The Invisible Bridge: How Foreign Tourism Professionals Foster Bridging Social Capital in Japan

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of foreign tourism professionals in Japan as key agents of *bridging social capital* within the tourism industry. These individuals serve as cultural mediators, interpreting Japanese traditions, social norms, and practices for international audiences while facilitating connections between local communities and global visitors. The research adopts a participatory observation approach, in which the author actively engaged in tourism-related activities, complemented by semi-structured interviews with 35 foreign tourism professionals and the development of a dedicated database. Findings identify three distinct generational cohorts among these professionals and reveal that, despite their significant contributions, they remain underrepresented at the institutional level. Operating without formal recognition, they act as *invisible bridges*, fostering intercultural understanding and supporting more sustainable tourism practices in Japan.

1. Introduction

When Japan positioned itself as a global tourist destination over a decade ago, it discovered unexpected allies among its foreign residents. In response to growing tourism demand, many of these individuals turned to the tourism sector, particularly in Kyoto, which has emerged as a hub for foreign tourism professionals. Although they contribute significantly by generating tourist traffic and income, alleviating overcrowding, supporting small businesses, and preserving traditional crafts, their presence remains largely invisible at both institutional and statistical levels.

Lacking formal organization or representation, their perspectives are seldom integrated into municipal tourism policymaking. Consequently, little is known about their specific roles or how they serve as conduits between Japan and the globalized world. Despite being active as tour guides, hotel and Airbnb hosts, event organizers, and tourism business owners, they are often overlooked as a distinct group. Nevertheless, many of them, though not of Japanese origin, devote themselves with remarkable dedication to introducing Japanese culture to international tourists, not only from their own countries but from around the world.

While existing literature on tourism and intercultural communication addresses topics such as cultural adaptation, translation, and the influence of local guides, there remains a notable gap in scholarship concerning foreign tourism professionals as *active agents of bridging social capital*. These individuals, situated between local traditions and global expectations, do more than interpret language—they mediate customs, values, and social norms. Despite Japan's growing status as a global tourism destination, research has largely centered on local actors or tourists' experiences, overlooking how foreign professionals negotiate their *dual cultural identity* to render Japanese traditions comprehensible and appealing to international audiences.

Dual cultural identity refers to the internalization of two distinct cultural systems, enabling individuals to navigate and mediate between them with empathy and nuanced understanding (Klandermans, 2022). This capacity is a hallmark of intercultural competence, particularly in multicultural environments. Given the diversity of foreign tourism professionals in Japan—across nationality, language, education, age, and background—they are not easily classified or located, especially in the absence of formal registration or common representation. Yet in an increasingly interconnected world, such formations offer new layers of global engagement. The largely unnoticed contributions of these professionals reflect the broader dynamics of how Japan is adapting to globalization through tourism.

By reframing Japanese cultural elements in accessible and relatable ways, foreign tourism professionals help to foster mutual understanding and respect across cultures. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how these individuals function as *"invisible bridges"*—facilitating bridging social capital and promoting cross-cultural communic-

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-ation within Japan's tourism ecosystem. To achieve this, the research applies a participant observation approach.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore how foreign tourism professionals in Kyoto foster bridging social capital through their everyday practices and intercultural interactions. It investigates the ways in which they mediate between international tourists and local communities, acting as cultural translators and informal representatives of Japanese culture. In particular, the study aims to understand how their generational backgrounds influence their approaches to tourism, storytelling, and community engagement, and how their roles have evolved in response to policy changes and shifts in global travel trends.

2. Background And Literature Review

2.1. Tourism in Japan and Kyoto

Japan occupies a unique position on the global stage: it is the third-largest economy (JETRO, 2022), one of Asia's oldest democracies, the 11th most populous country, and also the most rapidly aging society. Despite these distinctions, it maintains one of the most restrictive immigration policies among OECD countries. As of 2021, Japan's population stood at 125.5 million, with 28.6% aged 65 and over—a demographic trend that contributes to an annual population decline of 0.5% (Statistic Bureau of Japan, 2022).

To address its labor shortage, migration has been proposed as a potential solution. A United Nations report projected that Japan would need approximately 20 million immigrants by 2050 to sustain its standard of living (United Nations Population Division, 2001). However, Japan has responded cautiously, favoring highly skilled migrants and emphasizing their societal value in public discourse, while maintaining strict policies against low-skilled immigration (Wakisaka & Cardwell, 2021). With only 2.9% of the population being foreign-born—most from neighboring Asian countries—daily interactions between Japanese citizens and migrants remain rare (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2020). Consequently, public spaces and events where such interaction does occur take on heightened social importance (Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021).

Within Japan, Kyoto holds a particularly distinct cultural and demographic profile. Known as the heart of Japan's traditional heritage, Kyoto is home to historic crafts such as tea ceremony schools, kimono dyeing and weaving, and ceramics, as well as the highest concentration of *gemaiko* (geisha and maiko). On the modern side, it is also the headquarters of global corporations like Nintendo, Kyocera, and Shimadzu, and it hosts international festivals for indie games, manga, and anime. This dual character—traditional and modern—sets Kyoto apart from other Japanese cities and shapes both the composition of its foreign residents and the types of tourists it attracts.

As of 2019, Kyoto had a population of 1.5 million, and its foreign resident population—3.46%—exceeds the national average of 2.9% by roughly 20%. Over the preceding decade, the number of foreign residents in Kyoto increased by 20%, reaching 48,773 individuals. Kyoto also receives a different tourist demographic compared to Tokyo or Osaka. While the latter attract more Asian tourists, Kyoto sees higher proportions of European and American visitors. Overall, the number of international overnight guests in Kyoto quadrupled over ten years, reaching 3.8 million in 2019 (Kyoto City International Strategic Vision, 2020).

2.2. Being the Bridge

As Brass and Borgatti (2020) note, "The individual serves as a bridge between otherwise structurally disconnected individuals, and those individuals are culturally dissimilar from one another." This captures the essence of *bridging social capital*, which refers to social relationships that connect individuals with diverse social backgrounds and identities who share common interests (Pelling & High, 2005). Unlike strong, close-knit ties, bridging social capital is often composed of "weak ties"—voluntary, flexible relationships that allow for dynamic social interaction without long-term obligation or sanctions (Widén-Wulff et al., 2008). These ties are critical for broadening acceptance of diverse values and identities (Paxton, 2002).

