



Coping with Over-Tourism: Protecting the “culture city” of Kyoto from tourism pollution

Dialogue between Kadokawa Daisaku (Mayor of Kyoto City) and Alex Kerr (Researcher on eastern culture), moderated by Kiyono Yumi (journalist)

Issues facing the city of Kyoto

Moderator, Kiyono Yumi: Attention is focused on tourism as a promising twenty-first century industry. But at the same time, its tendency to threaten the daily life of residents has become evident, such as crowding and the poor manners of tourists in stations and well-known tourist spots. Today, I'd like to hear what our speakers consider are the problems affecting Japan's most popular city for travelers, how they are being addressed, and what solutions might be possible.



Alex Kerr

Alex Kerr: First of all, I'd like to make something clear. The title of the book I released with Kiyono Yumi in March 2019 is “Destroying the Nation with Tourism.” But I have no wish for the nation to be destroyed.

Personally, I foresaw tourism's promise in the 1980s, rented out individual *machiya* (townhouses) in Kyoto, and established a long-stay accommodation business in an area of Kyoto and other remote places in Japan. For the next thirty years, I always hoped that tourism could help to “raise up the nation.” Destroying the Nation with Tourism is based on that aspiration. And alongside hopes for the future, it's a study into how Japanese tourism might move forwards.

Kadokawa Daisaku: First, I'd like to say that Kyoto is not a tourist city. Kyoto has built up a history of *monozukuri* manufacture that ranges from traditional industries to modern cutting-edge industries. It also has diverse layers of cultural “story-making” such as noh and kyogen, flower arranging, the tea ceremony, incense, right up to modern art. In that sense, Kyoto has many different and profound special features. It is a city of religion, of learning, an international city, and a city of culture and art. It is not a tourist city with tourism at the fore.



Kadokawa Daisaku

Kiyono: So, Kyoto itself doesn't sell tourism?

Kadokawa: Kyoto is highly appreciated for tourism but underpinning that is culture. Yet, in reality, tourism is having a considerable effect on the daily lives of Kyoto's residents. Meanwhile, what should we do to pass on and strengthen Kyoto's true values, while also satisfying the people who visit the city? We are working hard with these thoughts in mind.



Kiyomizu temple

Kerr: It's not just Kyoto; there are other famous culture cities around the world such as Barcelona, Florence and Amsterdam that are suffering from problems caused by over-tourism. I am sure that they think the same way as Mayor Kadokawa: essentially and fundamentally they consider themselves cultural cities.

Kadokawa: Looking at tourism as an industry, 2017 tourism consumption in Kyoto was about 1.13 trillion yen. If you compare that to the annual consumption of Kyoto's 1.47 million residents, it is about 53%. In that sense, tourism clearly makes a large contribution to Kyoto's economy and employment. On the other hand, as tourists concentrate in particular places, problems of crowding and behavior are becoming evident. Rather than immediate economic considerations, when we think about tourism, nothing is more important than how it harmonizes with citizens' daily lives. What's more, I believe that efforts to link tourism to the economy, particularly traditional industries and regional development, are key.

Kerr: Common features of over-tourism around the world are overcapacity, issues with private lodgings, speculative development and shop openings, and damage to the landscape and regions that result. I first came to live in Kyoto prefecture forty-two years ago now, but each year I personally experience these issues more often, even in the center of Kyoto.

Kadokawa: Still, in a survey of levels of tourist satisfaction that Kyoto city conducts each year, 90% of people reply that they are satisfied. In other words, the crowding in a few areas is not a big negative.

Kiyono: I think that may be evidence of Kyoto's rich attractions, but speaking from personal experience as a traveler coming from Tokyo, from the moment I got off the train onto the platform I was shocked by the crowds. Long queues at taxi ranks seemed to be the norm and made moving about more stressful.

Kerr: When I meet guests from abroad, I guide them around places such as Gion and the temples of Ginkaku-ji and Kinkaku-ji at their own request. Increasingly, we run into crowds so thick that you can't move, and it's totally exhausting.

Kadokawa: Ginkaku-ji and Kinkaku-ji are crowded, but they are not the only temples. Kyoto has over 2,000 fascinating temples and shrines. There are many famous places where you can quietly experience history. Statistically, the gap between the number of tourists during peak and off-peak periods has narrowed considerably, and the number of tourists during peak periods is actually decreasing. I am uneasy how, despite that, the image of Kyoto as a uniformly crowded city continues to spread.

