

Backpacking as a Means of Self-Discovery: The Case Study of Japanese Backpackers Traveling around Asia

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Abstract

Many people in contemporary Japan face a situation wherein they ask themselves “Who am I?”. One of the social values that should be respected in modern society is an individual's autonomy. Following this tendency, quite ironically, individuals constantly need to reaffirm their self-identity. One example is the word “*jibun-sagashi*” (“seeking the self”), which has recently gained popularity in Japan; it represents the conflict of individuals with their self-identity.

The search for self-identity has induced people, especially the young generation, to discover backpacking. An individual's identity is formed through the process of differentiation with the “other”, and backpacking, wherein one experiences various cultures for long periods of time, can be regarded as a social practice itself that constructs this identity. In the field of anthropology of tourism, research on backpacking has repeatedly indicated that one's identity can be transformed through the course of adventurous traveling.

However, the environment in which backpacking exists has undergone crucial changes. As is evident from the flooding of the tourism market with backpacker's manuals, backpacking is being commodified, and it now exhibits the characteristics of mass tourism. This presentation introduces a case study of Japanese backpackers traveling in Asia. It explores the various cultural and social meanings attached to backpacking, and analyzes the conditions under which this practice is re-localized in contemporary society.

Keywords: backpacking, commodification, self-identity

1 . Issue: Travel and Identity

The existence of people who are grappling with the question “Who am I?” is becoming an issue in contemporary Japanese society.

For example, psychiatrist Tamaki Saito describes the situation well by categorizing

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young people in contemporary Japanese society into the “self-discovery type” and “*hikikomori* type.” “Self-discovery” has become a universal phenomenon on par with the socially-recognized problem of *hikikomori* (Saito 1999:36-41).

In response to this analysis, journalist Toru Takeda asserts that Saito's *hikikomori* type is the result of an overly strong self-image and loss of the ability to interact with one's surroundings (Takeda 1999). Both state that these are two sides of the same coin in the struggle for identity. It is precisely because one of the most highly esteemed contemporary social values is “individual autonomy” a situation has arisen in which each person has to confirm his or her own identity at all times.

In these obsessive conditions surrounding identity, it was backpacking that drew attention as a means for self-discovery. In its early days at the start of the 1970s, Erik Cohen understood backpacking as a kind of counterculture of mass tourism, characterizing backpackers as “drifters” (Cohen 1972) and “wanderers” as well as extracting the two characteristics of “furthest away from the beaten track” and “He is almost wholly immersed in his host culture” (Cohen 1972).

In addition, inherent within these two characteristics was a momentum toward the renewal of identity sought by many people. This is because if one's identity results from the process of differentiation with others, then a journey where a person experiences foreign cultures for an extended period of time in close quarters is the same as various differences having practical implications for the construction of an identity.

However, since Cohen conducted his analysis, the circumstances surrounding backpacking have changed dramatically. As demonstrated by the flood of backpacking guides in the market, we can confirm that backpacking itself is in the process of becoming commercialized in the same way as mass tourism. Thus, I would like to use Japanese backpackers as subjects in a case study to consider the cultural and social significance of backpacking¹⁾.

2. The Adventures of “Saruganseki”

The history of backpackers in contemporary Japanese society began with the “poor travelers” that was popular mainly among young people in the 1960s. As many poor travelers carried large backpacks on their backs, they were known in Japanese as *kanizoku* (literally, “crab tribe”) due to their appearance from behind and shuffling-like movements (Asahi Newspaper August 7, 1967; Arai 2001). The *kanizoku* liked to roam around Hokkaido; however, considering the contemporaneous developments in globalization, such as the so-called “liberalization” of traveling overseas in 1964 and the

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introduction of the hippie movement in the United States, their range of travel gradually began to expand.

However, it was due to a certain topic in 1996 that backpacking experienced an explosive boom in popularity and came to be practiced by many people. In a television program broadcasted this year, a pair of comedians known as Saruganseki were able to cross Eurasia by hitchhiking over a period of 197 days, starting in Hong Kong and ending in London.