Moreover, the effectiveness of knowledge transfer and communication often depends on the range and diversity of one's social network (Reagans & McEvily, 2003). Beyond structural connections, this leads us to *cultural bridging*, which addresses how individuals differ or align in terms of beliefs, values, and norms. As Schoewalter and Goldberg (2019) explain, structural bridging measures interconnectivity or isolation in networks, while cultural bridging assesses shared or divergent cultural worldviews.

Cultural bridging is especially significant in international tourism, where guides and mediators help visitors interpret new environments. Tour guides act as "cultural mediators" (Cohen, 1985), offering narratives that enable tourists to understand the unfamiliar. This role is inherently dual: guides not only explain local culture to tourists but also convey tourists' expectations and perspectives to the host community (Holloway, 1981). This two-way communication fosters cultural empathy, encouraging both tourists and locals to understand and appreciate diverse viewpoints.

In this way, tourism can also nurture *global citizenship*. According to Salazar (2006), tourism professionals serve as cultural brokers, transforming complex traditions into relatable narratives. These interactions do more than inform—they challenge stereotypes, reduce cultural biases, and promote inclusive worldviews (Richards & Wilson, 2006).

The effectiveness of this process depends heavily on the guide's intercultural sensitivity and adaptability. Hofstede (2001) emphasizes the importance of identifying shared values to reduce miscommunication and build rapport. On a broader scale, tourism-driven cultural bridging has socio-economic impacts. As Pearce (2005) notes, relationships developed through tourism can lead to community collaboration, economic partnerships, and cultural preservation—such as when tourists engage directly with local artisans.

Moreover, foreign tourism professionals—particularly guides—serve a complex and essential function as cultural bridges. They facilitate structural connections across cultures, promote intercultural understanding, and contribute to broader societal outcomes such as sustainability and cultural continuity. By fostering empathy, challenging cultural assumptions, and encouraging inclusive engagement, these professionals shape the intercultural experiences of both tourists and host communities. Future research could expand on these findings by examining the long-term effects of such interactions on cultural preservation and the socio-economic resilience of tourism-dependent locales.

Despite the growing body of literature on intercultural communication, migration, and tourism in Japan, few studies have explicitly examined the unique contributions of foreign tourism professionals as agents of social capital. Most existing research focuses on either local Japanese perspectives or tourist experiences, overlooking the role of long-term foreign residents who operate within and across both spheres (Phillimore, Liu-Farrer & Sigona, 2021). This study addresses this gap by analyzing the bridging role played by these professionals through the lens of generational change and intercultural practice.

3. Research Method

This study employs participant observation in multiple ways. The author, a foreign tourism professional, collected data both through their own professional activities and by regularly joining the tours, events, and other tourism-related engagements of fellow professionals—as both a participant and observer. This dual role enabled the collection of data involving three key stakeholder groups: (1) foreign tourism professionals (i.e., foreign-born individuals who receive remuneration for their tourism-related activities), (2) international tourists, and (3) local residents.

Participant observation, as an interactive and relatively unstructured method that produces free-flowing data (Guest et al., 2013), aligns well with the exploratory nature of this research. As Bernard (2006) notes, it allows deeper insider access, facilitates more relevant questioning, and enhances understanding of the meaning behind observed behaviors—advantages that structured observation alone may not offer.

This method is particularly valuable in tourism research, as it allows the researcher to become embedded within the network of stakeholders, offering a unique vantage point on intercultural interactions and exchanges. According to Richards (2011), as a fundamental research technique, participant observation captures social-cultural information, revealing insights that would otherwise remain inaccessible through more rigid methodologies. In the context of bridging social capital, this approach enables the researcher to witness firsthand the emergence of weak ties, which play a crucial role in bridging diverse social groups and facilitating the exchange of information and resources (Dickinson et al., 2016) and to observe subtle dynamics within cross-cultural encounters.

Given that cultural bridging is central to this study, participant observation proves especially suitable for exploring how foreign tourism professionals mediate between tourists and locals. DeWalt and DeWalt (2010) emphasize that this method is particularly effective for examining complex social relationships and behaviors. By directly engaging in tourism activities, the researcher gains access to how professionals navigate cultural differences, build rapport, and foster intercultural understanding. McMorran (2008), in his study of labor relations in the Japanese hotel industry, confirmed the value of participant observation in tourism research, highlighting its ability to uncover deeper layers of meaning.

Moreover, this method captures the reflexive and emergent qualities of cultural mediation. Emerson et al. (2011) underscore that its unstructured nature enables the documentation of evolving themes and patterns, essential for understanding processes like cultural bridging. The researcher's dual role as both participant and observer also enhances analytical depth. As Adler and Adler (1994) explain, this dual perspective bridges emic (insider) and etic (outsider) viewpoints, offering a more holistic understanding of the studied phenomena.

To complement the participant observation, this study also utilized semi-structured interviews with 35 foreign tourism professionals. These interviews provided a structured yet adaptable approach to data collection. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well-suited to tourism research because they allow for in-depth exploration while accommodating the diversity of participants' backgrounds and experiences (Buchanan & Bryman, 2009).

This method enriches the study's exploration of bridging social capital by capturing personal narratives, subjective insights, and lived experiences. As Vertovec (2007) notes, interviews are effective tools for understanding how individuals perceive their roles and relationships within complex networks. Furthermore, interviews allowed for triangulation with data from observations and field notes, enhancing the study's validity and reliability (Creswell, 2014). They also helped mitigate potential researcher bias, given the author's dual identity as both practitioner and investigator, by providing perspectives beyond the researcher's own experience.

While participant observation provided an immersive and contextualized foundation for this study, the inclusion of semi-structured interviews enabled participants to articulate their experiences more explicitly—together offering a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of foreign tourism professionals and their role in fostering bridging social capital in Japan..

3.1. Challenges in Data Collection on Foreign Tourism Professionals

There are no official records documenting the exact number or entrepreneurial activities of foreign tourism professionals in Japan, as no organization is responsible for identifying or representing them. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive statistics reflects the heterogeneity of this group in terms of residency status, types of engagement, language use, and tourism-related roles. As a result, this study could not employ random sampling methods. Instead, it began by constructing a dedicated database of foreign tourism professionals through profile collection.

