

# Japan-Iran Tourism Relations: Opportunities and Limitations in Promoting Iran's Cultural and Heritage Tourism to the Japanese Market

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## Abstract

As one of the world's top countries in terms of the sheer age and volume of its historical sites, Iran has high potential to develop a rich tourism industry based on culture and heritage. However the coexistence of the rich Persian and Islamic cultures that distinguishes Iran from the rest of the Arabic countries of the Middle East is not promoted internationally, especially amongst Japanese overseas travelers. Nevertheless, the cultural and heritage tourism market which is emphasized by Iran's national tourism development plan is also compatible with Iran's social and political situation. Politics and international relations have been playing a fundamental role in Iran's tourism industry for many years. The country has experienced stable official relations with Japan for years, unlike the often unstable ones with many European countries and the United States of America. This situation, coupled with the fact that Japan is one of the main sources of travelers for the international travel market and the currently high proportion of cultural and heritage travelers among Japanese tourists, implies that the importance of Japan as a target market for Iran's tourism industry should be recognized by Iranian tourism policy makers.

**Keywords:** cultural tourism, Persia, Japanese overseas travelers, international relations.

## Introduction

The source of international tourist arrivals in Iran has significantly changed during the last three decades, from western tourists especially Americans who were 60 percent of all tourists to Iran in the 1970's, to that from the neighboring countries and Arab states of Middle East, which contributes 70 percent of Iran's tourism today (Mideast Mirror, 1998). This paper argues that while the international political climate influenced by the USA has negatively affected the flow of American and European tourists to Iran, it has caused Iran to be a favored destination for tourists from the Islamic Arab countries of the Middle East and from Iran's other direct neighbors.

However, despite the fact that Iran and Japan have experienced relatively stable political relations over the years, Japanese tourists are particularly missing in Iran

compared with the other countries of the region such as Turkey and Egypt with similar heritage tourism attractions. The fact that Iran or Persia was the favored destination for Japanese tourists in the Middle East/South Asia region in the 1970s implies that there may be potential to regain this share through influencing today's Japanese overseas travel market. In order that this potential may be better understood, this paper explores the attitude toward Iran as a tourist destination in today's Japanese society and examines the ways in which the Iranian tourism industry could promote its cultural and heritage tourism in Japan.

## **Background**

In recent years the growth of Japanese international travelers in the world's travel market has been significant. According to the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 842 million people traveled out of their own country in 2006. The number of Japanese tourists traveling abroad in 2005 exceeded 17.41 million, the second highest ever behind the 17.82 million travelers in 2000 (JTB 2006). In this context Japanese tourists are distinguished in the existing tourism literature as being very important on a world-wide basis, especially for cultural and heritage tourism. The marketing opportunity in the form of Japanese senior travelers may be significantly increased from 2007, the beginning of retirement of the Japanese baby boomer generation with a strong interest both in domestic and foreign travel (Nita 2006).

The share of different countries and regions of the Japanese international travel market varies according to the preferences of Japanese travelers. For example, Hawaii has been the most preferred destination during the period 2005 and 2006, with Australia in second place (JTB 2006), but the share of the Middle East region in Japan's tourism market remains inconsistent with the potential of these countries to attract Japanese tourists. The region which has been referred to by historians as the Fertile Crescent is the cradle of civilizations and the birth place of many of the world's main religions. However, only some countries in the Middle East region have been relatively successful to attract tourists in this context. For example 60,000 Japanese tourists visited Egypt in 2003 and 80,000 to 100,000 Japanese tourists travel to Turkey each year (Katsumi 1999: 3), but tourism in many countries of the region such, Iran, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon has not reached these levels.

Iran is a typical example in this case. According to UNESCO Iran is ranked as one of the ten top countries in the world in terms of its ancient and historical sites, and there are a million historical monuments in Iran with more than 12,000 of them registered officially (Mashai 2005). However, there have been dramatic changes in Iran's social and economic situation since the Islamic revolution in 1979 and the tourism industry has not been immune to such changes. For example, in the 1970s some 60 percent of all tourists to Iran were Americans, spending an estimated 1 billion dollars each year, but that trade almost disappeared after the revolution (Mideast Mirror 1998). In the case of Japanese tourists to Iran a similar pattern is apparent; while 24,106 Japanese traveled to Iran a year before the Islamic revolution, a share of almost 0.6% of the overall Japanese international market at the time, the Japanese never returned after the revolution (ITSP 1999). Today, the number of Japanese tourists in Iran is a very small 3,000 a year.

