

# Going abroad. Maybe. Maybe not.

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It has long been an article of faith of mine that a primary motive for Japanese students to learn English, and an inducement for them to persevere in it, has been to enhance and improve their experiences of travel abroad. I took this as a given, and for years students reinforced the belief in responses to questionnaires about needs and motives. Most wanted to travel abroad if given the chance, the time, and the money. This seems to be born out given that the number of Japanese traveling abroad has held steady at around 17,000 since 1994 (higher a few years, lower a few years, but more or less steady) (Japanese Tourism 2016).

What happens, then, when traveling abroad loses its appeal, as it seems to have done in student responses for the last few years; travel abroad no longer dominates responses. In fact, it comes in third or fourth. What is happening?

When I asked students about this, two broad factors emerged: one related to a general sense of economic opportunity, the other related to a social / psychological in-turning.

When talking about economic issues, a major change in student sensibility emerged. Early in my teaching career in the 1980s, 1990s, and through the early 2000s, students had a broad sense of possibility. They could learn English and with it travel on their own or with friends. They could attend school in the US or UK or Australia or any of a dozen of other countries. They would find work that would take advantage of these skills and experiences. There were the days of Japan as number 1: a world leader and power. Students in the 2000s were aware of the changing world position of Japan and the challenges facing them and the country, but they were convinced that they could work through or overcome these difficulties.

In recent interviews the tone has changed. Fewer and fewer students express an interest in going abroad. For most, a primary reason is economic. They feel that the expense of travel overseas is higher than any possible return. They are also keen on saving money because they are woefully aware of the depressed state

of the job market and want to husband their resources. Also they are obliquely aware of Japan's shrinking economic presence and power in the larger world and consequently feel less of a need to engage with it.

Another reason for the decreasing interest in overseas travel, that is harder for them to articulate, might be called cultural, with students' interests narrowing and horizons, both geographic and social, shrinking. They are simply less interested in the outside world – what is outside Japan, what non-Japanese people believe and how they live. By and large students have become more inward looking. They are less involved with the outside world. This prominently includes the world outside Japan.

At the same time, students' interests to matters inside Japan also seem to be narrowing. To some extent, this seems to be response to the growing importance of social media in their lives. Social media give them a chance to interact with self-selected friends and peers at any time and at any place (including during lessons and in classrooms). Students interested in games deal exclusively with others interested in games. Those interested in sports, with sports enthusiasts. And so on. Nothing wrong with that, per se. But the limited circle, its virtual and mediated nature, and the reluctance to hear voices outside it all conspire to make for a mindset increasingly unlikely to want to travel abroad.

That is to say, the impulse to travel abroad and have first-hand, unmediated international experiences is weakening. Certainly, these observations are far from scientific. They are mostly based on chats with students at schools where I teach who were willing to engage with me: the sample is self-selected, very small, and from a very non-representative set of students. Still, these are the changes I have observed and some possible causes for them. A further cause for these changes may reflect students' changing notions of the very concept of internationalization and Japan's place in the international project. But that is a matter for another essay.