

Possibility of VFR tourism: Tourism in light of the emigrants' history of Wakayama Prefecture

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Abstract

The Nikkei population is estimated at 4 million in 2022 [1]. The origins of the Nikkei [Japanese ancestry] community can be traced back over 150 years ago, when Japanese people crossed the sea to seek work. Wakayama Prefecture is considered one of the leading prefectures for overseas migration in Japan. Even today, there are Wakayama Kenjinkai [the prefectural associations] in North America, Central and South America, and other parts of the world. Based on the history of emigration from Wakayama prefecture to various places in the world, this paper focuses on commemorative events, referring to the relationship between the Nikkei communities and citizens of Wakayama prefecture. Then it discusses the possibility of VFR [visiting friends and relatives] tourism for mutual exchanges, where Wakayama Kenjinkai around the world and other migration-related organizations in Wakayama will act as a bridge between two places.

Keywords

VFR tourism
Wakayama Kenjinkai
Commemorative events
Migration history
Japanese ancestry

Introduction

As of 2022, the Nikkei population is estimated at 4 million. The origin of the Nikkei communities can be traced back to the time when Japanese people crossed the ocean to seek work over 150 years ago. In this paper, the author mentions the possibility of further developing new relationships between the Nikkei communities and the residents of Wakayama Prefecture, their ancestral homeland, based on the migration history of Japan. This would increase the potential for future reciprocal VFR [visiting friends and relatives] tourism between Nikkei communities worldwide and those living in their ancestral homelands.

Brief overview of the history of migrants from Wakayama to various places in the world

In the first instance of Japanese mass emigration abroad, 153 Japanese contract emigrants crossed the ocean to Hawaii in 1868. Thereafter, in February 1885, 953 Japanese government-contracted emigrants including 22 from Wakayama prefecture [hereinafter referred to as Wakayama], and in June 1885, 983 Japanese people including 33 from Wakayama went to Hawaii to work for a sugarcane plantation under a 3-year contract between the Japanese government and the Kingdom of Hawaii (Wakayama Prefecture, 1957).

Wakayama is considered one of the leading Japanese prefectures in emigration abroad. The number of emigrants from Wakayama is over 30,000 and is ranked 6th in Japan [2]. They emigrated to the United States, Canada [3], Australia, Latin America, the South Pacific, and so on, thus creating Nikkei communities [Japanese diaspora / Japanese heritage] and laying the foundation for the present day Wakayama Kenjinkai [associations] around the world (Higashi, 2011). According to Wakayama Prefecture [4], there are currently nineteen overseas Kenjinkai organized. The oldest association is Seattle Kisyu Club and the second is Nanka Wakayama Kenjinkai [Nanka: Southern California]. Both were

established a century or earlier. [See Table 1]

Table 1. Anniversary celebrations in the decade before COVID-19

Names of Kenjinkai	Year of Foundation	Anniversary	Celebration Date
Nanka Wakayama Kenjinkai	1911	100 th	2011/11/13
Brazil Wakayama Kenjinkai	1954	60 th	2014/04/27
Mexico Wakayama Kenjinkai	1985	30 th	2015/04/22
Seattle Kisyu Club	1905	110 th	2015/04/23
B. C Wakayama Kenjinkai	1965	50 th	2015/04/25
Eastern Canada Wakayama Kenjinkai	1976	40 th	2016/09/17
Peru Wakayama Kenjinkai	1991	25 th	2016/10/01
Argentina Wakayama Kenjinkai	1966	50 th	2016/10/23
Brazil Wakayama Kenjinkai	1954	100 th	2017/10/29

Created by the author based on information from Kenjinkai, Wakayama Prefecture, and migration-related organizations

The current state of its connections with Nikkei communities through Kenjinkai

One of the most important activities of the Kenjinkai is the anniversary celebration. To celebrate the commemorative event, the governor and a delegation from Wakayama visit the corresponding foreign country. Additionally, group tours that include sightseeing are sometimes organized to recruit the general public to participate in the ceremony. The target tourists for the tour are not only people who have immigrant ancestry but also members of migration-related organizations or anybody interested in the ceremony and sightseeing.