However, Japan has a good chance of becoming interested in Iran as a

destination because of Japanese curiosity about cultural and heritage tourism, and because of the oil trade. Even though current Iranian society, making it different with other cultural destinations in the region, does not have or does not tolerate the sea, sand, sex and alcohol that are significant features of modern tourism, Japanese senior travelers seem not to be worried about this as much as many western tourists. Though sun and sand and surf holidays are not expected to disappear, they have declined in relative importance as more and more visitors seek challenging educational and/or relatively unique experiences (NWHO 1999).

### **Iran as a Destination**

Iran, officially the Islamic Republic of Iran, is a country in southwestern Asia, located on the eastern shore of the Persian Gulf. Iran lies at the easternmost edge of the geographic and cultural region known as the Middle East. The land area of Iran is 1.648 million square kilometers, containing 1.636 million sq km land and 12,000 sq km water. The country is bordered on the north by Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, and Turkmenistan; on the east by Afghanistan and Pakistan; on the south by the Gulf of Oman, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Persian Gulf; and on the west by Iraq and Turkey. Iran's capital and largest city is Tehran, located in the northern part of the country.

One of the world's most mountainous countries, Iran contains the volcanic Mount Damavand, at 5,671 meters this is the highest point in the Elburz Mountains running parallel to the Caspian Sea in the north. The landscape of Iran is dominated by two mountain ranges (Zagros and Elburz), two coastal regions, several large lakes, two great deserts (Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut), and river systems that drain either into the Persian Gulf or the desert areas of the Central Plateau. Figure 1 provides a map of Iran with indicators to Iran's two mountain ranges and to the diversity of its climate. The Caspian Sea to the north includes a coastline of around 630 km in length, and the Persian Gulf coastline is 1,880 km in length to the south.

For years people in the central part of Iran have learned how deal with the harsh natural environment. Underground water irrigates oases where a wide variety of grains and fruits are cultivated. The Qanat<sup>1</sup> irrigation system that was developed in ancient Persia is still active and attracts international tourists to Iran. The long-term harmony of human settlements and nature has left the people of the central plateau of Iran with a rich culture and an advanced extreme environment agriculture (which produces the world's largest crops of pistachio and saffron).

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<sup>1</sup> The qanat system consists of underground channels that convey water from aquifers in the highlands to the surface at lower levels by gravity. It has the advantage that less water is lost by evaporation on its way from the hill to the plain. The system is still in use after 3,000 years and has continually been expanded. There are some 22,000 qanat units in Iran, comprising more than 170,000 miles of underground channels. The system provides water not only for irrigation but also for house-hold consumption.

Figure 1 Map of Iran



Source: World Atlas 2006.

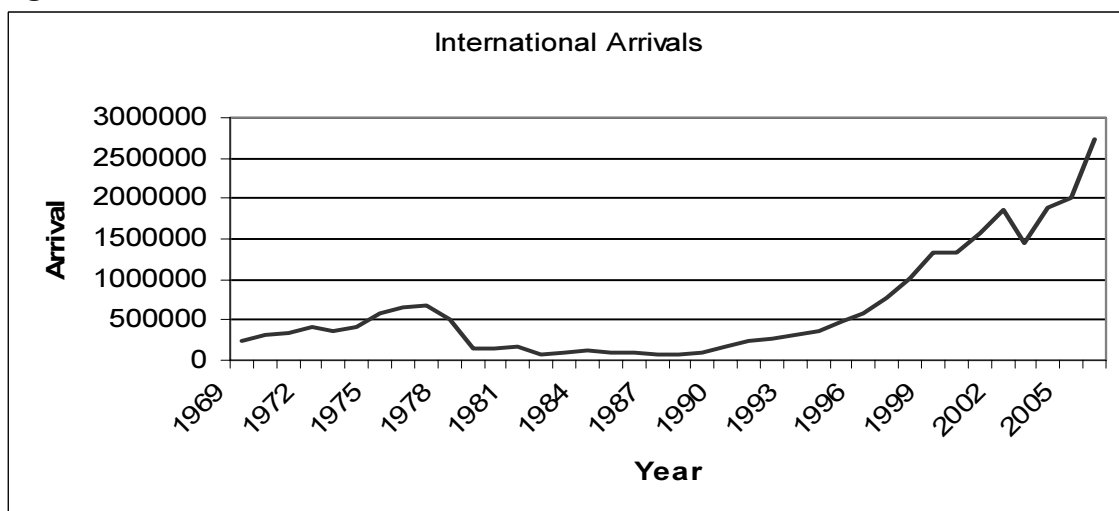
The population of Iran is currently 65,397,521 with the majority under 30. The country’s population, while ethnically and linguistically diverse, is almost entirely Muslim. For centuries, the region has been the center of the Shia branch of Islam. Iran’s population today is a combination of Persian 51%, Aerie 24%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 8%, Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baloch 2%, Turkmen 2% ethnic groups, a diversity which attracts numbers of international tourists (Iran Centre of Statistics, 2005). The territory of present-day Iran once was the center of the Persian Empire, the world’s preeminent power for some 500 years before the rise of the Seleucid and Roman Empires. The country still contains hundreds of sites that represent the glory of ancient Persia. These historical sites, which are spread out all over the country especially in rural areas have attracted historians and archaeologists as well as other tourists for centuries.