Kiyono: Why do you think that is?

Kadokawa: I think that media reporting is one factor, but the main reason is concentration. It's natural that crowding will be noticeable if everyone goes during the crowded season, at crowded times of the day, and to crowded places. Today, there's the effect of "Instagramability" and people tend to gather at a few specific locations.

Kerr: Some tourist locations around the world that are facing overcapacity, such as Madrid and Amsterdam, are exploring two approaches: restricting the total number of tourists and "guidance measures." How about Kyoto?

Kadokawa: Kyoto covers a wide area and is proud to be multi-layered and varied. Therefore, we are working to alleviate three areas of concentration: season, time of day and place. For example, when it comes to time of day, the period from afternoon to evening sees concentrations of tourists, so we

are actively encouraging morning and night tourism. Thanks to this, more people are staying overnight in Kyoto and the number of day-visitors is decreasing each year. When it comes to alleviating crowding at particular places, the Togetsu-kyo bridge in Arashiyama, for example, is crowded, yet Daikaku-ji temple and the Oku-saga area — both within walking distance — are actually quiet and calm. South of Kyoto station too, Fushimi Inari Shrine is crowded, but if you walk a short distance you can enjoy a stroll around Fushimi's sake breweries. For these reasons, right now we are working with local authorities and private businesses to promote these attractions so that tourists don't concentrate in single spots.



Togetsu-kyo bridge in Arashiyama

Measures to combat the rapid rise of home-sharing

kiyono: Damage to communities due to the rapid rise of home-sharing accommodation is an issue in tourist regions around the world, isn't it?

Kerr: A special feature of Kyoto is that commercial areas and residential areas are close to each other; and that is part of the city's essential appeal. On the other hand, businesses anticipating a rise in home-sharing buy up machiya one after the other and repurpose them for use as budget hotels or home-sharing. When they do that, it leads to land prices going up. When rental prices go up, people move away because they cannot pay, and the community is hollowed out. This problem is getting worse in Kyoto too.

Kadokawa: We absolutely do not allow inappropriate home-sharing that threatens the living environment of residents. I have put measures in place and am fully determined. The Private Lodging Business Act (New Private Lodging Business Act) passed into law in 2018, and the city of Kyoto itself is dealing with the issue through detailed and strict regulations.

Kerr: What kind of things are included in the Kyoto city regulations?

Kadokawa: We have drawn up and applied detailed regulations, such as that staff must live in the facility or within 800 meters; neighbors must be told about the facility beforehand; and contact details must be disclosed in case of complaints or emergencies. These have been praised as the strictest regulations in Japan and, although there was some push back from businesses, we have implemented them without budging. In 2016 we established Japan's first home-sharing reporting and advice counter and, based in part on the information provided, we have issued orders to cease operation in bad cases. Furthermore, the city of Kyoto has worked to implement strict measures, such as the setting up of the "Kyoto City Liaison Committee on Measures Against Home-sharing and Other Issues" in June 2018 in cooperation with the police, which led to the first prosecutions under strengthened penalties of the Inns and Hotels Act (revised Hotel Business Act). Currently, we have forty-one staff dealing full-time with these issues. As a result, the number of reported facilities doing business without permission has reduced from 2,454 to 24, as of the end of March 2019.

Kerr: As Mayor Kadokawa has actually done, the creation of local rules, not uniform national ones, is an effective way to make tourism an essential element of regional revitalization. Although it was a landmark change for the new act to encourage local authorities to set their own regulations, more discussion about the creation of systems that fit the particular situation in each region would be a good thing.

Kiiyono: For example, what issues would you identify?

Kerr: According to the new act, the operational days of home-sharing accommodation per year are limited to 180 or fewer. For depopulated areas that are more keen on using tourism for regional revitalization, this method instead narrows its effectiveness. Countries with developed tourism industries, such as in North America and Europe, have given regions more decision-making discretion than the national government.

Kadokawa: Local authorities are in a dilemma between national laws and the local situation. If the national government transferred more authority to municipalities, they would have more options for action. We intend to keep pushing the government to do that.

How to protect Kyoto's machiya



Machiya (townhouses) is the traditional Kyoto-style house

Kiyono: There is a problem with home-sharing accommodation threatening local communities; but with the rapid expansion of tourism, Kyoto's machiya are still gradually disappearing, aren't they?