The author has attended two ceremonies held in California, where the total number of participants ranged from a few dozen to several hundred. For example, Wakayama Kenjinkai in

South California [Nanka Wakayama Kenjinkai] held its 100th-anniversary celebration on November 13, 2011, where more than 70 out of 451 guests had travelled from Wakayama. At the ceremony, reunions with relatives and acquaintances and new friendships were formed (Centennial Commemorative Booklet Committee, nd.).

On the other hand, sister-city relationships and international exchange organizations annually invite Nikkei descendants to visit Wakayama. More notably, on November 24, 2020, Wakayama Prefecture hosted the first Wakayama Kenjinkai World Conference in Wakayama City attended by 280 participants from abroad and 168 domestic participants. The participants at the ceremony strengthened their exchange and promised to meet again in a few years.

After the ceremony, three different hometown tours were conducted from November 25 to 27. Most attendees participated in one of the tours. In each region, in addition to sightseeing and visits to local industries, migration-related organizations hosted Kenjinkai members and their families from around the world and organized exchanges with local people (Wakayama Prefecture, 2019).

Such exchanges, with Kenjinkai as the mother organization, may increase the motivation to visit Wakayama again, if they were a memorable part of the tour.

New approaches for the future mutual visitation

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the movement of people was restricted in 2020. After a long period of being accustomed to the 'new normal', people began to create opportunities to connect with people residing in different places using online meeting systems. The following are few examples in Wakayama:

- (1) On December 6, 2021, Wakayama International Exchange Association and the author co-hosted a meeting to share information about the current situation of migration-related groups/organizations from Wakayama City, Kinokawa City, Tanabe City, Taiji Town, and Los Angeles.
- (2) On February 14, 2021, Wakayama International Exchange Association held the 'Global Seminar', and two young members from Wakayama Kenjinkai in Brazil and Argentina talked about their memory of visiting Wakayama and the situation in each country.

The participants shared their information, and some youths had an opportunity to learn about the migration history in Wakayama. These online meetings have continued on an irregular basis in 2022, with several university students participating each time.

The members of Kenjinkai are aging. Therefore, it is vital for the younger generation to participate in social events involving Kenjinkai members. This online interaction will increase familiarity, which may lead them to visit each other's country in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the author states the possibility of VFR tourism based on the migration history of Wakayama Prefecture. Firstly, the emigrant history as Wakayama's unique regional heritage may create specific opportunities for international exchanges (Higashi, 2011). Especially, Wakayama Kenjinkai around the world plays a role in bridging two places: Wakayama and the place where their ancestors emigrated. Secondly, the migration history provides an opportunity for the younger generation to visit Japan, meet their ancestral relatives, and learn about their ancestral history. Finally, continued online interactions between young

people from Wakayama and the Nikkei community could motivate them to visit each other in the future.

Endnote

- [1] 海外日系人とは—公益財団法人 海外日系人協会 [Who are "Nikkei & Japanese Abroad"? - The Association of Nikkei & Japanese Abroad] (jadesas.or.jp) (2022/09/22)
- [2] The number of emigrants by prefecture during 1885-1894 & 1899-1972 is as follows:
1. Hiroshima 109,893 2. Okinawa 89,424
3. Kumamoto 76,802 4. Yamaguchi 57,837
5. Fukuoka 57,684 6. Wakayama 32,853
Quoted: Japanese Overseas Migration Museum (Planned and Edited), (2015). *Japanese Overseas Migration Museum Guide to Exhibits, Dedicated to Those Japanese Who Have Taken Part in Molding New Civilizations in the Americas* Japanese Overseas Migration Museum, 12-13.
- [3] For example, Mihama Town in Wakayama sent many villagers to Canada as fishermen.
Emigration from Mio, Mihama town, to Steveston, Canada began with Kuno Gihei's journey to Steveston on the west coast in 1888. After seeing a large school of salmon in the Fraser River, he invited his fellow villagers to join him. This was the beginning of group emigration centered on fishing in Mio. People who returned to Japan following their success in Steveston brought Western lifestyles to Mio as well as substantial amount of money (Wakayama Prefecture, 1957)
- [4] 在外県人会について | 和歌山県 [About an overseas association of people from Wakayama prefecture / Wakayama Prefecture] (wakayama.lg.jp) (2022/09/22)

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