The country was called Persia until 1935, when Reza Shah required other nations to use the name “Iran” officially in communications. Iran was a monarchy ruled by a *shah*, or king, almost without interruption from 1501 until 1979, when a year long popular revolution led by the Shia clergy culminated in the overthrow of the monarchy and established the Islamic republic (The World Factbook 2006). There have been many changes in Iran’s social and economic situation since the time of the Islamic revolution

and Iran's tourism industry has not been excluded from facing these changes.

Figure 2 shows how the number of international tourists has been affected by the political climate in Iran. The industry in Iran was growing during the 1970s until more than 678,000 tourists visited Iran in 1977, a total which was quite significant at that time. However, the growth of tourism was stopped in 1979 by the revolution. The revolution was followed by the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s, during which international tourists were absent in Iran due to war and security problems. This disastrous war finished in 1988 and the industry began during the 1990s to revive.

**Figure 2 Iran Tourist Arrivals**



Source: Iran Touring and Tourism Organization (ITTO) 2005.

The September 11 incident in the USA and the American raids on Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) resulted in a minor downturn in 2001 and a notable 22% slump of international tourism to Iran in 2003. However, the flow of international tourists to Iran has been increasing since 2003, recording the highest ever level of 2.73 million travelers in 2006. Tourists from Arab countries are soaring to unprecedented levels and are expected to contribute up to 70% of Iran's tourism by 2007 (Euromonitor 2007). American and European tourists have been replaced by tourists from Iran's neighbouring countries of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Pakistan as well from the Arab states who are not worried about security as much as Europeans or even Japanese overseas travellers are at this time.

The numbers of travel agencies operating in Iran has dramatically increased during the past ten years as shown in Table 1, but it is doubtful if this is positive for the industry as many of them are recording recurrent losses and 40% are on the brink of bankruptcy (Euromonitor 2007). The formal travel agency sector is controlled by a few well established travel agencies and tour operators, most of which are part of multi function foundations such as the Bonyad Mostazafan Foundation which owns the Azadi International Tourism Organization (AITO). These organizations have their roots in the government and exercise considerable control over inbound tourism.

**Table 1 Number of Iran Travel Agencies**

Year	Ticketing	Tour Operating	Ticketing & Tour Operating	Total
1988	-	9	83	92
1989	-	9	82	91
1990	-	9	82	91
1991	-	9	82	91
1992	-	91	80	171
1993	-	117	108	225
1994	-	129	144	273
1995	53	189	176	418
1996	97	255	151	503
1997	151	316	165	632
1998	121	339	313	773
1999	N/A	N/A	N/A	1188
2005	N/A	N/A	N/A	2500

Source: Iran Touring and Tourism Organization (ITTO) 2006.

In the case of Japan, there are only a few (not exceeding 15) travel agencies that conduct Iran tours. JTB is the main one with branches all over the country, and the rest are mainly located in Tokyo or in other main cities in Japan. The AITO Travel Company, which is a governmental agency in Iran, is the main counterpart for Japanese travel agencies and it is almost impossible for small Iranian travel agencies to come into the business with Japan (Vafadari Mehrizi 2006).

