

Interview with Dr. Tokuro Matsuo, Professor, Information Systems Architecture, Advanced Institute of Industrial Technology in Tokyo Metropolitan University Corporation

MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Convention & Exhibition/Event): a Vehicle to Lead a Nation to Prosper Through Tourism

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

International conferences and exhibitions are often good means of attracting tourists to the host countries, as participants may take the time to travel around the nation before or after the events. If attracted by what they discover, they may visit the country again as real tourists. When they participate in such events, they are generally more interested in the topics at the conference or exhibition than in the country's tourism resources. But depending on how the country promotes itself during their visit for business purposes, they could become good customers for the nation's tourism sector. MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Convention & Exhibition/Event) could thus trigger a rise in tourism in the host nation. Japan is no exception.

We were lucky to have an interview with a bright young academic who was appointed by the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) as a MICE ambassador, whose mission is to attract as many international conferences, meetings and exhibitions as possible to Japan. Dr. Tokuro Matsuo, professor of Information Systems Architecture at the Advanced Institute of Industrial Technology in Tokyo Metropolitan University Corporation, responded to our questions as below.

(Interviewed on June 14, 2017)

Path Leading to MICE Ambassador

JS: You have a Ph.D. in the IT field and are also working as a MICE ambassador for the JNTO to attract international conferences to Japan. First of all, could you tell us how you have become a MICE ambassador while working as an academic on IT research?

Matsuo: I finished my undergraduate course in 2001 and gained a Ph.D. in IT engineering from the Graduate School of Engineering at Nagoya Institute of Technology in 2006. Between 2001 and 2006, I had written many research papers and one of them published in 2005 was recognized internationally as a contribution to developing a new frontier in this area.

European scientists working on the same issue called on me to organize an international seminar on the subject of my paper. Though I was still a Ph.D. student, I managed to organize an international seminar under



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the guidance of my professor at the time. It was a very small one of around 50 participants, since the theme of the seminar was very new and specific. In spite of that, this small conference on a specific IT engineering topic triggered my career in organizing a wide range of international conferences. After gaining my Ph.D. I worked as an associate professor for the Graduate School of Science and Engineering at Yamagata University from 2006 until 2012. In 2009, a US academic association asked me to organize an international conference on computer science in Japan. In August 2011, I organized an international conference of around 190 people from 20 countries at a hot spring inn in Kaminoyama city in Yamagata Prefecture in the Tohoku region. My selection of a hot spring inn as a conference venue was very spontaneous and not intended to attract tourists from overseas, but it was considered unique and I was awarded a

Prize of Attraction of International Conferences and Contribution to Regional Development by the JNTO.

Following the award ceremony, I spoke at a panel discussion titled “Towards Attracting International Conferences by Promoting a Host Region’s Localities Globally”. I then had some requests for presentations about my personal experience in Yamagata from various regions in Japan and eventually got more requests to talk about attracting international conferences in general, and thus gradually I became considered one of the experts in attracting international conferences as a tool for developing tourism. To be fully qualified as a professional of tourism to meet those requests, I worked on research on tourism and published a number of research papers on this as well after 2012. In 2015, I got the Honorable Mention Award at the International Tourism Congress in Portugal.

I have been teaching at this school, the Advanced Institute of Industrial Technology at Tokyo Metropolitan University Corporation as a full professor since 2012. Though I was in charge of an IT engineering class at Yamagata University, at this school majoring in IT engineering I am teaching a class on business and services as well as organizational management of enterprises. In my class, I teach about not only tourism and conventions but also marketing and business planning in which I cover such issues as how services in business should work to attract customers or how to develop a new product to keep customers in a business plan.

JS: Could you tell us exactly what issue you worked on in the area of IT engineering?

Matsuo: I worked on an institutional framework for stopping injustice by using AI. The engineers had been working on strengthening security systems to prevent injustice, but other engineers had also been working on creating loopholes for it. This was truly an endless game between the two types of engineers. I thought we should create a system where an injustice would be automatically penalized to truly discourage people from behaving in such a way, and I used to work on it by taking account of economic theory.

JS: Tourism is important for Japan now, but we do not have so many experts on it yet. Tourism must be studied from a wide range of angles, since it has an interdisciplinary nature. It is probably true that people who have worked on different issues will need to get into tourism and encourage the study of tourism services as much as possible. Could an IT expert like yourself help to develop and deepen studies on tourism?

Matsuo: Yes. In particular, we have a common concept of services between IT and tourism. IT is not uniquely manufacturing but providing services as well to IT users. A person is now writing or buying a ticket by using IT and this is considered a replacement of human services in the old days. So the progress of IT should be considered more as a convenience for human beings and eventually

reach a stage where a human being would not even be conscious of using IT. For example, a vending machine could be designed to enable users to feel for a button spontaneously without searching for it consciously. Likewise, tourism and convention services should also be tailored to users’ interests or feelings about them.

Role of MICE Ambassador

JS: You were appointed a MICE ambassador by the JNTO after having organized a number of international conferences since your Yamagata conference in 2011?