Two primary criteria guided the data collection process, which began in 2017: (1) the professionals must offer their services in Kyoto, and (2) they must cater to an international clientele. Individuals who worked exclusively in their native language—thus only mediating between their home country and Japan—were excluded, as they operated within a limited ethnic niche rather than fostering broader cross-cultural engagement.

The initial sampling strategy involved personal contacts and a snowball sampling technique. However, foreign professionals typically recommended only one or two peers, as they were rarely interconnected through their tourism activities. To overcome this limitation, the author sought out physical and digital hubs in Kyoto where such professionals might congregate. This included attending events and observing the composition of their audiences. Although some small hubs were identified, interviews and further fieldwork revealed that Kyoto itself, as a city, functions as the primary hub for foreign tourism professionals.

To supplement this outreach, data sources included newspaper articles highlighting foreign professionals, social media content, online videos, interviews, university lectures, tour guide websites, accommodation platforms, travel rating sites, Kyoto event listings, international webinars, and online audio-based communities. These efforts led to the identification of 350 foreign professionals offering services in Kyoto.

From this pool, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 individuals. Selection was based on the consistency and popularity of their activities, ensuring a diverse representation of the larger group. A full list of interviewees is provided in Appendix 1. Care was taken to reflect a broad geographic spread, with participants from Europe, North America, Asia, and South America. Gender balance was also considered, although the field remains male-dominated, particularly among full-time tourism workers.

The sample included a variety of tourism-related roles, such as private tour guiding, accommodation ownership, event organization, hosting cultural experiences, and content creation through writing or digital media. While not statistically representative, the sampling strategy was designed to capture a wide range of perspectives, career paths, and personal motivations.

Given the author's dual role as a tourism professional and researcher, reflexivity was essential throughout the data collection process. While this insider perspective provided unique access to networks and informal interactions, it also risked introducing bias. Efforts were made to mitigate this through triangulation with diverse sources, reflective field notes, and inclusion of voices beyond the researcher's immediate network. Additionally, the snowball sampling approach may have excluded professionals less integrated into existing networks, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings.

3.2. Data Analysis

This study employed qualitative methods, combining participant observation and semi-structured interviews, with data captured through detailed field notes. Interviews were not audio-recorded, as the aim was not to conduct formal transcript analysis but to explore participants' lived experiences and personal narratives in an open and flexible manner. Field notes were taken during and immediately after each interview, documenting key quotes, contextual details, and reflexive observations.

Thematic coding was conducted manually, using an inductive approach to allow themes to emerge organically from the narratives. Field notes were repeatedly reviewed and annotated to identify recurring patterns. While no software was used, the data were organized into matrices categorizing bridging strategies, generational differences, and cultural mediation practices. Codes were refined iteratively and validated by cross-referencing with interview excerpts and observation logs.

Narrative analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns across the data. Analytical categories such as *cultural mediation*, *building trust*, and *facilitating collaboration* were derived from both inductive insights gathered in the field and theoretical frameworks related to bridging social capital. These categories captured the various ways in which foreign tourism professionals connect international visitors with local communities, resources, and cultural meanings.

The analysis followed a recursive, iterative process: field notes were repeatedly reviewed, compared, and coded to extract shared themes, while illustrative examples were selected to highlight the richness and diversity of

experiences. Narrative analysis, as employed in this study, focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences through storytelling. Rather than reducing data into isolated variables or rigid categories, narrative analysis considers the structure, content, and context of personal accounts to uncover how people interpret and communicate their lived realities (Riessman, 2008).

This approach is particularly well-suited to researching undocumented or underrepresented groups, as it does not rely on formal transcripts or systematic coding frameworks. Instead, it prioritizes emergent themes, reflexivity, and contextual interpretation (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). By emphasizing participants' own voices and the meanings they assign to their actions, narrative analysis offers deeper insights into how foreign tourism professionals function as cultural bridges within Japan's tourism landscape.

4. Foreign Professionals In The Tourism Sector Of Kyoto

Foreign tourism professionals in Kyoto exhibit significant diversity in terms of their countries of origin, native languages, levels of Japanese language proficiency, educational backgrounds, age groups, and residency statuses. At the outset of this research, a central objective was to identify commonalities among this otherwise heterogeneous group. Initially, it appeared that entrepreneurial engagement in tourism activities served as a key unifying factor. However, the interviews revealed that entrepreneurship was often not their primary aspiration. Instead, it emerged as a functional strategy—a means through which many pursued deeper personal goals, particularly the desire to sustain a meaningful life in Japan. For many participants, lifestyle aspirations, including the opportunity to live in Kyoto and engage with its culture, were more central than purely economic motivations.

Interestingly, none of the interviewees reported having initially migrated to Japan with the specific intent of working in tourism or establishing businesses. Rather, most transitioned into tourism-related roles after settling in Japan and accumulating local knowledge. Their migration was typically not a response to economic instability in their countries of origin. Instead, their entrepreneurial ventures reflected a strong cultural affinity with Japanese society and a desire to contribute to it. This finding aligns with broader research on lifestyle migration and cultural integration in global cities (Paxton, 2002).

The types of activities undertaken by these professionals span a wide array of tourism and intercultural mediation roles. Many of them operate accommodation facilities, often purchasing and renovating traditional *machiya* townhouses to function as boutique guesthouses, private stays, or small-scale hotels. These projects contribute not only to the preservation of Kyoto's architectural heritage but also to the city's cultural sustainability (Reagans & McEvily, 2003). Others work as private tour guides or Airbnb hosts, offering tailored itineraries and immersive cultural experiences. Through direct interaction with small groups of tourists, they facilitate personalized encounters with Kyoto's traditions, spaces, and people.

In addition, several foreign professionals have established their own travel agencies, curating specialized tours and employing others in the sector. This entrepreneurial activity often emerges from a deep familiarity with the city and its cultural resources, which allows these individuals to offer experiences that differ significantly from standardized mass tourism products. Some participants also work as travel writers, producing guidebooks, blog articles, and digital content that contextualize Kyoto's heritage sites with culturally rich narratives that are often lacking in conventional English-language materials (Reagans & McEvily, 2003).