Their adventures became a social phenomenon most likely because their travels transcended the imagination of people. In a journey that saw them move from place to place while working and sleeping rough, they became sick and were arrested by the police but were also helped by many kind people. What they gained at the end of their travels was a sense of self-transformation (Saruganseki 1998). It was after Saruganseki that there was a rapid increase in the number of backpackers (Arai 1999), mostly because of many people empathizing with Saruganseki, superimposing their romantic desires to achieve self-discovery through travel, and their search for a renewal of identity upon Saruganseki, who had already achieved the things that they wanted.

3. The Mechanisms of Self-Discovery

I would now like to use their stories to investigate the extent to which the traveling brought about self-transformation in them. A Japanese backpacker cited the following as his motivations for traveling.

I returned to work after undergoing an operation for hernia of the intervertebral disk; however, I could not move around as well as I thought. I had no choice but to quit my job and was in despair. Worrying what I should do with my life now, I decided to go traveling and confront myself once. Yes, you could call it self-discovery. (Gaku²). Nickname at the time. Name only. As below)

Gaku, whose sole aim after graduating from vocational school was to become a chef, had to give up on his long-cherished dream due to illness. What he chose in the depths of despair was to go backpacking.

Thus, Gaku's journey of self-discovery began in South-East Asia. He chose a style of travel in which he followed a guidebook to the letter, even this kind of travel was sufficiently stimulating. He mentioned that while traveling his perspectives and ways of thinking gradually began to change.

Traveling allows me to meet people I would not have met otherwise if I had stayed in Japan. In Aceh, I met a Japanese person who had fought alongside the local people, and people who only cared for marijuana and women. These kinds of encounters with people built up inside me and gradually changed me.

If one of the objectives of his travels was self-discovery, then this sense of personal development and transformation in the form of a “changed self” is no doubt the feeling that Gaku had been yearning. He analyzed that these kinds of changes were brought on through continual contact with different values. If the essence of backpacking is becoming submerged in “authentic” local cultures, we can consider that the process of Gaku’s self-transformation is an authentic expression of backpacking³⁾.

The essence of this kind of journey of self-discovery is not something that can only be seen in Gaku’s story. Although there are differences in expressions, the manner in which the following story relates an episode of traveling with self-transformation has characteristics in common with Gaku’s story.

Travel helps me to grow. Although I had the misfortune of being cheated out of all of my belongings in Kathmandu, I do not really think anything of it now. It was because of this that I found my path in life. I also became close to a female Korean backpacker but we went our separate ways after four months. I want to become a person who understands this kind of pain and who is considerate to others. We learn these kinds of things from traveling. (Nao⁴⁾)

It is through this succession of extraordinary experiences such as falling in love while traveling and being a victim of fraud that a sense of self-transformation is felt.

Through guidebooks and the Internet, information about things such as fraud and theft is provided repeatedly along with actual examples; however, there is no end to these kinds of incidents. Even if backpacking is commercialized, the fact that the symbols of “going off the beaten track” and “being immersed in local culture” are maintained means that an actual element of danger remains in traveling and many people actually get into trouble.

Getting into trouble is no doubt an unpleasant experience and leads to feelings of regret and anger. However, even negative experiences can be transformed into positive experiences by these people. This is the reinterpretation of all experiences while traveling within the context of the tale of self-development. Through this, it leads to the creation of the feeling that the self has been transformed.

4. Strategies for Host Societies

These kinds of people embody self-development on a daily basis; however, the travel that brings about this self-development has caused considerable changes in the substantive content. This is because in tourism strategies for an age of globalization, a rapidly increasing number of backpackers is an important target for most countries in Asia, and it means the arrival of business opportunities for the local people. In these kinds of countries, a suitable and surprising system of tourism for backpacking was developed while receiving national aid.