Matsuo: Yes. I had organized around 50 international conferences and conventions since then and I also had many connections with a wide range of international conferences’ organizers. That was the reason, I believe, why I got nominated. In 2017 as well, I organized a conference in Indonesia and I am also planning to organize ones in Beijing, Hamamatsu, Nagoya and Kanazawa towards the end of 2017.

JS: What is the role and mission of MICE ambassadors?

Matsuo: One of the missions is to attract any international conference or convention that has never been organized in Japan to Japan. Another one is to promote Japan as a host nation of those conferences among the conference organizing groups and associations in Australia, Europe and the United States. The host country of international conferences is sometimes fixed in turn in regions such as Asia, North America and Europe, but in other cases there is competition among nations in each region to attract a conference. On those occasions, MICE ambassadors are expected to play a key role in winning the competition.

JS: What do you think are the merits for a host nation of organizing an international conference?

Matsuo: Firstly, if you organize an international conference in your country, many researchers in the country will participate in it. If they were given an opportunity to present their research results at the conference, they would all work hard on their presentations, and that could raise their research capacity and lead to more patent acquisitions, and thus the economy would be vitalized. According to the Japan Tourism Agency of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, the estimated economic impact of international conferences organized in Japan in 2015 was around 590 billion yen.

Secondly, there are merits for tourism as well. Participants in an international conference from abroad will be different from tourists visiting Japan. They are more likely to stay in luxury four-star or five-star hotels, and join in dinner banquets. Tourism experts are saying that the economic impact of the consumption of such conferees would be around eight times that of tourists from overseas in

general. When an international conference is organized, we see our tourism-related infrastructures gradually expanding, such as the English guidance boards at Haneda Airport or Tokyo Station.

Thirdly, we can expect a cultural impact from an international conference as well. There would be more public lectures on the subjects related to the conference's theme for citizens or junior high-school or senior high-school students organized in various schools, universities or civic halls to commemorate the conference.

Moreover, in the hosting region many academics working at universities there would be intellectually stimulated by the conference to write papers. This would make it easier for those academics to get research funds from public and private entities working on research development, which would then create a new business opportunity for local companies working closely with the universities. This is the fourth impact of an international conference.

JS: In the case of Exhibition, I guess there would be large business matching events as well. If many ventures join these events, could it accelerate start-ups?

Matsuo: Yes. Exhibition has so many aspects. Not only business matching but also human connections would be born. Through business collaboration and joint product development there would be secondary impacts upon human resources development and multilateral cooperation among nations. Another interesting point about Exhibition is that it would create more business meeting opportunities. All of these, conferences, exhibitions and meetings, are contained in the whole concept of MICE.

Attraction of Japan as Venue for Conference

JS: What do you think are the attractions of Japan as a venue for international conferences? In particular, what do you think about its tourist attractions after such conferences?

Matsuo: I think we Japanese tend to underestimate the attractions of our own localities. Most of these tend to believe they would not have to attract new customers and are rather happy with the current status of their region as a tourist spot. But it is true that more regions will try to follow the successful cases where regions gained more customers by improving tourism-related infrastructures, such as English sign boards.

We see today a significant increase in overseas tourists visiting Kenrokuen Garden in Kanazawa or Okayama Castle in Okayama city, and other such regional cities in Japan. Such an increase can provide an education opportunity for those regions' tourism administrators and businesses. Among the foreigners visiting MICE, some will have personal tours after the conferences or meetings. Their views on Japanese tourism will have to be taken as well as those of group tour participants in order to improve the current situation.

JS: I think in many cases the venues of international conferences hosted by European nations are selected because of their attractions as tourist spots. Are the venues of nations that enjoy a high status among tourists gaining more benefits from hosting conferences than Japan?

Matsuo: No. They do not intend to earn benefits from hosting MICE. Japan occasionally tries to promote its venues through "branding their locality". But Japanese regions are often unable to do the marketing to find out exactly what foreign tourists would want in traveling in Japan. If they assume that what a Japanese tourist finds charming would be the same for a foreign tourist, they will fail to attract foreign tourists. For example, if they promote the merits of a newly built sidewalk from a station to the center of the city to facilitate traffic, even though Japanese tourists might appreciate it, foreigners may not like it at all, as they would prefer stopping by a stream or a brook or a deserted temple in their wandering walks in a forest rather than walking straight down to the center of the city from the station on the sidewalk.

JS: For example, in Nihonbashi in downtown Tokyo which has many historic spots, the local NGOs and a real estate firm have worked to develop the area for a long time and are employing foreign staff to promote the attractions of Nihonbashi for overseas visitors. Do you think more such efforts will be needed in the future?

Matsuo: Yes, certainly, that is one of the ideas helping Japan to improve its capacity to promote the nation as a tourist destination. However, more fundamentally, objective marketing will be necessary. Any subjective solution solely based upon an individual's values will not work.

JS: Should we create experts in marketing to promote tourism in Japan?