Beyond tourism services, many of these individuals engage in what can be termed *mediator-bridging activities*. For example, some act as business mediators, assisting foreign tourists and entrepreneurs in establishing commercial ties with Japanese companies. Their linguistic skills and cultural fluency enable them to foster long-term business relationships that might otherwise be hindered by cross-cultural misunderstandings (Holloway, 1981). Others contribute to the preservation of Kyoto's aesthetic and cultural landscape, investing in the restoration of historic properties and aligning their efforts with municipal conservation goals.

Furthermore, a number of these professionals expand their cultural engagement through literary work, writing novels, poetry, or essays that explore themes related to Japanese society and lifestyle. This form of expression allows them to reflect on their own experiences of cultural negotiation while simultaneously enriching the broader intercultural discourse. Similarly, many are active in digital tourism, using platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and webinars to share narratives about Japanese traditions, crafts, and daily life. These digital outputs often incorporate personal stories and artistic perspectives, which not only engage global audiences but also enhance cultural understanding (Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021).

Moreover, some professionals contribute to cultural life in Kyoto by organizing or participating in local and international events. These include initiatives such as PechaKucha Night, Writers in Kyoto, and events hosted by *Kyoto Journal*, which provide spaces for multilingual and multicultural dialogue. Such activities highlight the role of foreign professionals as informal cultural ambassadors, capable of bridging divides between Japanese communities and international visitors.

Taken together, these diverse practices reveal the significance of foreign tourism professionals as multinational cultural translators. Drawing on their experiences from their home countries, previous travels, and their lives in Kyoto, they create accessible and meaningful narratives that help international tourists engage with Japan in nuanced ways. Their storytelling abilities allow them to present complex cultural and historical topics in

a relatable manner. This is particularly valuable in a context where many of Kyoto's heritage sites offer minimal or overly simplified English-language interpretation (Reagans & McEvily, 2003).

Therefore, foreign tourism professionals in Kyoto not only contribute economically but also fulfill essential intercultural functions. By bridging linguistic, cultural, and experiential gaps, they enhance the overall quality of the tourist experience while supporting efforts to preserve and reinterpret Japanese traditions for a global audience. Their role, although often informal or unrecognized at the institutional level, is central to fostering cross-cultural understanding in Japan's increasingly globalized tourism ecosystem.

4.1. Background of Foreign Tourism Professionals

In general, the majority of foreign residents in Japan come from Asian countries, with China representing the largest group, followed by South Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Brazil (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2020). However, among foreign tourism professionals in Kyoto, the demographic composition differs significantly. The largest group originates from the United States, followed by the United Kingdom, China, France, and Canada. A more comprehensive understanding of this demographic distribution emerges when examining the proportions by region: professionals from Europe (including the UK and France) constitute 39%, followed by North America (the US and Canada) at 38%, Asia (including China and Indonesia) at 19%, and South America (primarily Brazil) at 4%.

These proportions contrast with the national foreign resident population and reflect the unique tourist demographic of Kyoto. While Asian tourists dominate visitor numbers in cities like Tokyo and Osaka—often attracted by shopping and modern entertainment—Kyoto primarily appeals to European, American, and Australian tourists who seek cultural experiences such as visiting temples, traditional gardens, and engaging in craft-based activities. This cultural tourism orientation helps explain the higher representation of Western tourism professionals in Kyoto.

A notable gender disparity also characterizes the foreign tourism workforce in Kyoto. Approximately 80% of these professionals are male, while only 20% are female. This imbalance is particularly pronounced among members of the first generation of foreign professionals (discussed in the following section), though more recent generations have seen a gradual increase in female participation. Men are more likely to work full-time in tourism, whereas women tend to engage in part-time or freelance roles. Several factors may account for this trend. For many individuals, tourism was not their original purpose for settling in Japan, but rather an activity taken up alongside or in place of their prior profession.

Regarding age distribution, the largest cohort of foreign tourism professionals falls within the 40–50 age range (34%), followed closely by those aged 30–40 (31%). Individuals aged 20–30 account for 23%, while those over 50 represent 12% of the sample. This age breakdown suggests that most professionals with more than a decade of residence in Japan entered the country during or shortly after their university studies and gradually transitioned into tourism-related careers.

In terms of language, the dominant medium of service delivery is English. However, many professionals also provide services in their native languages, including French, Chinese, and others. A considerable number of professionals are also capable of conducting tours and interactions in Japanese, further facilitating communication with local communities and broadening their accessibility to a diverse clientele.

4.2. The Three Generations

During data collection and interviews, recurring patterns began to emerge among foreign tourism professionals of different nationalities, age groups, and linguistic backgrounds. One key variable consistently stood out as a defining factor: the time of arrival in Japan and the length of residency. Since tourism is highly sensitive to economic and social fluctuations, professionals who entered the industry during different decades encountered distinct sets of challenges and opportunities. Based on these temporal differences, three generational cohorts of foreign tourism professionals in Kyoto were identified, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: The three generations of foreign tourism professionals in Kyoto

Generation	Time of moving to Japan	Typical activity in tourism	Characteristics
1st Generation: The big names	1970 - 2003	Activities related to art, exclusive tour guides, business and machiya owners, writers	Recognition of each other, strong social connections, insider access, native level Japanese language skills, artistic approach Typical visa status: permanent resident
2nd Generation: Skillful escapers	2004-2013	Tour guides, traditional arts and crafts masters, accommodation owners	Started their career as company workers, only knows a few of other professionals, native level language skills Typical visa status: permanent resident, spouse, business manager

Generation	Time of moving to Japan	Typical activity in tourism	Characteristics
3rd Generation: The opportunists	2014-	Tour guides, accommodation owners, event organizers	Tourism as a side gig, improving Japanese language skills, utilizing their own skillset (photography, drawing etc.) Typical visa status: spouse, student

Source: Author

4.4.1.   1st Generation: The Big Names

The first generation has been labeled *"The Big Names"* due to the prominence of its members—many of whom are internationally recognized artists, writers, and cultural experts who have resided in Japan for several decades. When they first arrived, tourism in Japan was relatively limited, and the number of foreign residents was considerably lower than it is today. This environment fostered a close-knit expatriate community, wherein members knew and appreciated each other's work and often collaborated on personal and professional projects.