Kerr: In the early 2000s, I started a project to restore machiya to be rented out individually. I wanted to do something to preserve the machiya and townscapes that kept being destroyed each year, so I came up with the project. At that time people around me said, "That method won't work in Japan," but the lodgings became very popular. Later, a movement to repurpose machiya into facilities for tourists spread all over Japan. Then, the rapid development of home-sharing happened and it's ironic that this has become an unexpected social problem.

kiyono: Until quite recently, the vogue for repurposing machiya led to their preservation, but it seems that machiya are once again being actively destroyed as tourist numbers increase and the machiya are torn down to build small business hotels and the like.

Kadokawa: The inherited aesthetics of Kyoto daily life and the philosophy of its way of life are concentrated in machiya. The preservation of Kyoto machiya is important from the viewpoint of scenic views, but I believe that it is absolutely vital for passing on the culture of everyday life.

In 2017, Kyoto City and other bodies held heated discussions and passed a regulation relating to the preservation and passing on of Kyoto machiya; a regulation that covered, as far as possible, privately owned property too. It obliged machiya owners to provide notification at least one year before starting demolition, and also created a system to match owners with those who wish to use machiya. Thanks to this, opportunities for resale and use have been secured. What's more, there are city-funded subsidies for maintenance and restoration.

Kiyono: Yet, why is it that machiya still continue to disappear?

Kadokawa: Traditional wooden houses are somewhat lacking when it comes to modern convenience. There aren't many people who want to raise children in machiya. People might say, "Then why not restore them to be comfortable?" But that involves considerable cost. The thorny problems facing machiya owners include finding funds for maintenance, management and repair, and also the tax burden when the house is inherited.

Kerr: On tax, isn't there some action that could be taken? For example, inheritance tax could be relaxed on machiya that were built before World War Two.

Kadokawa: We lobby the government regarding the tax system, but barriers are high.

Kerr: I have great respect for Mayor Kadokawa's initiatives, but I am extremely worried that the country as a whole is lacking resolve to determinedly and properly protect the streetscapes and properties that it has inherited from those that came before. In Europe and the United States, or in Asian countries with successful tourism industries such as Thailand, preserving scenic views has been fundamental to tourism strategy.

While I am complaining about scenic views in Japanese tourist areas, here's another thing: we should think about signage pollution before "tourism pollution." Never mind when you visit shopping arcades, even if you go to Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples your eyes are bombarded with a storm of signage. "Entrance this way," "Shops this way," "Toilets this way," "No shoes," "No photography." Recently, they have even added cute characters and mascots, so I'm sometimes astonished as I wonder where the spirituality of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples has gone?

Kiyono: Outside Japan, there's often an inconvenient lack of signage, but signs in Japan have gone beyond helpfulness, haven't they?

Kerr: In famous religious sites like St. Peter's Basilica in Rome or Notre-Dame in Paris, for example, there are no signs of that kind at all. Japan's sign-strewn scenic views are a mystery to me.



Sings near the Kiyomizu temple

Kadokawa: Signs that spoil scenic views are not appropriate for a historic city. On that point, I feel the same way. Our new measures to deal with scenic views started in 2007. We carefully applied and strengthened rules on the height and design of buildings, and on signage. We went as far as completely banning rooftop signs and gaudy signage in all areas of Kyoto city.

In central city areas such as the Shijo-dori street, we banned projecting signboards that stick out into the space above streets. Thanks to that, we had comments from people who saw the Yamahoko Junko [float procession] during the Gion festival that, “The colors of the Yamahoko floats have become more visible.”

Kerr: Projecting signboards cause great harm to the appearance of streets. I’m happy that the city of Kyoto has worked on these measures. Convenience stores and fast-food outlets in the city of Kyoto are also working to restrict the color and size of signs. The Lawson in front of the Yasaka-jinja shrine has a muted brown logo and wooden latticework has been installed on the store front. I felt that they had considered the surrounding scenic views and that it can be done when people try. It was encouraging.

Kadokawa: At first, our signage policies were criticized as too strict, but over the course of ten years we have quietly made requests, at times set about removing signs ourselves, and 30,500 advertisements have been taken away or rectified. We are grateful to all the citizens and businesses involved. On the other hand, there are situations when signs are needed to clearly explain Japan’s culture and rules to people from other countries.



