

Background and Issues in Demand for and Supply of English-Speaking Tourist Guiding Services in Kanazawa

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Abstract

Japan has seen the demand for tourism-related services increase significantly in recent years. Kanazawa, a city on the west coast of Japan, has experienced an even greater demand than the rest of the country. This paper presents the history of English-speaking tourist guiding services in Kanazawa, and reveals issues and solutions to the balancing act of its supply and demand. The roles of government and the private sector are laid out, with questions asked about the influence of certain groups. A role of this research paper is to explain the situation starting from the 1980s up to the present, and create the canvas on which future research will be carried out and presented.

Keywords

tourism in Kanazawa, English guide services, demand and supply

金沢市で観光客の英語ガイドサービスの需要供給の背景と課題

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1. Introduction and Background

Kanazawa is a city on the west coast of Japan, and is a UNESCO Creative City of Crafts and Folk Arts, recognized as such since 2009 (UNESCO, 2017) (Kanazawa City, 2013). In such a role, the city of Kanazawa has a vision to promote tourism, in particular, craft and creative tourism (UNESCO, 2017). However, while crafts and folk

arts are a tourist draw, the most attractive features of Kanazawa are places and landmarks, rather than activities. A survey by the travel, culture and language advice site, Japan-guide.com, puts Kenrokuen Gardens (one of the top three gardens in Japan (Yamada, 2016)) at the number one spot of the top attractions of Kanazawa, with the ‘samurai district’ *Nagamachi*, and the ‘geisha district’, or tea

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district *Chayagai* also in the top ten (Japan-guide, 2018), with results being similar whether ranked by footfall (most visited), visitors' satisfaction, or by travel professionals' recommendations. So, Kanazawa has a lot to offer tourists coming from within Japan or abroad and, although cultural and craft resources such as Kaga Yuzen (dyed silk), gold leaf manufacture and design, Shikki (lacquerware), Kaga Zogan (inlay), Ohi Ware (light ceramics) and more are in their abundance (Kanazawa City Tourism Association, 2018), there is also a wealth of sightseeing areas to enjoy and experience.

Kanazawa has been planning and preparing for welcoming tourists, with certain groups organized to meet the demand of tourism from non-Japanese people. The Society to Introduce Kanazawa to the World (SIKW) was active in the 1980s with its mission being clear from its name; its work including provided cultural exchange meetings, and publishing materials (Lohr, 1989) (Yamazaki, 1985). In 1992, the KGGN group (Kanazawa Goodwill Guide Network) was formed from an offshoot of SIKW, aiming to provide a volunteer guide service and distribute information in areas where tourists frequent (Kanazawa Goodwill Guide Network, 2017). As long as a person had some knowledge of a foreign language, they could be a guide regardless of whether they held a license or not. Being volunteers, the law requiring licenses to be held in order to receive payment for services did/does not apply to them. The KGGN is still active to this day, and data they have collected over the years regarding increasing tourist numbers in the Kanazawa area are presented later in this paper.

In 2012, the National Licensed Interpreter-guide Net Kanazawa (LINK) group was established (Nakagawa, 2018), and this was designed to provide tourists with tour guides who held a national license (Japanese government approved licensing system

acquired by passing a (difficult and lengthy) course of study culminating in an examination). A fee was set for their services (LINK, 2017), making the (formal) provision of guides in Kanazawa a two-tier system: one tier in which a tourists could choose a volunteer guide, and another whereby they could select a guide with more proven ability and experience, and pay for the service.

A big change came to Kanazawa in 2015 with the Hokuriku Shinkansen (bullet train) line opening in March of that year (Sugai et. al., 2016). This connected Tokyo, the capital, with Kanazawa city. Up to that date, Kanazawa had not been an easy place to visit, with journey times from Tokyo by bus being at least eight-and-a-half hours in duration, by car six hours (Lambe, 2018), and by the fastest train being almost four hours (Takeshi, 2014), for a one way journey. With the advent of the Shinkansen's Hokuriku line, the trip was reduced to as little as two-and-a-half-hours. The significance of this is that tourists were now able to travel to Kanazawa in the morning, take their time sightseeing in the city, before returning to their hotels in Tokyo that evening. Such a possibility put Kanazawa on the map for many people than before. A side-effect of the opening of the Hokuriku Shinkansen was the publicity it brought to Kanazawa. People who hadn't heard of Kanazawa before were now watching advertisements about the city. Due to this, even before the Hokuriku Shinkansen line opened, Kanazawa began experiencing notable increases in visiting tourist numbers (Takeshi, 2014).