Initially, these individuals hosted family and friends visiting Japan, and through word-of-mouth referrals, their international networks began to expand organically. Over time, they started offering tourism-related services, such as organizing cultural tours and events, providing information to international audiences, and renovating traditional Japanese homes for use as accommodations or community spaces. Some also supported foreign investors through the property acquisition process.

Most members of this generation first came to Japan as international students on university scholarships, often in artistic or cultural fields. Their early academic and creative pursuits deeply influenced their later activities in tourism. For them, tourism was not a primary career objective but rather an extension of their artistic or scholarly engagement with Japanese culture. Their involvement in tourism developed naturally alongside their broader attachment to Kyoto.

This cohort has significantly contributed to the dissemination of knowledge about Kyoto through the authorship and translation of guidebooks, cultural essays, and other materials. With the rise of the internet, many also became pioneers in creating online content rich in cultural information. Due to their long-standing presence and integration into Japanese society, members of this generation often have privileged access to exclusive spaces and experiences not readily available to newer professionals.

As one interviewee recounted, he never intended to pursue a tourism-related career, but Kyoto's unique cultural landscape inspired him to take up photography. Eventually, he became an expert on the *ukiyo* (floating world), geishas, and *maikos*. His expertise enabled him to guide private tours into traditionally closed-off cultural circles. In addition to his tourism activities, he now teaches university courses on Japanese aesthetics, organizes photography exhibitions, hosts "Geisha Nights," and contributes as an expert to television programs and cultural initiatives.

4.4.2.   2nd Generation: Skillful Escapers

Members of the second generation typically arrived in Japan as exchange students, language school attendees, or university students. After completing their studies, they entered the Japanese workforce, often securing full-time positions in sectors unrelated—or only marginally related—to tourism. At this stage, many of their narratives begin to align, revealing shared circumstances and motivations. After spending five to ten years working for Japanese companies, many expressed frustration with their professional roles and working conditions.

During the initial years, they focused on improving their Japanese language proficiency, adjusting to the routines and expectations of Japanese corporate life, and navigating the rigid hierarchical structures common in many workplaces. However, over time, a range of dissatisfactions emerged. Interviewees frequently cited the inability to utilize their individual skills, the lack of clear promotion pathways, limited autonomy in decision-making, and an inability to maintain work-life balance. A recurring theme was the perception of having little or no influence over their own roles, and that their suggestions for innovation or improvement were often disregarded.

Faced with these limitations, many began to consider alternative career paths. All interviewees in this group expressed a strong desire to remain in Japan, but they no longer wished to continue with their traditional corporate careers. Instead, they reflected on how they might leverage their personal qualities, advanced Japanese language skills, local social networks, cultural familiarity, family ties, and in-depth knowledge of Kyoto and other regions of Japan. As one Canadian guide explained, they shared many experiences with foreign tourists, having frequently traveled throughout Japan for leisure and accumulated firsthand knowledge of heritage sites, travel routes, accommodations, and cultural practices.

Like the first generation, many of them had served informally as 'tour operators' for visiting family and friends, which further deepened their familiarity with tourism logistics and intercultural mediation. Building on these foundations, they eventually transitioned into tourism not by joining existing companies, but by establishing their own businesses or working independently as freelancers.

Notably, this generation includes the only group of professionals who obtained official certification as licensed tour guides. At the time, guiding tourists legally required a national or local license. Many took the national *Tsūyaku Annai-shi* (通訳案内士) exam, or the Kyoto-specific tour guide exam, which tested knowledge in Japanese history, geography, and language. According to JNTO (2017), there were 22,754 licensed guides in Japan under this system, and the average exam pass rate was approximately 20 percent. The fine for conducting unauthorized tours was 500,000 yen, underscoring the legal risks involved in unlicensed guiding

However, as inbound tourism surged and demand for guides outpaced supply, particularly in rural areas where few licensed professionals were available, the legal framework was revised. In 2017, Japan relaxed its requirements, allowing individuals to offer guiding services without a formal license. This policy shift significantly expanded opportunities for freelance and independent guides, particularly those from abroad, and helped pave the way for the diversification of the tourism industry.

4.4.3.   3rd Generation: The Opportunist

Members of the third generation demonstrate the most diverse backgrounds and life trajectories among foreign tourism professionals, with no dominant or unifying narrative emerging from the interviews and data collected. Many are involved in tourism on a part-time or side-project basis while pursuing other primary engagements. They include university and language school students, artists, and individuals on working holiday visas with limited stays, typically up to one year.

The expansion of digital platforms, such as local tour guide websites and Airbnb Experiences, has significantly lowered the barriers to entry into the tourism sector. As a result, this generation is less likely to be involved in capital-intensive ventures; instead, they rely on their time availability and local knowledge to provide cultural and tourism services. Some entered the tourism field shortly after arriving in Japan, often while still enrolled in university, while others became active after living in Japan for five to six years. These engagements range from running guesthouses or hotels to launching small-scale tourism businesses. In some cases, university professors manage *machiya* guesthouses as side ventures, while photographers offer short cultural tours framed around photo shoots.

This generation has entered the field at a time when tourism in Japan is significantly more active and accessible. The growth of online platforms, coupled with the deregulation of tour guide licensing in 2017, has created a more open environment for foreign entrants. For many, tourism is not (yet) perceived as a long-term career path but rather a source of supplementary income. Their work arrangements are highly flexible; some organize and manage their own programs, while others work on commission for fellow foreign professionals or local agencies.

One second-generation American business owner noted that he prefers to hire foreign guides from this newer cohort because communication between foreign tourists and foreign guides is often smoother, even when the guides and guests come from different countries. He also observed that English language proficiency and pronunciation tend to be more consistent among these individuals, even if they are not native speakers.

Visa status plays a critical role in shaping the employment opportunities of this generation. While student visas allow for part-time work within specific hourly limits, other visa categories restrict formal participation in tourism-related activities. Consequently, many members of this cohort must navigate regulatory uncertainties as they engage in tourism on a temporary or informal basis.

4.4.4.   Institutional Challenges

Although this study refers to "foreign tourism professionals" as a collective group, in practice, they do not yet exhibit a strong sense of group identity or formal organization. Their self-identification varies widely, with individuals using terms such as "private guide," "tour guide," "tourism expert," "freelancer," or "entrepreneur in tourism." However, as their numbers continue to grow, there are emerging efforts to build solidarity. For instance, some have created informal online communities, particularly on social media, under the umbrella term "foreign tourism professionals," where they coordinate activities and connect with peers across Japan.

