

IMPACT OF SAKE TOURISM ON DEVELOPMENT OF SAKE INDUSTRY IN JAPAN

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Abstract: *in this article, sake, a Japanese alcoholic beverage, and sake industry are discussed as an integral part of traditional Japanese culture. The author considers the history of the appearance and distribution of the drink and its place in the modern world. The conclusions made by the author confirm the statement that the development of sake tourism is not only able to expand the tourism activities in Japan to rural areas and unload urban tourism in the country, but also affect the production volumes of sake itself, due to possible increased sales to foreign and local sake tourists.*

Keywords: *sake tourism, sake industry, alco-tourism, Japanese culture.*

ВЛИЯНИЕ САКЭ-ТУРИЗМА НА РАЗВИТИЕ ИНДУСТРИИ САКЕ В ЯПОНИИ

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Аннотация: *в данной статье sake, японский алкогольный напиток, и sake-индустрия рассматриваются как неотъемлемая часть традиционной культуры Японии. Автор рассматривает историю появления и распространения напитка и его место в современном мире. Сделанные автором выводы подтверждают утверждение о том, что развитие сакэ-туризма не только способно расширить туристическую деятельность Японии на сельские районы и разгрузить городской туризм в стране, но и повлиять на объемы производства самого сакэ из-за возможного увеличения продаж за счет иностранных и местных sake-туристов.*

Ключевые слова: *сакэ-туризм, сакэ-индустрия, алко-туризм, японская культура.*

Traditional alcoholic beverages have been recognized to be an integral part of a country's culture as they are related to local customs and history. Many countries have their representative traditional alcoholic drink, which is tightly bound with the local culture, for example, beer in Germany, whisky in Scotland, wine in South Europe, vodka in East Europe, rum in Cuba, tequila in Mexico and the like. All of

those beverages went beyond local culture as they were accepted around the world and turned into the global drinks. Still, we associate most of them with the country of origin or production. Such a phenomenon lays the ground for the development of alco-tourism. Similar to gastronomic tourism, alcohol tourism is a journey to a destination conducted with the purpose of enjoying alcoholic beverages unique to that destination. Wine tourism, for instance, would be an example of a rapidly developing segment of the tourism industry.

In the case of Japan, the niche of the most popular national alcoholic beverage that attracts tourists is, undoubtedly, reserved by sake. The traditional rice wine of Japan has a long-standing history of more than 2000 years, yet, it remains a popular alcoholic beverage in the country [1]. Sake, which is known as “the Japanese spirit” or “the drinks of the Gods”, is an important part of the history and culture of Japan.

The history of sake is so ancient that its descriptions are found in kojiki and nihonshoki (oldest written chronicles of Japanese history) [5]. People began drinking it around 400 A.D. [4] However, as many other traditions of Japan, sake originates from China. Chinese brewing technology was traditionally applied to sake production in Japan around 1570 [5]. Since then technologies in Sakagura (sake brewery) have changed significantly.

The history of most of the breweries in Japan goes back hundreds of years. The skills of the masters who produced alcohol in Buddhist temples in the Edo period (1603–1867) in Japan have been handed down to today’s sake masters (Toji) [4]. In every prefecture, there are families who have kept the tradition of sake brewing as a family business, which is traditionally passed from father to son.

Traditionally, in Japan sake was consumed as a part of a ceremony or celebration. In the Shinto religion sake is often used as part of purification rituals, including as an offering to the gods and for purifying the shrine [1]. For example, there is a Shinto ceremony called O-miki performed with a Shinto priest in a shrine, and using unique white porcelain flasks (called miki-dokkuri) and cups that can be seen on the altars of shrines everywhere. In this ceremony, a small amount of sake is drunk in a prayerful act of symbolic unification with the gods [10]. The god of sake was also the god of rice growing and harvesting. So when the people prayed for good growing conditions and thanked the god for a good harvest, they connected with the god of sake. Sake linked the people to their gods, and then linked people together in congeniality. In this way, sake took on a vital role in religious festivities, agricultural rites, social interactions and many different ceremonial events, from marriages to funerals [6].

The importance of cultural aspect in sake production and consumption, as well as long history behind that drink, could not help but attract foreigners to discover sake. Delicate yet complex rice wine liquor has steadily becoming an international trend amongst connoisseurs and general consumers alike. Japan has bundled sake with sushi which has already become a global food. Sake interest in the US, Europe, and Asian countries became possible due to many celebrities who are sake admirers. As such, sake has become a global drink, going beyond a traditional alcoholic beverage of Japan [4]. Nowadays, sake is highly valued at the

international level. The Robert Parker group evaluated 800 different sake products, 78 of which received the scores similar to those given to high-class Bordeaux wines, while the prices of sakes are essentially lower than those of Bordeaux wines [5].

Nevertheless, the consumption of Japanese sake has been decreasing since its peak in 1974, as is the case with other liquors around the world [1]. Sake sales have started slipping down and they still decreasing. Some reasons for Japanese sake decline, according to researchers, may be related to the introduction of other types of alcohol, reduced consumption among young people, and control of driving under the influence with the increased number of cars [4]. Besides, the drop in demand is related to higher costs of sake compared to other alcohols. This is due to the restriction on imports of rice in Japan, which is both raw material for sake (70% of the price of sake is the price of rice) and staple food for the Japanese nation. For this reason, sake production was always strictly controlled by the authorities through taxation and regulations [1]. Such a situation as well creates difficulties for Japanese sake producers on the international market since other sake producers such as China, the USA, and Vietnam are growing.

