimated CAN\$457 million dollars (Zekushi 2004) on their marriage ceremonies outside of Japan through the purchase of these kinds of travel packages. In Canada much of the industry is concentrated in Vancouver, Whistler, and Banff, yet Niagara Falls is a popular destination too.

Images and Authenticity

Clearly Japanese wedding practices raise issues about cultural authenticity. I will explain my approach to this issue. First, it appears that the chapel wedding does not lie in any Christian conviction, but is rather related to its western image. This is similar to the symbols and images of the West packaged by department stores, as studied by Millie Creighton, in that the chapel ceremony does not necessarily reflect the reality of any part of the Western world (Creighton 1992: 55). In fact, the images and symbols are often “...blurred refractions, decontextualized fragments of various Western traditions and practices that have been culled and then altered to fit the Japanese cultural context and the expectations of Japanese consumers” (Creighton 1992: 55).

It has been argued that Japanese culture, like all cultures, is more akin to a moving target than a static phenomenon (Smith 1995: 27). Robert Smith has demonstrated that Japanese weddings and funeral practices have always been moving, changing, and reconstituting themselves. Despite the indications that some elements of these rituals are considered ancient and traditional in Japan, he has shown that many of the customs and practices are the products of invention and are far more modern than commonly believed (Smith 1995: 33). Although these practices are not reflective of an ancient static past, that does not make them any less ‘authentic’ or ‘real’. Following the work of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), the inventive process at work in these rituals in fact reflects the nature of the cultural process as constantly being re-negotiated by those

living with the traditions. Therefore, the alteration of Japanese ritual *is* Japanese culture rather than a weakening or watered down version of some former pure state (Smith 1995: 34).

These sentiments are echoed by Clifford (1998) in his argument about cultural hybridization. Cultural hybridization is a process of appropriation that selectively joins together different traditions, practices, and symbols to create something new that is meaningful to participants. His perspective underscores the relevance of the encounter between cultures as a process of negotiation instead of depicting it as the dilution of previously authentic, bounded entities. This perspective allows anthropology to move beyond treating cultural representation and negotiation as solely a negative process of exploitation or cultural dilution to explore some of the more subtle levels of negotiation.

So far I have been arguing that wedding sites in Japan are rich locations of active cultural negotiation. But more to the point, rather than reiterating old opinions, my focus is on what significance, if any, does travel add.

Tourism

Is there social significance to travel and tourism? My position is that, yes there is. I base my position on the increasing recognition that tourism is a significant and important dimension of the modern world. Modern tourism accounts for the single largest peaceful movement of people across cultural boundaries in the history of the world (Nunez and Lett 1989: 276). Since anthropology is a discipline that is aimed towards the exploration and explication of cultural similarities and differences, tourism is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. Tourism occurs in most, if not all, human societies, and all people in nearly every society have also been touched in some way by tourism (Stronza 2001:264). The economic importance of tourism alone merits the attention of anthropologists. The World Tourism Organization (2000) estimated that 664 million people traveled internationally in 1999. The International Ecotourism Society (1988) calculated that tourism receipts represented one third of the world trade in services. "Such figures point to the fact that tourism is a significant catalyst of economic development and sociopolitical change, processes that are central to the interests of many anthropologists" (Stronza 2001:264).

The significance of tourism has been recognized by anthropologists of Japan, particularly in studies of domestic tourism. Jennifer Robertson has argued that the growing sense of alienation of the urban working class in Japan has been perceptively capitalized upon by the travel industry and enterprising rural areas catering to the mystique and rediscovery of the countryside through *furusato* or home village tourism. In Robertson's opinion the increasing concentration of the functions of 'information capitalism' has accelerated the rediscovery and exoticization of the countryside (*inaka*) as a desirable landscape of nostalgia (Robertson 1997:99).

Creighton has also argued that the travel and tourism industries reflect contradictions between goals to internationalize and fears about vanishing Japanese cultural traditions (Creighton 1997:239). The search for "home" has been a pervasive social concern in Japan since the 1970s, yet the notion of "home" is a "real Japan," which in the collective nostalgic imagination implies the return to a pre-Western, preindustrialized, and nonurban past (Creighton 1997:239). The effect of *furusato* themed tourism is that "[i]t also functions to link fears of a vanishing cultural identity, by

asserting a unique Japanese heritage in the face of an increasingly Western lifestyle, and by promising an affirmation of belongingness to Japan's urban dwellers" (Creighton 1997: 241).