These individuals function as informal actors, often filling institutional voids within Japan's tourism ecosystem. Their contributions—such as linguistic mediation, cultural translation, and intercultural storytelling—arise precisely because of these institutional gaps. Rather than being peripheral, their informality grants them the flexibility to respond to the nuanced and dynamic needs of international visitors and local stakeholders alike.

However, the very informality that allows these professionals to thrive may also pose risks. Formalizing their roles through regulatory frameworks could potentially undermine the adaptability and cultural fluidity that define their value. While a few foreign professionals have begun to collaborate with municipal tourism offices—typically as consultants or unofficial representatives—such engagements remain limited and sporadic.

A critical risk associated with their continued institutional invisibility is the potential reintroduction of regulatory frameworks, such as mandatory licensing for tourism-related work. If such systems are implemented without accounting for the presence and unique needs of non-native professionals, they are likely to be designed primarily for native Japanese speakers. This was evident in earlier iterations of Japan's national tour guide

licensing system, which placed heavy emphasis on written Japanese proficiency and kanji literacy—criteria that disadvantage foreign-born professionals whose strengths lie in verbal communication, intercultural competence, and multilingual narrative delivery.

Without formal recognition or policy support, these professionals remain vulnerable to exclusion from the very industry they are actively shaping. Their invisibility not only limits access to resources, representation, and institutional support, but may ultimately threaten their livelihoods should new legal or administrative frameworks be enacted. Therefore, understanding the extent to which they serve as cultural bridges between tourists and local communities requires a closer examination of their interactions, partnerships, and the feedback they receive from stakeholders.

4.4.5. The International Tourists

Foreign tourism professionals in Kyoto engage with international tourists at various levels, depending on the nature of their services. Those managing accommodations typically interact with guests on a short-term, practical basis. In some cases, tourists choose accommodations specifically because of the host, whose identity and background influence booking decisions. However, in many instances—especially when reservations are made through large booking platforms—guests are unaware of their host's identity until arrival.

The most personal and meaningful interactions occur between foreign professionals and tourists in the context of guided tours. A majority of travelers select their tour guides in advance through a variety of channels, including personal recommendations, social media platforms, tour companies, or experience-based websites such as Airbnb Experiences and Viator. These tours are usually limited to small groups (typically 6–8 participants), creating a more intimate and engaging environment. Often, tourists are drawn to these professionals because they offer niche experiences not commonly available elsewhere—such as Zen garden tours, photography walks, or bicycle tours—many of which are uniquely curated and often only available through foreign guides in Kyoto.

While foreign professionals offer services in their native languages, English remains the primary medium, as it is widely accepted as a common language among international audiences. However, linguistic diversity still presents certain challenges. In many family travel groups, younger members often serve as interpreters for older relatives. A significant number of tourists are also aware that navigating Japan in a foreign language—particularly English—can be difficult, and thus intentionally seek out English-speaking guides. Some travelers reported dissatisfaction with local Japanese guides whose English proficiency did not meet their expectations, reinforcing their preference for foreign-born professionals.

Another commonly cited reason for choosing foreign guides is their perceived approachability and directness. Many tourists associate Japan with strict cultural norms and formal etiquette, and fear unintentionally breaching social expectations. In this context, foreign guides are often seen as more relatable and less intimidating, making it easier for tourists to ask questions they might hesitate to pose to a Japanese host. For example, Chinese tourists on the author's tours expressed a preference for non-Japanese guides, explaining that this allowed them to avoid potential discomfort related to Sino-Japanese historical tensions.

As one American tour guide explained, tourists frequently ask questions such as: *"What is it like to be a foreigner in Japan?"*, *"Are the Japanese welcoming?"*, *"Do you have Japanese friends?"*, or *"What was the hardest thing to get used to here?"*—questions that can only be meaningfully addressed by someone with personal experience of being a foreigner in Japan. Some travelers are also interested in daily life and relocation logistics, particularly those considering future study or work in Japan. Several foreign professionals reported receiving messages and comments on their online content—videos, virtual tours, or blog posts—from individuals who had never previously considered traveling to Japan but were inspired to visit after engaging with their work.

While the majority of these tourists are from North America and Europe, there is also a growing number of guests from countries such as China, Taiwan, and South Korea, where English proficiency is rising. Foreign professionals noted that many Asian English-speaking tourists actively choose non-Japanese guides due to the added cultural dimension: they not only learn about Japan but also about the guide's country of origin and personal experiences. Additionally, some Asian families book tours to give their children an opportunity to practise English in real-world situations. As one guest reflected: *"His English was easy to understand for the Chinese, even if you're not good at it."*

Given that foreign guides are often the first point of contact for international tourists, they significantly influence visitors' initial impressions of Japan. These interactions frequently transcend transactional tourism. They foster intercultural reflection, deepen cultural awareness, and provide comparative perspectives that enrich the travel experience. At the micro level, foreign professionals also help mediate geopolitical tensions through their presence and conduct. Their storytelling, demeanor, and interpretation of cultural norms collectively shape how Japan is perceived by international audiences.

4.4.6. Locals, Kyoto Citizens

This research focuses on the interactions and connections established between foreign tourism professionals and local stakeholders through tourism-related activities. Tour guides, in particular, play an important intermediary role by selecting the shops, restaurants, and artisans they introduce to their clients, thereby contributing to the

visibility, revenue, and sustainability of these local establishments. One Canadian tour guide, for instance, noted that he intentionally selects venues based on personal connections and prefers to take tourists to places they would be unlikely to discover on their own. These are typically small, locally owned businesses where staff do not speak English and where meaningful interaction would be difficult without the guide's assistance.

The interviewed tour guides typically do not receive commissions from temples, shops, or restaurants. Their income derives solely from the fees paid by the tourists. This financial independence allows them to base their recommendations entirely on the preferences and interests of their clients, rather than on business arrangements. Many guides develop strong personal relationships with the venues they frequent and prefer to bring visitors to the same trusted locations.

