

Suggestions for International Interpersonal Exchange in Northeast Asia(Summary)

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It has been pointed out that one of the barriers to the formation of the Northeast Asia economic subregion is the fact that mutual trust both between its component states and at the level of individual citizens is still insufficient. One way of eradicating the distrust that remains in the region even now is to promote international interpersonal exchange and create as many opportunities as possible for a mutually trusting relationship to emerge. Hitherto, people have experimented with international exchange through such initiatives as sister city exchanges, academic exchanges and foreign student exchange programs, but there are chances for mutual understanding to be born even from short visits, such as on business or for tourism.

How many of the population of Northeast Asia visit

the other countries of the region over the course of a year? According to official statistics published by the individual countries, about 11 million people travel across borders within the region. The approximate breakdown of this is 4.84 million Japanese, 2.88 million South Koreans, 1.43 million Chinese, 1.43 million Russians and 550,000 Mongolians. The breakdown of destinations is as follows: 1.57 million visiting Japan, 3.01 million visiting the Republic of Korea (ROK), 5.64 million visiting China, 770,000 visiting Russia and 160,000 visiting Mongolia.

In contrast to the 16.22 million Japanese traveling overseas, the number of foreign visitors to Japan does not exceed 4.77 million. This shows that the Japanese are fond of overseas travel and that little progress has been made in

attracting foreign tourists to Japan. A similar trend can be seen within Northeast Asia, with the number of Japanese visiting other countries in the region exceeding threefold the number of other Northeast Asians visiting Japan. 30% of Japanese traveling overseas visit other countries within the region, with the number of visitors to the ROK and China being particularly high, at 2.38 million. 33% of foreign visitors to Japan are from Northeast Asia. South Koreans occupy the largest share of foreign visitors to Japan (1.13 million, 24%), with Taiwan in second place, the USA in third and China in fourth (390,000, 8%).

Of the 2.88 million South Koreans who visit other Northeast Asian countries, 1.68 million visit China and 1.13 million travel to Japan. Reasons why travelers to China are particularly numerous include the fact that tourism in the Mt. Paektu area is flourishing, as well as travel back and forth between China and the ROK by small-scale merchants (peddlers). 58% of foreigners visiting the ROK are from other countries within Northeast Asia, totaling 3.01 million. Of these, 2.38 million are Japanese tourists. This should be seen in the context of the fact that the ROK has waived visa obligations for the Japanese.

11.23 million foreigners visit China, with about half coming from other Northeast Asian countries. The greatest number come from Japan (23.8 million, 21%), followed by the ROK (16.8 million, 15%) and Russia (12 million, 11%). Most of the Russians are peddlers who cross the border to buy goods to sell at home. While the number of travelers from Northeast Asia visiting China is 5.64 million, the number of Chinese traveling to other Northeast Asian countries is barely a quarter of that figure, at 1.43 million. The background to this situation includes the fact that there are many constraints on Chinese visiting Japan and the ROK, arising from various factors in all three countries.

One characteristic of cross-border travelers in this region is that there are many peddlers. Most of the Russians crossing into China from the Russian Far East are peddlers going there to buy commodities to sell at home in Russia. It seems that there are also Chinese peddlers who travel to Russia. In addition, South Korean peddlers use ferries to travel back-and-forth between the ROK and Japan and China. However, it is unlikely that such an inefficient transport method as peddling will continue to be used indefinitely. If the economy of the Russian Far East develops, distribution chains are developed and import tariffs are kept at a low level, business opportunities for peddlers should disappear. In their stead, cargo will be transported efficiently.

The backbone of international interpersonal exchange in Northeast Asia in the 21st century is tourism. The foundations have already been laid to enable tourism to flourish. It is possible to make return journeys to countries within easy reach cheaply and in a short period of time. Another advantageous factor is that there are few differences in terms of time zones and climate. As Japan, China and the Korean Peninsula share a common Asian culture, they are very similar in terms of thoughts and religion, not to mention such aspects of dietary culture, such as eating white rice with chopsticks. In addition, Northeast Asia is rich in nature tourism resources and cultural treasures. Furthermore, there is potential for cruises on deluxe passenger boats on the Japan Sea to be set up, thereby attracting shoppers. In the future, as they become freer to travel overseas, many Chinese are likely to visit Japan and the ROK freely.

There are a number of obstacles impeding travel in Northeast Asia.

The biggest of these is the necessity of visas or a similar permit in order to cross any of the borders in the region. The only exception to this is the visa exemption for Japanese visiting the ROK. The fact that so many Japanese visit the ROK as tourists is proof of the effectiveness of measures to implement visa-free travel. Obtaining visas takes time and money.

In fact, there are times when it takes hours just to cross the border. In particular, immigration procedures for entering and leaving Russia are complicated and one often has to wait a long time. This is especially predominant when making overland border-crossings.

The basic facilities underpinning tourism, such as hotels suitable for accommodating tourists, also cannot be said to be sufficient in Northeast Asia. Moreover, with regard to transport infrastructure, there are many places where modernization is required, on roads and railways, and at airports. These problems are an issue in the area north of an imaginary line drawn from Seoul to Beijing.

The biggest worry for tourists in Northeast Asia is safety. Russia has a particularly bad image in terms of this aspect.

Competition to lure international tourists is taking place on a global scale. Most Japanese tourists have already visited Hawaii and Europe, and are used to following well-developed tourist routes and staying in comfortable hotels. In order for Northeast Asia to attract ordinary tourists, it is necessary to develop basic tourist infrastructure that will not disappoint them.