A typical example of the commercialization of backpacking is the “unexplored route” in which backpackers sailed by boat down the Mekon River over a period of two days, from Chiang Khong in Thailand to Houexai, Pakben, and Luang Phabang in Laos (At the time of the research conducted in November 2004, 1 baht was approximately 2.7 yen). First, backpackers purchase a 750 baht ticket for Luang Prabang sold at a guesthouse in the border town of Chiang Khong. Then, the next morning, a staff member from the guesthouse drives them by car to immigration at the border. At the nearby Mekon River, boatmen are already waiting to take them to the Laos side on the opposite shore, and when each person has completed the immigration procedures and boarded the boat, it departs. It takes a few minutes to cross the Mekon River and when they arrive at the Laos side, the boat pulls up in front of immigration on the riverbank. Once the respective simple immigration procedures have been completed, a bus that had been waiting takes them to another dock about 10 minutes away. After they are shown to a boat that is moored there and get on board, they can relax as they slowly sail down the Mekon River that flows threadlike through the dense jungle.

Vietnam has further refined the commercialization of backpacking. Vietnam that finally brought an end to the Vietnam War in 1975, introduced the Doi Moi (“renovation”) policies, and actively set about introducing a market economy while maintaining a socialist system. Then, in 1993, the whole country was opened up to overseas tourists. Adapting to the progress of globalization, the Vietnamese government drew up drastic tourism policies and constructed a sophisticated system that targeted overseas backpackers who desired a journey of self-discovery.

In Vietnam, a number of travel agencies have set up networks of tourist buses on a nationwide scale. For example, if using the travel agency SINH CAFÉ and traveling along the Huế-Hội An-Nha Trang-Ho Chi Minh route, a book of 3 tickets costs US \$14. If adding an extra place to visit, going from Huế to Hội An via Đà Nẵng, a book of 4 tickets costs US \$15 (At the time of the research conducted in November 2004). Passengers are

free to choose the number and location of stopovers as well as the number of days spent traveling.

The appeal of backpacking and the biggest difference from mass tourism is that the right to decide where and when to visit lies completely with the backpacker. The travel agencies in Vietnam are skillful at staging this, providing a structure within which backpackers feel like they are roaming footloose and fancy-free under their own steam.

Moving on is simple. When backpackers wish to move on, they check the schedule of the bus and go as per their convenience to the office, followed by boarding the bus that is waiting. Upon arrival at their destination, there is a bus that takes them to a guesthouse affiliated with the travel agency. The passenger is free to decide whether to stay at that guesthouse and there is no obligation. Although it is not so much of an issue if they are arriving during the day, if arriving at night the likelihood that they will stay increases. This is because walking around unfamiliar towns in the dark with all of their belongings exerts an enormous amount of psychological pressure on backpackers. The travel agency no doubt receives a margin from the guesthouse in the event that the passenger stays at the guesthouse designated by the travel agency. In this instance, as the accommodation fee does not increase, backpackers who have no place to stay have no reason to refuse accommodation.

During an interview conducted in November 2004, Mr. A—a Japanese person managing a guesthouse in the Kaosan district of Bangkok—stated that “It has only been five or six years since Thailand developed this kind of system; however, Vietnam has already been doing it for 10 years.” The response of host societies to the increase in the number of backpackers has been quick, and their strategies for catering to all the desires of backpackers who come from places such as the United States and Japan for self-discovery have been greatly successful.

As demonstrated by the case studies in Thailand and Vietnam, the process of commercialization of backpacking is not merely a history of the commercialization of individualized travel. On the one hand for the guests, there are obsessive conditions surrounding one’s identity in contemporary society to “discover” the means for self-discovery through cross-cultural experiences and this is becoming a trend, while on the other hand for the hosts, there is a complex entanglement of factors such as the modernization of the nation, the end of socialism, and globalization. When these elements of push and pull are harmonized at a certain point, backpacking goes further down its path in being commercialized.

Therefore, the main trend of contemporary backpacking is to establish routes and bases of travel in locations throughout the world, and create original ways of traveling by freely combining them. This form has been transformed considerably and is far removed

from the ideals indicated by Cohen.