An American tourism company owner shared that he selects restaurant partners based on specific criteria: the absence of an English-language menu (so tourists feel they are experiencing something authentic and exclusive), a clientele composed primarily of Japanese patrons (as tourists often perceive the presence of other foreigners as diminishing the "local" experience), and an ambiance that aligns with tourists' expectations of what a Japanese restaurant should look like.

In another case, a Hungarian guide was asked by a client to help establish business connections with Japanese knife makers, as the client was planning to open a Japanese knife store in their home country. The guide, who had previous experience working for a Japanese trading company and understood the nuances of Japanese business culture, facilitated the initial contact. This led to a long-term collaboration between the client, the knife makers, and the guide himself.

As Japan's domestic market continues to shrink, traditional industries and crafts increasingly rely on foreign connections to remain viable. However, due to language barriers and differing business customs, these opportunities are often difficult to access without a mediator. In such cases, the personal relationships and social capital built over years by foreign tourism professionals become indispensable.

Japanese clients and professionals are also part of this ecosystem. As noted earlier, many accommodations and tours provided by foreign professionals are also available in Japanese. Japanese guests occasionally join English-led tours, particularly those run by foreign professionals, sometimes with the intention of practicing their English. One Japanese guest commented in their feedback that participating in such a tour was a valuable language-learning opportunity.

Foreign tourism professionals do not operate in isolation; many Japanese companies and individuals are also active in the tourism sector. However, collaboration between them appears to be highly contingent and driven by personal rather than institutional connections. In Kyoto, bilingual events for tourism professionals are rare, and content offered exclusively in Japanese may not attract foreign professionals. Just as the success of a tourism professional does not necessarily depend on how many local colleagues or competitors they know, collaboration is not always prioritized. Nevertheless, members of the first and second generations often maintain relationships with Japanese professionals, whereas such connections are much less common among the third generation.

In relation to bridging social capital, the following thematic categories emerged:

- **Reciprocity and Resource Exchange**: Foreign-born tourism professionals contribute both tangible and intangible resources to the Japanese tourism sector. For instance, a Hungarian tea expert facilitated commercial partnerships for a knife shop in Hungary, while a British artist promoted international exhibitions within Kyoto's geisha districts. Their ability to navigate both tourists' expectations and local norms enhances cross-cultural communication.

- **Building Trust**: First- and second-generation professionals frequently leverage their personal networks to offer more authentic and meaningful experiences. Their educational or professional backgrounds lend credibility, while their connections to local friends, neighbors, and businesses create an informal, personal touch distinct from the formal style often associated with Japanese guides. Third-generation professionals, by contrast, tend to rely on their employers' networks while slowly developing their own connections.

- **Facilitating Collaboration**: These professionals act as connectors, linking international visitors with local individuals and institutions. Examples include assisting tourists interested in Japanese art studies, supporting local artists through digital platforms, or restoring *machiya* townhouses. Such efforts promote both cultural preservation and local economic development.

- **Conflict Resolution**: Foreign professionals play a crucial role in resolving cross-cultural misunderstandings. By offering relatable analogies and explanations of Japanese customs, they help foster empathy and reduce misinterpretations about Japanese behavior and societal norms.

- **Addressing Barriers**: Language and cultural barriers are often overcome through the mediation provided by these professionals. They translate materials, advise local businesses on engaging international clients, and even design sustainable tours that redirect tourist flow to lesser-known destinations. This not only

alleviates the strain on overcrowded areas but also supports underrepresented communities and ecological balance.

Overall, the most effective and consistent bridging activities are evident among the first and second generations. Their longer residence in Japan, deeper cultural knowledge, and more established local networks position them as key mediators between international visitors and Kyoto's communities. In contrast, third-generation professionals—though actively involved in tourism—tend to have more limited bridging capacities due to their shorter periods of residence, fewer connections, and lower levels of cultural embeddedness.

4.4.7. Bridging Role In Practice

The bridging role of foreign tourism professionals becomes most visible through their dynamic interactions with international guests, local communities, and cultural contexts. This section presents a real-life example that illustrates how these individuals function as intermediaries between different cultural spheres.
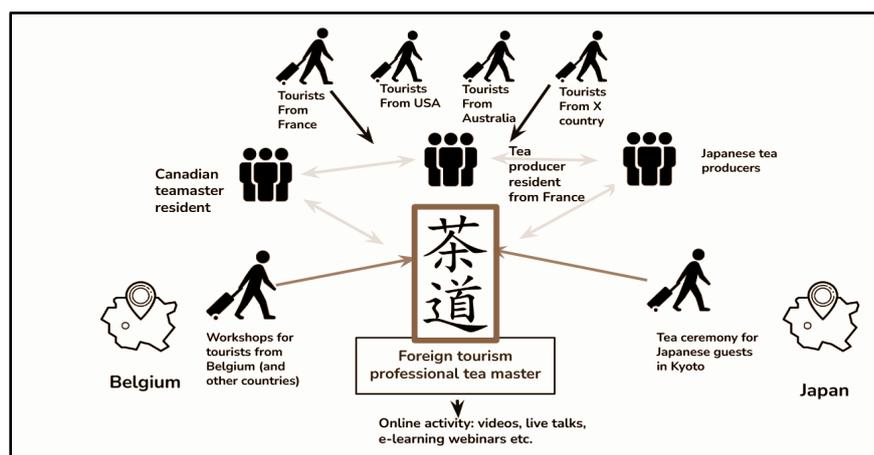

Figure 1: Model of a foreign tourism professional bridging capital. **Source:** Developed by the Author

At the individual level, the development of professional networks among foreign tourism professionals often extends beyond a simple bilateral link between Japan and their country of origin. Instead, their services and relationships are typically international in scope, forming transnational networks. As illustrated in Figure 1, consider the case of a tea master from Belgium who has lived in Kyoto for more than 13 years. His professional activities are diverse, including in-person tea ceremony experiences (conducted in Japanese for local guests and in English for international guests), online tea training programs, the management of a tea shop, and guided tea tours. His clientele spans multiple countries, not just Belgium, and his professional network includes both Japanese nationals and foreign residents.

For example, he collaborates with a Canadian-born tea master who teaches at a university and runs a tea house, as well as a young entrepreneur from France who has invested in and currently manages a tea plantation in the region. The Belgian tea master also introduces and vouches for the quality of local Japanese tea growers, acting as a trusted cultural and commercial mediator. This example illustrates a dense and well-connected network of foreign professionals built around a shared cultural practice.