The above meant that the demand for tour guides was set to soar, and Kanazawa City decided to make a "middle layer" between the volunteer tour guides, KGGN, and the national guide license holders, LINK, introduced earlier. In June, 2016, it was announced that Kanazawa City would begin a municipal guide license system, allowing guides

who passed a course of study to work within the city bounds for monetary gain. This was under a pilot national government system allowing municipal licenses for four cities in need of more tour guides, as stipulated by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT, 2016). A course of study was planned by Kanazawa city, 40 places were advertised in the local newspapers, and 48 people (above quota) were accepted to the course which ran from October 2016. Upon passing a final examination (in February 2017), the participants became able to work as Kanazawa tour guides and had legal permission to receive a fee for their services (with certificates presented in March, 2017). The program was also carried out the following year, with a similar number of participants.

One of the final pieces of the story is the announcement by the national government that they would no longer require tour guides to hold licenses from January 4th, 2018, with this law brought in on May 26th, 2017 (Ito, 2017). This law was to tackle the lack of tour guides in the country as a whole, and came about due to the realization that it would take too long to train enough of them. The Japan-hosted Rugby World Cup (in 2019), and Olympics (in 2020) was also looming, and the country lifted the strict rules on fee-receiving guides in order to have more of them available in time.

2. Tour Guide Issues in Kanazawa

2.1. Changing of the old guard

The “old guard” refer to, in this paper, the guides who were being paid for their services prior to the changes in the laws, as well as volunteer guides. In response to Kanazawa City bringing in a training course for municipal guides, some of those being paid for their services, including many LINK members, were against such a plan (according to information which includes an interview with a LINK member

in July, 2016, and internal memos shown). They felt (rightly or wrongly) that having more guides in the city would reduce their earnings. They also kept a close eye on the members of the course, with the leader of the group quickly complaining to the city hall if they felt that the new guides were working outside their jurisdiction or otherwise bending the rules. For example, a municipal guide who had written “I have been a guide for three years” on a website was reported to city hall by LINK, and had to explain that they were doing the job as a volunteer before the license change, in order to satisfy the city-employed interviewees. Another instance was when a member (again, of LINK) found a photograph online of a guide outside the jurisdiction of Kanazawa with some holidaymakers. The guide was called to Kanazawa city hall for an interview, and it transpired that the guide was traveling with their family members from overseas. Some municipal guides felt that their every move was being watched by some of the old guard, and they did not understand what these people, including LINK, had to do with, or what power they had over city hall ... and where their legitimacy of such power came from. Upon asking, Kanazawa city hall responded that they had a responsibility to investigate complaints made by the public (according to a conversation with Tourism Desk staff, Iwata, N., in October 26, 2017 and emailed conversations with same October 26 and 31, 2017), (source of complaint being LINK revealed by another member of the group). The relaxation of government tour guide laws removed any basis for complaint from January 4, 2018, and no more complaints were heard, nor interviews requested after that date.

2.2. Need for More Kanazawa Tour Guides

The need for more tour guides in Kanazawa was real, with the number of tourists to the city increasing greatly and rapidly. Data published by

KGGN volunteer guides show that they serviced 10,000 tourists in the one-year period from April 2007 to March 2008, 17,500 in the period from April 2010 to March 2011, 24,000 from April 2013 to March 2014, 33,000 the following year (to March 2015), 50,706 to March 2016, and 61,111 to March 2017. It can be seen that the numbers of tourists were increasing already before the Hokuriku Shinkansen was in service, and then saw much larger increases after that. This shows that the government were correct in their decision to add more tour guides to the market, and that, if Japan and Kanazawa in particular were to continue to be more popular, there would be enough work for all.

The number of tourists who visited Kanazawa in the year before the opening of the Hokuriku Shinkansen line (and regardless of whether they used a guide service or not) was 182,000 visitors. This is in contrast with the year after the line opened, which was 2,240,000 people. This is an increase of over 12 times. It should be noted that this is the number of tourists, and that business travelers are excluded from this data (KMG, 2018). During the same time, visitors to Japan as a whole also increased, but at a much lower rate.