Iran's hotel faces are variable. Almost 40% of Iran's hotels and tourism accommodations are in Mashhad City where the holy shrine of Imam Reza is located and attract millions of domestic tourists as well as Shiite Moslems from Iran's neighboring countries. Tehran mainly benefits from conferences and events while other areas such as Shiraz and Isfahan attract holidaymakers during public holidays. As Table 2 shows, the average rate of hotel occupancy in Iran stood at 55.8% during 1990s, which meant that almost half of the available travel accommodations were not being used at any one time. Owing to the prevailing international political situation it is unlikely that occupancy levels will rise much in the near future from these levels (Naghi J.Simin 2000).

**Table 2 Iran's Hotel Occupancy Trend**

Year	Occupancy %		Average Length of Stay			Arrivals		
	Rooms	Bed places	Domestics	International	Total	Domestic	International	Total
1988	69	64.7	2.5	6.5	2.6	2645267	65254	2710521
1989	68.7	65.2	2.4	5.5	2.5	2744307	90736	2835043
1990	69.5	66.5	2.5	3.9	2.6	2578508	141643	2720151
1991	64.8	62.2	2.5	3.9	2.6	2532500	173871	2706371
1992	58.7	54.6	2.3	4.2	2.4	2462276	145986	2608262
1993	52.6	50.4	1.9	3.7	2.0	2379032	149249	2528283
1994	53.4	51.4	2.3	3.6	2.4	2412089	199235	2611324
1995	53.1	53.1	2.5	3.7	2.6	2811766	257176	3068942
1996	54	54	2.3	3	2.3	3538633	324753	3863386
1997	47	46	2.8	2.4	2.4	2934461	294538	3219001
1998	38	37	2.22	2.57	2.22	2159865	252321	2412186
1999	41	40	2.13	2.49	2.17	2260079	313418	2573497

Source: Iran Touring and Tourism Organization (ITTO), 2001.

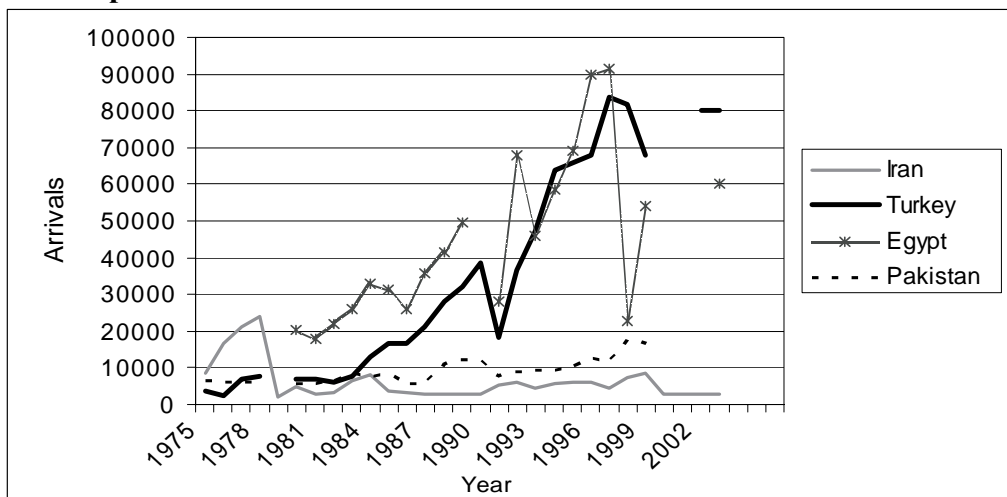
## Iran-Japan Travel Relations

Iran was a favorite travel destination in the Middle East region during the late 1970s for Japanese and western tourists. While only about 4 million Japanese used to travel in those days, Iran attracted relevantly high proportion of Japanese overseas market compared with the other countries in the region. According to tourism statistics from the International Tourism Promotion Society in Japan, 24106 Japanese tourists visited Iran in 1978, more than three times more than the number of Japanese tourists in Turkey at the same time for example. Today, more than 17 million Japanese travel overseas but only about 3000 visit Iran, while the number of Japanese tourists visit Turkey is about 80,000 more than 25 times bigger than the share of Iran in Japanese overseas travel (Vafadari Mehrizi 2005).