One tourist described the experience by saying: *"It helped that [name] is fluent in English, and his familiarity with both cultures—having lived in both the States and Kyoto—helped in explaining everything in a way that made sense to us or that he knew we would find interesting."* Analysis of tourist feedback reveals several recurring keywords and themes: *cultural translator*, *expert insights*, *deeper meaning*, *easy to communicate*, *wealth of knowledge*, *provides context*, *non-touristy*, *storyteller*, *enriching experience*, and *passionate about Japanese culture and history*.

From these responses, three core categories of bridging functions can be identified. The first is cultural translation—the ability to interpret and contextualize customs, rituals, and social practices, making them accessible to international audiences. Rather than merely offering information, foreign professionals serve as interpretive guides, explaining the *meaning behind* cultural elements in ways that resonate with visitors.

The second category is storytelling. Tourists consistently highlight the ability of foreign professionals to convey information not as static facts but as engaging narratives. These stories often involve local individuals or personal anecdotes, which deepen the visitor's emotional engagement and understanding.

The third category is approachability. Tourists describe these guides as relatable and sensitive to their uncertainties as foreigners in a culturally unfamiliar setting. Comments such as *"understood the things us foreigners get confused about," "it was not a safari," "a refreshing oasis,"* and *"helped us understand what we saw"* point to a sense of comfort, clarity, and authenticity that these guides provide.

The conceptual model of bridging capital, as exemplified by the case of the tea master, encompasses both structural and cultural dimensions. Structurally, foreign tourism professionals form multi-layered networks that span tourism, education, cultural preservation, and business. These individuals not only connect international audiences to local artisans and heritage sites but also facilitate cooperation among other foreign residents. This enhances both horizontal ties (peer-to-peer) and vertical ties (between tourists and institutions or businesses) within the tourism ecosystem.

Culturally, these professionals operate as translators of more than just language—they translate values, social norms, and lived experiences. Their bridging role incorporates contextual explanation (*cultural translation*), narrative-based engagement (*storytelling*), and emotional and interpersonal accessibility (*approachability*). Many of them exhibit dual cultural identity, which enables them to personalize the tourist experience by conveying the deeper meanings behind Japanese traditions, customs, and everyday life. In doing so, they also help tourists navigate moments of uncertainty and cross-cultural anxiety, transforming what could be a transactional service into a meaningful educational and interpersonal exchange.

Together, these structural and cultural bridging dimensions underscore how foreign tourism professionals act as *"invisible bridges"*—facilitating intercultural understanding, opening access to traditionally closed cultural spaces, and enhancing Japan's global connectivity. Despite their lack of institutional recognition, their contributions to cultural translation and social cohesion are both significant and enduring.

5. Conclusion

Foreign tourism professionals in Japan play a critical role in fostering *bridging social capital* by connecting diverse groups through cultural mediation, resource exchange, and conflict resolution. Their dual cultural identity uniquely positions them to address key challenges—including linguistic barriers, cross-cultural misunderstandings, and the effects of overtourism—while simultaneously supporting and enriching local communities. However, despite their contributions, these professionals often remain underrecognized and their efforts fragmented, largely due to the absence of structural acknowledgment and group cohesion.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of foreign tourism professionals on cultural preservation, community development, and the evolving dynamics of Japan's tourism industry in an increasingly globalized context. Such studies could further illuminate how these individuals contribute to sustainable tourism models and intercultural competence.

This research underscores the significance of foreign tourism professionals as *"invisible bridges,"* highlighting their unique ability to facilitate connections that transcend national boundaries, social hierarchies, and cultural divides. As Japan continues to host international events and expand tourism-related academic programs, new opportunities are emerging for deeper engagement with this group. Their cross-cultural expertise and mediating capacities represent valuable resources for enhancing the quality and inclusivity of Japan's tourism ecosystem.

Closer collaboration between foreign tourism professionals and local tourism boards—through initiatives such as joint workshops, regional revitalization programs, and the sharing of best practices with Japanese counterparts— could lead to practical improvements in both visitor experience and community resilience. Moreover, the establishment of a formal organizational framework could support and coordinate their efforts, offering greater stability and protection amid potential future regulatory changes.

Institutional representation and the inclusion of foreign tourism professionals in tourism-sector decision-making processes would not only acknowledge their contributions but also enhance the collaborative and adaptive capacity of Japan's tourism landscape as it continues to navigate the demands of global connectivity.

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Appendix A: List of interviews

Country of Origin	Age	Native (level) language(s)	Activity
Canada	30-39	English	Tour guide
Belgium	30-39	Dutch	Master of traditional arts/craft
China	40-49	Chinese	Master of traditional arts/craft
Singapore	20-29	Chinese, English	Tour guide
Hungary	30-39	Hungarian	Tour guide, interpreter
USA	50-59	English	Tour guide
USA	50-59	English	Accommodation owner
Singapore	30-39	English	Accommodation owner
Taiwan	40-49	Chinese	Tour guide
Germany	40-49	German	Tour guide
USA	40-49	English	Travel writer
USA	20-29	English	Tour guide
Israel	30-39	Hebrew	Tour guide
France	20-29	French	Tour guide
UK	40-49	English	Accommodation owner
Latvia	30-39	Lettish	Event organizer, tour guide, writer
Canada	40-49	English	Tour guide
Russia	20-29	Russian	Tour guide
China	20-29	Chinese	Tour guide
USA	30-39	English	Software developer (in tourism)
USA	30-39	English	Travel writer
USA	20-29	English	Event organizer, interpreter
USA	40-49	English	Accommodation owner
Turkey	40-49	Turkish	Tour guide
France	20-29	French	Tour guide
UK	60-69	English	Travel writer
France	50-59	French	Accommodation owner
Canada	30-39	English	Accommodation owner
Thailand	20-29	Thai	Event organizer
Belgium	60-69	Dutch	Tour guide
Ukraine	40-49	Russian	Tour guide
China	30-39	Chinese	Photographer, tour guide
USA	40-49	English	Tour company owner
Indonesia	50-59	Indonesian	Photographer, tour guide
Brasil	30-39	Brazilian	Interpreter, tour guide