

Is Japan Ready for the 2020 Olympics?



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Is Japan ready for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics? After intensive lobbying at the IOC and preparing tons of money, Tokyo's efforts to win the bidding to host the Olympics have finally achieved a fruitful outcome. However, there is the big question about whether or not Japan is truly ready to welcome foreign tourists and participating athletes. Also, it is questionable whether Japanese companies can take full advantage of this great opportunity for globalizing their business to earn large profits.

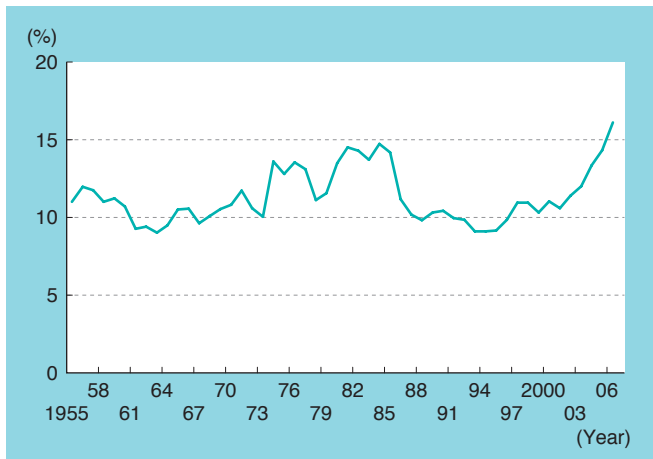
While Japanese companies such as Toshiba, Hitachi, Itochu, and other trading companies doing a fairly good job overseas in producing infrastructure, such as high-speed rail and nuclear power plants, electronics companies such as Sony, Panasonic, NEC and Fujitsu have not been so successful overseas (Sony is fairly successful in India, but

not worldwide). Especially in the home electronics and smartphone market, Sony and Panasonic have both lost to global players Apple and Samsung which has led to a decline in Japan's economy and presence in the world.

Japan's percentage of exports compared to GDP is low (as the *Chart* and *Table* show) since its economy has been depending on the fairly big domestic market of around 120 million people. But it is time for Japan to realize that its population and domestic market is shrinking and the only way to keep the Japanese economy up and running strongly is by exporting and relocating businesses overseas. This is an important factor that Japan needs to note to be well prepared for the 2020 Olympics.

Now, I would like to mention a little about Japanese culture and hospitality. My friends who visit Japan and travel around

CHART
Trend of Japan's dependency on exports



Source: Compiled by Japan Foreign Trade Council, referring to IMF's International Financial Statistics, Nikkei Financial Quest & Chief Cabinet Office's website

TABLE
Exports dependency — ratio of major economies (Goods exports amount/nominal GDP) (%)

Country	CY 1996	CY 2006
Singapore	135.3	205.9
Thailand	31.0	63.4
Chile	22.5	39.5
Germany	21.0	38.4
South Korea	24.7	37.2
China	17.7	36.9
Russia	21.4	29.8
Mexico	28.9	27.6
France	18.2	21.9
UK	21.6	17.8
Japan	8.9	14.8
India	8.6	13.6
Brazil	5.7	13.3
US	8.0	7.8

Source: Compiled by Japan Foreign Trade Council, (JFTC) referring to IMF's World Economic Outlook Database, April 2007 & IMF's Direction of Trade Statistics

the country always tell me that Japanese people are very nice and very helpful. I have heard of episodes of Japanese people taking lost travelers all the way to the nearest station or to their final destination. There are many other aspects of their society that Japanese are proud of in accommodating international travelers.

To return to the original question I posed at the beginning: Is Japan ready for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics? The answer is half “Yes” and half “No”. Why? That’s also a very good question. Interviews I conducted have revealed a couple of problems in certain situations.

The first situation I encountered was when I met a family from the United Kingdom of Pakistani origin in Shibuya. They seemed to be searching for something specific, so I asked what they were looking for. They answered that they were looking for a Halal restaurant around Shibuya. Since there was no Halal restaurant in Shibuya, I had no choice but to take them to a spaghetti restaurant which provided seafood spaghetti. There are not so many Halal restaurants in Japan, as Japan does not have a large Muslim population. Although there are shops selling Halal food, you have to be well aware about where they are and when they are open. This is something very hard for travelers to research in advance, so in order to enhance the presence of the Halal market in Japan some application on the Apple store or Google needs to be developed and well-advertised. It is likely that many Muslims will come to Japan during the Tokyo Olympics and we need to pay attention to their interests.

On another occasion, I was walking in Shinjuku and met a family traveling from Thailand, as well as a man from Switzerland and a couple from Australia. I asked them what they found inconvenient when traveling in Japan. At that time I had an unlocked iPhone and they asked me if they could use my phone to navigate and surf the web to find restaurants and to post pictures and posts on social media. I had to apologize and explain that in Japan the wireless industry is messed up and there is very little free Wi-Fi at tourist destinations, and even if there was a place with free Wi-Fi they would need email verification, which requires another Internet connection. In order to help these travelers, I opened my personal hotspot feature so that they could search things on their own phones, since it is quite annoying sometimes to get used to a different interface on another person’s phone.

We live at a time when so many rely on their mobile phones. With such high reliance on mobile phones, many people buy unlocked smartphones and then get a local sim card in order to make phone calls, such as to change their hotel reservations or make extra bookings. It has been

pointed out that consumers with mobile phones are using masses of data on their phones these days for web browsing or contacting friends and family. There will be numerous smartphone users among the foreign visitors coming to Tokyo for the Olympics, so in order to meet their needs and enable them to enjoy their time in Japan, we must provide pre-paid sim cards for foreign tourists and participating athletes. In addition, Japan needs to invest in free Wi-Fi hotspots. In this age of Internet technology, people can be seen surfing the web on their smartphones everywhere. So it should not be forgotten that with more people getting better and easier access to the Internet, Japanese companies would have a greater opportunity to advertise their products online and return to the glory days of the 1980s.

In addition to the sim card and free Wi-Fi issues, all the people I met and interviewed said they were surprised that Japan does not sell smartphones unlocked with no annual contract. Many tourists believe Japan is a technology superpower and one of my friends from Hong Kong always buys Sony headsets and other electronic gadgets such as Japanese-brand rice cookers that you can only get in Japan. Whenever I take my overseas friends around Tokyo they do a lot of shopping, which helps support Japan’s economy and thus contributes to increasing consumption and cash flow into Japan. Japan needs to be aware of this and in particular Japanese producers such as Sony or Panasonic should aim to meet their needs.

Another thing which all the people I met told me was that not so many people speak good English and the signs in English are insufficient. Also there is the fact that Japan does not have so many street names which makes it 100 times more difficult to find your way to your desired destination, since you cannot specify your destination by pointing out specific street names.

Of course there were many other issues raised, but what I have mentioned here seem to be truly major problems that need to be addressed. The government must step in and take immediate action to improve the accommodation of foreign tourists coming to Japan, and needs to simplify bureaucratic procedures for faster decision-making.

All in all, the issues of Internet access, English signs and promotion, and Halal food need to be quickly resolved so that Japan can more effectively demonstrate the wonderful spirit of *omotenashi*. **JS**

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