The political climate of Iran during the last three decades has impacted negatively on tourism promotion between Iran and European countries and America. Richter (1999: 41-45) believes that all the attractions in the world cannot bring tourists to Lebanon, Iran and even Dubrovnik without political peace. Figure 3 lends support to this assertion in that the increasing trend of Japanese tourist arrivals to Iran stopped in 1979. However, the country's tourist attractions in term of heritage and historical sites did not change and the potentials remain. The fact that Japan and Iran have experienced relatively stable official relations and there has been almost no problem in Iran-Japan political relations as they exist with America brings up the question: why does the Iranian/Persian culture and heritage not attract Japanese cultural tourists at the present time?

A study of tourism advertisement materials in Japan done for the wider research of which this paper is part (Vafadari Mehrizi 2005), shows that there have been almost no marketing activity to keep the Japanese travel market up to date with Iran's cultural and heritage attractions. It has been often the case that the lack of information about Iran in Japanese society has lead to the misidentification of Iran with its neighbor country of Iraq, and also Iran appears to many people in Japan as an Arab nation having no relation to the ancient Persians. The propaganda against Iran initiated mainly by the American and European mass media has also played an important role in creating an image problem for Iran among the Japanese people (Vafadari Mehrizi 2005).

**Figure 3 Japanese Travelers in the Middle East and West Asia**



Source: International Tourism Promotion Society Japan.

Many different elements can trigger a tourist's decision to visit abroad. One may decide to visit a place after reading a novel, a pamphlet or magazine or looking at a newspaper article while another may choose a destination when seen in a TV program, movie or mass-media advertisements. The destination may be recommended by a family, friends or even a travel agency. The relevant weighting of these travel reasons also differs for different destinations (Milner et al 2000; JTM Co 2005; JTB reports different years).

The study of Japanese overseas travel carried out each year by the Japan Tourism Bureau, which is the most intensive on-going study in this field, shows that for a high proportion of Japanese tourists who travelled to the Middle East in 2005 "reading a pamphlet" was the starting point in making the decision (40.7%). The Middle East was recommended to 12.3% of Japanese tourists by family or friends, and for 11.1% of those who visit the region, it was a movie or TV programs that influenced their decision (JTB 2005). Reliance on these sources makes promoting Iranian tourism more difficult given the fact that the likelihood of finding information about Iran's tourist attraction in Japanese travel agencies is very low due to the small demand for Iran tours in Japan.

Unfamiliarity with Iran as a destination among in today's Japanese travel market is thus the main problem in promoting Persian tours in Japan. As Moller and Schuscerc believe:

*Tourism products can not be transported or stored, hence for using them the tourist is forced to leave his familiar environment and move to more or less unknown or even strange places. While the search for new impressions, environment, cultures or experiences is one dominant motivation for travel in General, it is important for producer of tourism products to make sure that the amount of unfamiliarity does not exceed a certain level. For this could shift the experience from exciting to odd or even strange and threatening (Moller and Schuscerc 2006: 140-153).*

The results of a survey study conducted in Oita Prefecture in 2005-6 by the first author confirm the high level of unfamiliarity and lack of information about Iran as a destination. For the Japanese who took part in the survey, 45.3% believed that Iranians speak Arabic while the truth is that only 1% or people in Iran speak Arabic. According to the study 70% of Japanese don't know the relationship between Iran and Persia, and only 4% knew that Iran is a destination for Silk Road tourism (Vafadari Mehrizi 2006).

### **Japanese Overseas Travel and Marketing Opportunities for Iran**

The millions of Japanese travelers traveling abroad every year attract tourism experts and marketers from destinations all over the world. More than 17.53 million Japanese tourists traveled overseas in 2006 (JNTO 2006). As a consequence, Japanese tourists have been the subject of numerous research projects. Many studies have examined the behavior of Japanese tourists in order to understand the psychological motives of individual travelers that influence various travel-related decisions and the level of satisfaction with the destination (Chon 1989). However, searching for any particular study on Japanese tourists in Iran to be used for this paper was without result. Regarding the characteristics of Iran as a travel destination, in this section the relevant findings on Japanese tourists by tourism professionals from different destinations are defined to



bring insight to the marketing of Iran as a destination in Japan.

### *Preferred destinations*

Japanese tourists can be considered fairly typical in their preferences for destinations with natural scenery and good beaches, as well as for cities rich in historical spots and modern culture. However, in comparison with other nationalities they have been found to consider good shopping and “crime free” reputations as extremely important. In addition, Sheldon and Fox (1988) found that Japanese tourists were strongly influenced by food services in their choice of destinations (Mok and Lam 2000).