The above shows that Kanazawa very much needed more tour guides, and that any efforts by the national or local government were to be welcomed.

2.3. Issues in Guide Activation

Kanazawa City created a website to advertise guide services, to coincide with the period immediately after the graduation of the first cohort of municipal guides. This site was entitled *Kanazawa Guide Interpreter Search* (Kanazawa Guide, 2018). Some issues were noticed with this site, a number of which were brought up by the guides at their graduation meeting in March, 2017 (but not subsequently tackled), explained as follows:

1. The LINK members booking box is put above

the municipal guides and KGGN members. As mentioned above, this was brought up at a Q&A session before the site went live, but it wasn't resolved. Therefore, as most people searching for a guide will click on the first booking box (over half of clicks are on the first link seen, and over 85% of people go to the top of the page, Miller, 2012), most requests will go to the LINK members. This was regarded as being unfair, as everyone should be treated equally. That is to say, there was no argument given or understood for giving LINK members work opportunity priority over municipal license holders, when guiding within the municipal boundaries. An alternative (a circle divided into three segments) was suggested at the meeting, but not adopted. This raises questions as to what background connections, agreements, or understandings LINK have with the city hall managers.

2. The municipal guides are charged a fee by the city to have their details on the site. This fee is charged every year. Some thought that was unfair, and unreasonable, and this situation may have affected motivation. Not all the municipals guides applied to have their details on the site, although various reasons may exist for that.
3. A major issue with the site is the difficulty of finding it. A search for, for example, "Kanazawa tour guide" brought up many links to other providers, but the city website was not on the first page of search results of a major search engine provider, Google (Alphabet), as of the date of writing.
4. The website booking engine asks tourists to decide what type of tourist they are (history, culture, other, etc.) before they book. This process can be off-putting. Then, too many clicks and input fields are needed/presented, making booking a chore. At the end of the

booking, the client is not even sure if they can get a guide – as a text file is just sent to the guide they have chosen, with a reply expected within 48 hours, according to the site.

A survey of municipal guides revealed that most of them received no booking requests over one year, except for one request that the city itself had sent directly to them. This is not an effective system. It could be that almost all of the “paid” services requests are going to LINK, with the “free” services requests going to KGGN, and the municipal guides are falling between the cracks.

3. Solving Issues in Tour Requests

The issues mentioned in the previous section were predictable, and were in fact predicted by some members of the municipal guide group before the site went live. In light of this, efforts were made by some of them to create a city-independent website, with a more improved interface, a smoother booking engine, and more “customer friendly” information. A lead team of two people (one was a graduating municipal guide, one had highly developed IT skills, and both were researchers) decided to form a group of skilled guides, and they worked to create a website and surrounding support infrastructure to facilitate the hiring of guides. Initially, six municipal guides were gathered and agreed to work under the banner of KWT¹ (Kanazawa Walking Tours). This KWT group was led and managed by

the two founding members, received requests for guiding services on their online platform, received payment for services and gathered relevant data from the clients (tourists), then the job requests were handed over to the waiting guides. The majority of the payment received was paid to the guides, with a portion retained for advertising and business development.

This system was seen as successful, with other guides expressing their desire to join. Some members of LINK and KGGN also expressed their desire to be a part of the KWT group. However, the KWT group’s lifeblood were its hard-won bank of online reviews from clients, making quality control an important issue. Furthermore, being able to provide enough work for the members was also important, so a rapid expansion of new members was not seen as being beneficial to the group as a whole.

Currently, KWT has ten members and five partner members, and has started to build a presence in other cities (such as Kyoto and Takayama).

4. Results/Conclusions/Further Study

Entrepreneurship was needed in the above situation, and sole reliance on the city was shown as not being adequate. The depth of entrepreneurship required to kick-start the tour guide industry in Kanazawa, i.e., the history, activities, results, and future plans of KWT are detailed in a further paper.

Notes

- (1) The author is part of the KWT group, and this information has been conveyed to Kanazawa City (and in this paper) for full disclosure. The author’s interests include access to data, and this will be given in following papers.

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