Matsuo: I think the easiest way is to do a survey by distributing a questionnaire on Japan as a venue for tourism among people outside Japan who have never visited or who are interested in Japan but have never been here. This is the most fundamental marketing to analyze the need for tourism resources in Japan. Though we often see surveys of foreign tourists who have been to Japan, the results are probably biased, since they were interested in Japan in the first place and so came here. The countries to be covered by this survey must be Southeast Asian nations with rising economies and strong potential for growth in the future such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. Among those nations, people prefer to travel within their own country at this moment, but they may become more interested in going abroad as their income is rising. Nearby places such as Japan, China, Taiwan and South Korea could be their priority for visiting on their first overseas trip. The total population of those

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Southeast Asian nations is almost 400 million and thus they could provide us with a big market. It would be useful for Japan to promote a good image of itself among them even before they become able to afford to go abroad for tourism. We need to anticipate the future and plan a strategy to accommodate it before our rivals start to think about it.

JS: On the question of human resources development to raise the capacity for marketing, what about efforts on the part of universities that have recently founded a Tourism Department? In spite of their efforts, these human resources are not well developed yet.

Matsuo: The Japanese government told 1,700 local governments all over Japan to set up departments of marketing for tourism called the destination management and marketing organization. That triggered the universities to set up their Tourism Departments. For a local area, hosting visitors would be a major part of their tourism business and so they need people capable of marketing. Assuming that most students in Tourism Departments have a non-natural science background, they would probably not like mathematics and this seems to be making it difficult to raise experts in marketing.

JS: In marketing for tourism, what foreign tourists are seeking in visiting Japan is clearly not “Japanese hospitality”, so-called *omotenashi*, is it?

Matsuo: No, it is certainly not. “Japanese hospitality” is not so popular among foreign tourists, since it seems to be pushing foreign tourists to adopt certain values. It appears at first a glance to be polite and warm-hearted, but in reality it is too formal and unfriendly. For some, they feel a bit estranged by this service.

In Western nations, there is no specific equivalent of this *omotenashi* in reasonably-priced hotels or airlines, except for luxury hotels. You can see a significant difference in quality of service depending upon the price. If you want to have high quality services, you have to pay more, while in Japan you would generally have the same quality of service regardless of the price. Thus, in Japan services are generally free of charge. But free services are subject to so many implicit rules, and this can make it difficult to provide flexible services and make customers feel at ease.

Recommendations for Future Venues for MICE in Japan

JS: What venues would you recommend for staging MICE in Japan?

Matsuo: Though a conference itself needs to be held in a facility, a dinner banquet could be organized at a unique venue. In the 32nd Congress of the Société Internationale d’Urologie with around 3,000 participants in Fukuoka in 2012, they organized a banquet in a shopping mall in Hakata city that was almost monopolized by the

participants who could walk freely there. It was a successful event, well known among people working in tourism. Everyone enjoyed walking around and eating anything freely, thanks to the advance planning by the hosting organization and the shopping mall.

I produced a dinner show following an international conference in Niigata in 2013 in a food market. This place is now also acknowledged as a unique venue for a dinner. In the same year, we had a welcome reception for an international conference on the lawns in Matsue Castle that used to have a rice storage facility in the 17th century. It was considered then a national designated cultural property, but afterwards it was designated a national treasure. Therefore, we cannot use this venue for a dinner anymore.

Additionally in 2016, we had a dinner banquet in a place preserving an ancient street from the 17th century with souvenir shops close to Kumamoto Castle. Inside a castle, space is limited and we would need to observe rigorous rules for eating and drinking there. But among the souvenir shops near the castle, all tourists, whatever they may want to do — look at the castle, buy souvenirs or leave the venue to go to their own drinks party — can enjoy the atmosphere.

JS: You would need to be intelligent and creative in planning such a unique event.

Matsuo: Yes, you must be. Local tourism businesses occasionally insist on promoting for foreign tourists some old folk handicrafts that have never sold well in spite of having been introduced to the Japanese public through the media. I do not think they would sell well for inbound tourists either. Not all historic items are necessarily successful in attracting inbound tourists. Some recently developed attractions such as *gyoza* dumplings in Hamamatsu or *ramen* noodles in Hakata have become very popular among foreign tourists, even though they have only a short history. We need to explore tourism resources that are still unknown and that nobody in the local region has ever imagined would sell well among foreign tourists. I am often saying that we should look at everything from a completely new angle without any preoccupations.

I recommend that Japanese tourism business people go to Narita Airport first with their mind empty. They should intentionally ask people around them how they could go to their home town from the airport, pretending to be tourists who have come to Japan for the first time. Then they will realize how difficult it may be to access their place or how difficult to understand the route map they made for tourists. And they may also discover some new point of attraction in their region which they have never thought about so far.

The key to success in tourism promotion must be to think about your region as if you were a stranger to it. There must always be new discoveries.

JS

Written with the cooperation of Naoko Sakai who is a freelance writer.