With a rich culture and history, Iran inherits the Persian civilization and culture. The country is among the top ten countries in the world in terms of historical sites and civilization (Alavi and Yasin 2000), and Japanese travelers are very interested in visiting historical sites. According to the “Opinion Survey of Overseas Travel Preferences” (JTB 2006) about 40 percent of the Japanese tourists mentioned visiting historical sites as their preferred purpose of travel. This fact should make it at least theoretically possible to promote Iranian tourism successfully in Japan.

### *Travel motivation*

Studies have confirmed that the travel-related benefits sought by tourists affect their choice of destination and their behavior at the destination. Cha, McCleary and Uysal (1995) studied the travel motivations affecting Japanese tourist behavior and found six distinct “push-factors”; relaxation, knowledge, adventure, travel bragging, family and sports. Further, Japanese travelers were segmented into three groups; sports seekers, novelty seekers and family/relaxation seekers.

Concerning Iran as a destination, it is obviously not “family and sports” or “rest and relaxation” that should be expected to be prime motivation factors in any decision of Japanese travelers to visit Iran. However, as an unseen destination there would be many new things for Japanese tourists to discover about Iran due to the lack of awareness of the country in Japan. Consequently, it is critical that the Iranian tourism industry takes advantage of Japanese curiosity as a motive in attracting them in a new destination like Iran.

In spite of the high demand for “life-seeing” by Japanese tourists in other destinations, the existing full packaged tours to Iran do not meet this desire to know their host community. Japanese tourists will not be able to find much traditional and ethnic food in Iranian restaurants as people cook in their houses. Also, a typical package tour takes Japanese to Iran to visit those places where the tourist can be isolated from ordinary life in Iran. The Iranian tourism industry it appears is not prepared to provide the opportunity for Japanese tourists to experience direct communication with people in Iran (Vafadari Mehrizi 2005). Japanese tourists in Iran can however enjoy its remarkable natural contrasts throughout the year. As the heritage sites in Iran are mainly located in the countryside, tourists have the chance to experience the natural environment and within the distance of few miles the traveler can experience major changes of seasons. There is also a great difference in vegetation and landscape between the littoral provinces along the Caspian Sea, the dry lands of the central desert, and the eastern and western provinces. For Japanese tourists who visited the country in former times,

Iran's natural environment itself was as attractive as the historical sites even though they did not expect it before their trip. However, the current image of the Iranian climate in the minds of Japanese travelers is mainly like a deserted unwelcoming land which is difficult to explore.

The Middle East and Africa are amongst the most important destinations for Japanese tourists every year. Visiting historic and cultural attractions accounts for about 65% of activities undertaken by Japanese tourists in Middle East countries (JTB 2003~2005). That the main reason for a packaged tour to Egypt or Morocco for example is cultural and heritage tourism can be seen by looking into the itineraries offered by Japanese travel agencies as a packaged tour. "Iran" as a tourist destination in the Middle East also has numerous cultural and heritage sites with a high potential to attract Japanese tourists using the same methods.

### *Travel mode*

One of the best known travel-related characteristics of Japanese tourists is their propensity to travel in groups on organized package tours and to stay for shorter periods of time than other international travelers in any one place. Independent travel is still only popular among the young and the wealthy. It has been postulated that this propensity to travel in groups is rooted in the collectivism of Japanese society which places great value on togetherness (Mok and Lam 2000). However, it may also be that a lack of confidence in communicating in foreign languages leads Japanese tourists to prefer to travel with a tour escort who can mediate between them and the host community (Carlile 1996).

Japanese tourists to Iran usually travel in a group, escorted by a Japanese speaking Iranian tour guide who works for the land operator as well their own tour guide hired by the Japanese travel agency. It is very rare to see Japanese tourists in Iran travelling independently. By travelling with a group in Iran, Japanese tourists seem to be seeking risk avoiding behavior more than other benefits. Due to the small size of the market, there are only few tour operators among Japanese travel agencies for Iran. Consequently, there is no competition to boost the chance of getting a discounted rate like in the more popular destinations for Japanese overseas travelers and therefore less demand.