Yamahoko Junko [float procession] in the Gion Festival

Kiyono: What kind of signs are those?

Kadokawa: For example, in the Gion district that Alex mentioned earlier, there's an issue with nuisance behavior by tourists who don't know the rules and crowd around *maiko* [apprentice geisha]. So, together with local people, we set up signs to encourage proper manners. And we took as much care as possible over design and the visual environment.

Kerr: The nuisance behavior in Gion and the Hanami-koji lane area pains me too. But I want to propose something not about signs, but rather about the layout of Hanami-koji lane. How about dividing Hanami-koji lane in half and creating a walking path only for geisha, maiko and those working in geisha houses, tea houses, restaurants, bars and the rest of the local nightlife district? If that was done, it would probably be reported around the world as a wise decision by the city of Kyoto as it struggles with over-tourism.

Kadokawa: Residents are pooling their efforts with universities and others to work on solving these problems. Balance between culture and the daily lives of residents is the most important thing. I'd like to find ingenious solutions rather than use excessive regulation.

How to deal with traffic congestion

Kerr: That probably sounded like an outrageous idea, but throughout human history, landmark and creative solutions to problems have all been outrageous ideas. In that sense, in Kyoto, Mayor Kadokawa has put in place some landmark road measures; namely, the lane-reduction for the main Kyoto street of Shijo-dori. Rather than being outrageous, it accords with global urban planning trends, and I believe that it was truly a wise decision.

Kadokawa: In 2015, we reduced the number of lanes for a one kilometer stretch of Shijo-dori street up to Kawaramachi-dori avenue from four lanes to two, and also enlarged the sidewalks by the same amount. But it wasn't a tourism measure. The city of Kyoto is putting in place ninety-four measures based on the principles of being a pedestrian city and prioritizing public transport. This was positioned as a flagship project within that.

Kerr: In any case, I expect you had plenty of trouble implementing the measure.

Kadokawa: Yes, that's right. It was the first attempt by a major Japanese city to do something like that. It took ten years. But we've been lucky enough to receive four domestic and international awards, as well as approving comments such as, "Now I can relax as I walk down the street pushing a baby buggy." At the same time, we received fierce comments opposing the measure.

Kiyono: What were typical negative comments?

Kadokawa: For example, that the road has become crowded with traffic, that buses aren't able to pass smoothly, or that it is inconvenient to deliver and pick up goods from shops along the street. These were all things directly related to the daily lives of citizens, so we simultaneously put in place detailed measures to deal with them. As a result, buses can pass down the street on time and people can deliver and pick up goods smoothly.

Kerr: Stopping cars from entering central urban areas is at the cutting edge of world trends. In 2009, for example, New York's Broadway main street was completely pedestrianized. In Madrid, San Francisco, or in small towns in the UK and Italy, policies to discourage cars from coming in are being put in place. Over capacity is tied to the number of cars that are allowed in, so surely there is also a link between how cars are restricted and alleviating over-tourism.

Kadokawa: Many people live near Shijo-dori and the road is important to their daily lives. Among those residents, there are people with disabilities, elderly people, and people who desperately need to use cars. So things like full pedestrianization are difficult to do without repeated discussions.

Kiyono: Kyoto City brought in an accommodation tax in October 2018, didn't it? Tokyo and Osaka Prefectures had already brought it in, so I was actually surprised that Kyoto hadn't yet.

Kadokawa: Tokyo applied the tax to accommodation charges above 10,000 yen per night, and Osaka for above 7,000 yen. But for Kyoto we calculated that the tax income would be around 300 million yen per year. We discussed the matter at length before deciding to have everyone who receives accommodation services pay the tax, relative to the lodging cost. Specifically, the tax for one person staying in an accommodation costing under 20,000 yen is 200 yen. For between 20,000 and 50,000 yen it is 500 yen. And for over 50,000 yen it is 1,000 yen. We anticipate a tax income of over four billion yen per year.

Kerr: The situation is that accommodation facilities aimed at tourists are all over the place. What's more, during peak periods the price of rooms jumps up to two or three times the normal rate. So, I agree with collecting accommodation tax. I think it would also be a good idea to consider a "visitor tax" like the one set by Venice in July 2019.

Kiyono: The issue is how the tax money is used, isn't it?

Kerr: That's an important point. In Japan, it's usual for new tax income to flow into the construction of roads and fancy new buildings. I really hope that things like a shiny new "Such-and-such Tourism Produce Hall" aren't built in Kyoto.