5. Conclusion: A Commercialized Self-Discovery

Although backpacking in contemporary society is viewed romantically as an experience of self-development filled with adventure, the reality is that it has transformed into a type of commercialized travel in the same way as mass tourism.

However, despite these journey's being this way, backpackers still find this kind of travel sufficiently thrilling and come away satisfied at having gained a sense of achievement and fulfillment through traveling. This is because it is structured in a way in which the initiative for travel is still completely in the hands of the backpackers. In other words, travelers are able to gain a sense of adventure, such as achievement and self-transformation, because the industries involved in backpacking are fully guaranteeing the discretion of each individual and skillfully staging as well as reproducing the adventurous elements of backpacking. The establishment of this kind of system is the result of the desire for self-discovery on the part of Japanese backpackers and the living strategies of the host societies that receive them as tourists becoming closely connected. This is not only a one-way interest but also functions extremely well in reconciling the ulterior motives of both parties. By reinterpreting all kinds of situations within the context of self-development, backpackers have been able to realize the feelings of self-transformation, and in turn by setting up a tourism market that targets these backpackers, local societies have been able to secure economic gains.

It is easy to criticize this situation as being "fake" and to denigrate their feelings as nothing more than an illusion. However, refusing to move away from this kind of "revelation" means that it would be impossible to apprehend the realities surrounding the participation and enthusiasm for the practice of backpacking. It is therefore important to determine how we can approach this sense of achievement of the people who satisfy their yearning for identity through backpacking.

This is because even if we structurally view the self-transformation gained during one's travels as being an illusion, as long as these are being lived as the actual feelings of individuals, the firm convictions that these people hold have a practical basis, and due to this it is possible for them to alter their values and views on life. Even if these are fictive and naïve feelings, the confidence and practice that these bring about have the power to open up a new horizon in the world in which they will try to start living.

Notes

- 1) This study is based on the fieldwork conducted by the author in the Asian countries. I conducted overseas research from October 2004 to September 2009 in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and Nepal; the research was conducted twice a year in summer and winter and for durations ranging from two weeks to two months. In total, the duration of the research overseas was 234 days. In addition, I conducted continuous interviews with active and previous backpackers from March 2004 to August 2010 in Japan. I also conducted interviews in a range of fields throughout Asia such as with Japanese backpackers, guesthouse owners and staff, travel agencies, tour guides, bookshops, money exchangers, restaurants, gift shops, tourist offices, and the Japanese embassy. While actually backpacking, I collected data by participating in “unexplored tours,” joining in the activities, and traveling with Japanese backpackers. The number of Japanese backpackers I met and spoke with during my investigation was over one hundred; however, the number of men and women I entered in my field notes as data that I had interviewed was a total of 41 people (30 men and 11 women).
- 2) Gaku—male, born in 1981—worked at French and Italian restaurants after graduating from culinary school. Gaku, who left Japan in September 2004 to travel around South-East Asia, said that he would continue traveling “for as long as my money lasts,” finally ended his travels in 2005 and returned to Japan. The interview was conducted in November 2004 in Nha Trang, Vietnam.
- 3) According to Luke Desforges, a geographer who conducted research on British backpackers, many backpackers stated their motivation for travel as being self-discovery. He also stated that the experiences of adventure and difference during travel granted “a new individualized identity to travelers” (Desforges 2000).
- 4) Nao—male, born in 1977—worked as a beautician after having graduated from a beautician’s school. Quit his job at the age of 25 and traveled around South-East Asia for half a year. Following this, he returned home once to save some money and then went traveling again. At the time of the interview, he had been traveling for a period of 1 year and 3 months. The interview was conducted in October 2004 in Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- 5) According to Swedish sociologist Torun Elsrud, although each person has separately experienced various travels, due to the adventures and risks that they experience, everyone has the same tendency to feel as if they have gained a new personality, such as “self-reliance” and “power.”

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