### *Shopping*

A strong Yen and high disposable income in the past have certainly been major contributing factors in the tendency for the Japanese to spend more in destinations than tourists from other countries, but cultural factors also may have played their part. The twin customs of *senbetsu* and *omiyage* have been found to be strong influences on spending in tourist destinations (Ahmed and Krohn 1992). Before going abroad, Japanese travelers are traditionally given a sending-off party where relatives, close friends and colleagues give money as a present (*senbetsu*) and wish them a pleasant vacation. The tourist is then obliged to reciprocate by buying presents (*omiyage*) of roughly equal value to the money received to bring back home. This kind of gift-buying can account for up to three-quarters of the travelers' overall spending budget (Keown 1989).

Persian carpets with their worldwide celebrity are particular buys among Iranian souvenirs which could also represent Iranian culture while fulfilling this need for omiyage. Visiting carpet museums in Tehran is a definite part of the Japanese group tour itinerary. Even though a Persian carpet may be too expensive to be purchased as usual omiyage, elderly Japanese tourists purchase them as a special gift for their children when they get married for example.

### *Aging and Japanese travel propensity*

Aging populations are now a common trend in much of the industrialized world and Japan is no exception. The subject of Japan's "Silver Market" and "Older travelers" has already been taken up by researchers into tourist marketing and as the population ages it will become an ever more important concern (You and Leary 2000). One of the most important questions regarding the travel behavior of older age groups is whether or not the maturing of the population has a negative impact on travel, especially international travel. Moschis (1996) states that the image of the elderly as infirm is exaggerated. It has been found that most elderly people remain active well into their seventies despite their ailments. Furthermore, the elderly are at a stage of life in which travel becomes increasingly possible as they are free from family and work responsibilities.

Japan, the world's healthiest nation (Usui 2003: 19), is also the most rapidly aging country in the world (McCreedy 2003). The mass retirements of baby-boomers beginning in 2007 will be an important phenomenon that will attract different businesses, including the travel industry in Japan. For example, a JTB subsidiary organizes tours to regions such as the Middle East, Africa and Latin America in response to the tendency of seniors to visit countries they have yet to visit (Nitta 2006).

The enormous customer market of retiring baby-boomers thus represents a new business potential for the Iranian tourism industry. This new class of tourists, with plenty of leisure time is not usually seeking sea, sand, or alcohol experiences (which are not generally available in Iran anyway) and this will make them much more attractive in comparison to younger generations. Consequently, it is realistic to consider these as a target market for the Iranian tourism industry.

### **Conclusions and Afterthoughts**

The road to the more effective promotion of Iranian tourism in Japan is not without serious challenges. However, tremendous opportunities also exist. Iran has achieved impressive change since the Islamic revolution but domestic crises such as the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and the ongoing regional crises in Iran's neighboring countries of Afghanistan and Iraq have imposed difficulties for the Iranian economy and its tourism industry.

Iran has found a good market in Japan for oil over the years. The fact that Japan is the main customer of Iranian Oil implies success in reaching Japan's energy markets by Iranians. As a marketing policy, Iranian tourism officials should take advantage of such existing business contacts between the two countries to promote Iran not only as a safe source of energy for the Japanese economy but also as a destination with rich history and culture which can attract Japanese tourists having a heritage and cultural interest. However, Iran is not only *not* improving its tourism relations with Japan at

present but is also losing its share in Japanese energy under the new political crises inflamed by third parties with respect to Iran's nuclear ambition.

To offset this situation Iran should capitalize on its rich history and traditions. Japanese senior travelers seem not to be worried about the absence of sea, sand and alcohol or 'democracy' in destinations like present-day Iran, as many western tourists are. Therefore, focusing on cultural and heritage tourism in promotions to the Japanese market is the key to promote Iran's tourism at least amongst this growing group of travelers. In regard to this, the chance to succeed as a tourism destination will increase dramatically from 2007 at the beginning of retirement age of a notable number of Japanese baby boomers with an interest in heritage tourism.

The key requirement in the promotion of Iran as a tourist destination in Japan is to bring more awareness and knowledge about Iran to the Japanese population. In this context, public investment is necessary to introduce Iranian tourist attractions and to change the Japanese people's attitude toward Iran. In this way even though the current image problem of Iran amongst the Japanese population is an obvious fact that we cannot expect to be changed quickly, its worst aspect, that of trading on the ignorance of the reality of Iran as distinct from the manufactured image largely created by third parties can be offset by informed promotion to the silvers market.

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