Kadokawa: The accommodation tax is used for city works that are beneficial to Kyoto residents and visitors, and we carefully fulfill our responsibility to explain how it is spent. There are things such as subsidies for encouraging good manners and resident-led measures, upgrading public toilet facilities, measures to address crowding on city buses, protecting the visual environment, and measures to deal with home-sharing accommodation.

Kerr: If the uses are made clear and citizens are able to monitor them, that will be good for both residents and tourists.

Protecting attractive towns

Kiyono: Today, we have heard about many initiatives that Kyoto is working on. I have realized that the city of Kyoto is working as hard as it can to solve these issues as over-tourism becomes more and more evident.

Kerr: In particular, I've realized that if local government has the authority and funds, it can implement measures to address over-tourism more quickly and effectively.

Kadokawa: Kyoto City is doing its very best and, at the same time, lobbying the government hard.



Nishiki market is the largest traditional food market of Kyoto

Kerr: There are still some big issues left for the authorities when it comes to tourism, I believe. For example, traditional local markets are popular with tourists all over the world. I also always visit them when I travel. But when the number of tourists visiting them grows, so do souvenir stalls selling cheap goods or snacks and ice-creams for people to eat as they stroll around. Meanwhile, traditional shops disappear, and this phenomenon is occurring over the world. The same happens in Kyoto's Nishiki market, and in Barcelona's Boqueria market.

Kiyono: When a particular place becomes popular for tourism, doesn't it tend to go down-market, lose its original meaning or value, and become less attractive?

Kerr: That's a kind of law of inertia inherent to tourism and there are already many examples from Japan and abroad. At the same time, Amsterdam and other world cities that had early experience of over-tourism have launched new controls, such as using administrative orders to remove shops for tourists that have opened on main streets. If we learn from these examples and act quickly when there are early signs of going down-market, we can protect those places so that they are pleasant both for residents and travelers.

Kadokawa: As I mentioned before, it is difficult for local authorities to deal with these issues without the underlying support of national law. But we keep trying new things together with citizens. Kyoto's appeal as a city lies in the everyday culture of its people, something that has developed over 1,000 years and more. That's exactly why the entire Agency for Cultural Affairs will soon move to Kyoto. It is important that we ourselves realize the value of this exceptional culture and pass it on. Everyone at the Nishiki market that was just mentioned, and at other shopping arcades too, are making bold efforts to deal with the issues. We intend to keep exchanging opinions and gathering knowledge, while both developing and passing on the traditions of Kyoto, a world city and the home of Japan's spiritual culture.

Translated from "Taidan: Obaa tsurizumu ni makenai: 'Bunka toshi' Kyoto wo kanko kogai kara mamoru (Coping with Over-Tourism: Protecting the 'culture city' of Kyoto from tourism pollution)," Chuokoron, June 2019, pp. 176-183. (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [July 2019]

KADOKAWA Daisaku
Mayor of Kyoto

Born 1950 in Kyoto Prefecture. 1969: took up employment with the Kyoto City Board of Education. 1974: graduated from Ritsumeikan University (evening course). From 2001 to 2007, served as chair of the Kyoto City Board of Education. In 2008, took up office as the mayor of Kyoto; currently third term. Was also a member of the working group of the Japanese government Council for the Implementation of Education Rebuilding and of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's Central Council for Education. Has also served as chairman of the League of Historical Cities and of World Cultural Heritage (Japan.)

Alex KERR
Researcher on eastern culture

Born 1952 in the State of Maryland, US. First came to Japan aged twelve. 1974: Graduated from Yale University (Japan studies). After graduating from Oxford University, moved to Japan in 1977. Is engaged in projects around Japan to restore traditional Japanese houses and rent them out to visitors. Published works include *Lost Japan: Last Glimpse of Beautiful Japan, Dogs and Demons, Another Kyoto* and *Destroying the Nation with Tourism* (co-authored with Kiyono Yumi). Chairman of the Chiiori Alliance & Trust (NPO) <http://chiiori.org/>

KIYONO Yumi
Journalist

Completed post-graduate studies at Keio University. Published works include *Shin Toshi-Ron TOKYO* (New Urban Theory Tokyo, co-authored with Kuma Kengo) and *Destroying the Nation with Tourism* (co-authored with Alex Kerr)