This example conforms to MacCannell's (1992) position that tourism is not just an aggregate of merely commercial activities; it is also an ideological framing of history, and tradition that has the power to reshape culture to its own needs (MacCannell 1992:1). For moderns, he argues, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles" (MacCannell 1976: 3). The modern preoccupation with "naturalness," nostalgia, and the search for authenticity in tourism are not merely casual and decadent pastimes, but also components of the conquering spirit of modernity—the grounds of its unifying consciousness. In other words, sightseeing is a kind of collective striving for a way to transcend the discontinuity of modernity, and of incorporating its fragments into unified experience (MacCannell 1976: 3).

While it is evident that Japanese wedding tourism to Canada is not identical to a search for an authentic past as evidenced in *furusato* tourism, I do believe that it is a continuation of the process of incorporating western images and fragments into a unified experience of modernity.

Globalization

I am going to switch gears here from scrapping the surface of hybridity issues in Japanese wedding practices and the social dimensions of tourism to try and connect this meaningfully to ideas circulating about in relation to globalization.

Globalization is a much-discussed but as yet poorly defined concept (Bestor 2003:76). Although there is no clear definition for globalization, there is a general recognition that it is related to the increasing velocity of capital (both economic and cultural) and the corresponding acceleration of transportation and telecommunications combining together in ever more large, fluid encapsulating markets and other arenas for exchanges across multiple dimensions (Bestor 2003:76).

Globalization theory is relevant for thinking about Japanese wedding tourism because it challenges us to think about the migration of symbols and commodities in global transnational spaces (Kearney 1995: 547). There is a concern with how the local and global are interrelated, and how production, consumption, and identities sometimes detached from local places (Kearney 1995:552), while at other times intensify other types of relations. This process can link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa (Kearney 1995: 548).

While symbols and commodities are effected in this process, so too are physical locations. Arjun Appadurai envisions the new global cultural economy as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that can no longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (Appadurai 1996: 32). What Appadurai identifies as *ethnoscapes* is a concept that may be applicable to Japanese international wedding sites. He explains an *ethnoscape* as "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting worlds in which we live where such groups as tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree" (Appadurai 1996: 33).

Local/Global Connections

My reasoning for bringing up the issues of Japanese contemporary wedding practices as a blending and invention of tradition, tourism as reflecting a search for meaning and coherence in a fragmented modern world, and how local and global interactions are based on networks of relations is because, as I see it at least, these forces all collide in this seemingly benign wedding tourism package. These tensions challenge anthropological inquiry to account for local social phenomenon not as isolated pockets, but rather as embedded in a global system. This interconnectedness requires us to move beyond the single sites and local situation of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in larger scales (Marcus 1995: 96). This has been referred to as the method of multi-sited ethnography where the ethnographer traces the movement of an object, like in this case the cultural commodity of the wedding ceremony, through its system of reproduction and in the process reveals something about how these networks function (Marcus 1995: 96).

There are also instructive lessons within the wedding tourism process for how we conceive of contemporary Japanese-Canadian relationships. I've touched briefly upon some of the meanings that Japanese tourists might be bringing with them in their encounter as guests in the wedding tourism relationship. But I've said nothing about what the hosts might be bringing to the encounter. I haven't investigated that dimension so there is not much that I can say about that at this point, but other tourism studies indicate that the tourist is not the sole actor framing the tourist site, since local people dialectically produce and reproduce local meanings for tourists (Harkin 2003:577). This likely indicates Japanese wedding tourism in Canadian is being shaped also by the local context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my attempt in this paper was to start with a fairly straight forward topic of inquiry, Japanese international wedding tourism. I have attempted to show that understanding the practice cannot begin and end simply in any one tourist location. To approach the topic as a disconnected, self contained process would be quite myopic. Before I move forward to speculate on what significance the practice may indicate, I have argued that I think it is necessary to move backwards to contextualize it in its recent history, connect it to related material on tourism that seems to be negotiating similar themes of modern Japanese identity in relation to the west, and finally to situate the practice in globalization theories that stress the relationship between local and global negotiations. So if I have been at all convincing, perhaps the next time you are strolling through Stanley Park in Vancouver, downtown Banff, or passing a small chapel in Niagara Falls and you cross paths with a Japanese wedding party posing for photos, or riding in a horse drawn carriage you might pause to think how your encounter is predicated on a traceable global network of meaning.

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