Production of sake in Japan has been declined from 513 million liters in 2006 to 427 million liters in 2016, which is twice less than the amount of shochu produced the same year [7]. Production decreases together with the number of local sake breweries: there were 2512 breweries in 1983, 1973 in 2004, while by the year 2009 their number is down to about 1594 breweries only [7]. Above all, for the fall of local breweries, the changes in the supply chain owing to the deregulation affect a lot, according to researchers. The local sake breweries are obliged to build the new supply chains to grow at a steady pace. They are starting to focus more and more on direct distribution turning towards, special expositions, sake tasting saloons and developing sake tourism [1].

In this situation, taking into account local limitations, difficulties with distribution and the decline in demand for sake among Japanese residents, the development of sake tourism can be one of the directions for solving the problem of sake industry descent. Though sake tourism is not as popular yet as wine tourism, Japan has all the necessary resources for its development, especially taking into account general amount of tourism in Japan exceeding 2 million visits every month.

The Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have utilized sake as a strategic product when they implemented the “Try Japan’s Good Food Project”. The Japanese government designated sake as a cultural bridge into the 21st century to establish the “Enjoy Japanese Kokushu Project”. Market exploration and expansion to improve awareness of sake and to promote export through global marketing represent important initiatives for the Japanese sake industry [4].

In fact, the Japanese Brewery Association is making great efforts to revitalize the sake market. In 1996 the Japanese Alcohol Export Organization was established under the sponsorship of the Japanese Alcohol Service Research Association and Brewery Masters Association. The organization created an online

site to introduce various sake products so that customers can search for their preferred products [4].

Even National Tax Agency of Japan contributes to the promotion of sake tourism through publishing information about sake brewery tours opportunities on their website. Information is provided in English and contains maps, brochures, reports on safety and quality, lists of breweries, sake museums, etc. that foreign tourists can visit [8].

On the other hand, sake tourism could as well be promoted among Japanese citizens. Domestic sake tourism may encourage them to travel outside of urban areas, as well as broaden their consumer preferences and learn more about Japanese history through the history of sake. Besides, the growth of interest to sake can become a hope for some rural areas that supply sake rice to breweries and are currently wrestling with depopulation and a shrinking economy.

The idea of countryside tourism was as well approached by a group of researchers who developed an app for sake brewery tours to draw tourists to less populated areas. Their project was encouraged by a concern that for the upcoming Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2020, the number of foreign tourists coming to Japan will be expected to be off scale, however, it is not likely that they will visit places outside of the urban area without a touristic occasion [2].

Promotion of sake tourism creates more opportunities for tourists to visit and experience the brewery as a local cultural activity, where they can observe and learn about the history of sake making, development of different types of rice, as well as participating in sake tasting. It is said that “Each glass of sake is packed with Japan”, and in each sake brewery and region of Japan are packed with many stories. Researchers Lee and Shin argue that storytelling about sake tradition and production methods can become an innovative instrument to engage customers and develop sake tourism in Japan. They believe through storytelling producers can build emotional relationships with the consumers and achieve their loyalty [4].

Sake breweries exist in all the prefectures of Japan from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south, each with a unique sake style. Access to clean water and sake rice are two main conditions for the production, which are not difficult to fulfill in any region of Japan. Nevertheless, there are sake regions which are more popular than others. The main sake producing area in Japan is Nada. One third of all sake comes from this district of the city of Kobe in Hyogo Prefecture, which historically had great water for brewing and a port for shipping to Tokyo [9]. Other regions famous for volume of the production are Kyoto, Niigata, Akita, Hiroshima and Fukushima. Nagano, Shizuoka, Kochi, Miyagi, Shimane, Yamagata, Fukuoka and Okayama do not produce as much sake as above mentioned regions but famous for their quality [9]. Granted, the regional differences in sake may not be as pronounced as terroir in wine, but diversity in the raw material and unique techniques of brewing allow breweries to claim differences in taste (dry, sweet, etc.) and quality (basic, premium, etc.), encouraging sake tourists to discover many regions of Japan.

In conclusion, sake brewing tradition in Japan dates back to ancient times, thereby representing particular importance for the history, culture, religion and

economics of the country. The decline in demand and production of sake since the middle 1970's in Japan is mainly driven by internal factors, including local regulations, taxation, distribution channels and consumer behavior. In order to overcome the industry recession, producers turn to direct sales and promotion of sake tourism. Sake consumption is becoming global and competing with wine in food pairing and cooking. The steady growth of inbound tourism in Japan, the world's obsession with Japanese culture and the upcoming Olympic Games in Tokyo provide the necessary resources for Japan to capitalize on sake tourism. That specific segment of tourism will satisfy certain tourists' demands and interests, promote Japanese culture around the world, encourage rural tourism and give a large sales market for the declining sake industry.

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