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# To gain more tourists, Fukuoka must exploit rich heritage and keep 'Omotenashi' spirit

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**CHINESE VIEWS**

WHEN I boarded an Air China flight to Fukuoka to attend the Kyushu Asia Media Conference held last week, I was a little surprised to find so few passengers that one could lie down on a row of empty seats.

The half-empty flight was a sign of the woes besetting Fukuoka amid a boom in Chinese tourists visiting Japan. According to statistics, Chinese tourists had made a total of 1.79 million trips to Japan as of September, an increase of 80 percent year on year, thanks to a weaker yen and relaxation of visa requirements.

However, the main beneficiaries of this surge probably are metropolises such as Tokyo and Osaka, or places with a quintessentially Japanese ambience, including Kyoto, Nara and Hakone.

Perhaps because Fukuoka has lagged behind other Japanese localities in tourist revenues, this year's Kyushu Asia Media Conference was fittingly themed "city, art and tourism." The conference was chiefly organized by UN-Habitat Fukuoka Office, Kyushu Economic Federation and other agencies.

Geographical proximity to continental Asia has established Fukuoka's status, since time immemorial, as a gateway to Chinese and Korean cultural influences.

This was well documented during a stop at the Fukuoka City Museum, where a few Asian journalists and I

were told by a curator that the highlight of the exhibition is an imperial seal, shaped like a coiled snake and carved out of gold. It was a gift from Emperor Guangwu of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220AD).

In the centuries that followed, Fukuoka had been a key outpost and trade hub when commerce flourished with China, and later with Korea.

Fukuoka is now seeking to restore its past glory as a city bustling with modern-day merchants — tourists.

During the panel discussion at the conference, it was pointed out by many participants that Fukuoka needs to overcome "hardware" problems, including a language barrier, a sporadic Wi-Fi service and credit card penetration, to become more tourist-friendly.

## Lower skyline

These shortcomings notwithstanding, the city, and by extension, Kyushu, one of Japan's four main islands, have their own glamour to appeal to travelers.

A key part of that glamour lies in their "provinciality," to quote a Japanese journalist. Unlike Tokyo or Osaka, Fukuoka is more serene and cozy, with a lower skyline and comparatively relaxed lifestyle.

Due exactly to this "provinciality," many of Fukuoka's local features have been well preserved. For instance, also at the city museum, I was greeted by a two-story high replica of something

like a Shinto shrine. Later my guide, Ms Hoshino, explained that it was actually a float, carried by numerous male citizens of Fukuoka during the Hakata Gion Yamakasa festival that falls in July. Observance of this centuries-old ritual is intended as a prayer for the blessing and good health of local inhabitants.

Replicas of the float are still hoisted and paraded through Fukuoka's streets each year, a spectacle suggesting the resilience of local heritage and identity.

Panelists including myself all argued that this local identity needed to be preserved and exploited as a selling point for Fukuoka's tourism brand.

## Hidden treasures

Ryoichi Matsuyama, president of Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), noted in his keynote speech that Fukuoka and Kyushu need to broaden their visibility and cultivate hidden regional tourism resources.

Celebrated Singaporean artist Ong Keng Sen, a guest speaker at the conference, said that Kyushu needs to find its hidden treasures that offer an iconic image of the city. They could be iconic Asian art museums or festivals. Such things will encourage one-time visitors to return to the city.

Yoshinobu Fukasawa, director of UN Habitat Fukuoka Office, acknowledged that Fukuoka faced an uphill battle in enticing tourists, but it has a strong

repository of soft power to fall back on, including a rich legacy of anime and a vibrant local identity.

But at the end of the day, what matters are individuals and thriving people-to-people exchanges, he said.

At the heart of the exchange is Japanese hospitality, or "Omotenashi," meaning to treat or entertain guests sincerely and warmly.

Journalists were asked to give advice on how to enhance the "Omotenashi" spirits in Japan. This is an odd question to ask, for I doubt there is much room for improvement in an area where Japanese hospitality is already world-famous.

I've visited Kyushu twice, the last time in 2011 and also embedded in a group. Wherever we went, we were received with warmth and utmost respect.

When we left, the hosts kept waving goodbye to us until our chartered bus disappeared from view.

And this "Omotenashi" flows both ways. Once in Japan, one feels the impulse to conform to local norms, to behave, and to reciprocate the civility accorded them. For Fukuoka, the "hardware" problem that holds it back as a tourist magnet will be overcome sooner or later. The city has richer heritage and tourist resources than meets the eye.

Better exploitation and promotion of these advantages, coupled with the "Omotenashi spirit," will go a long way toward enhancing Fukuoka and the region's appeal to overseas tourists.

# Much to be done in the world on human rights

**CHINESE VIEWS**

AS Human Rights Day approaches, high-profile cases of violations within American borders and by its agencies abroad are being scrutinized, especially as it pertains to be a defender of civil liberties globally.

United Nations human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein on November 25 urged the US to examine race-related issues in its law enforcement and justice systems after a controversial ruling on the shooting of an unarmed black teenager.

On November 24, a grand jury did not indict white police officer Darren Wilson, who shot Michael Brown dead in August in Ferguson, Missouri. The decision led to protests and rioting in the small town and more than 170 US cities followed suit, dividing the nation.

Besides its deeply rooted racism, the surveillance scandal — which targeted its own citizens as well as leaders of other countries — and attacks on foreign soil

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in its anti-terror campaigns, resulting in heavy civilian casualties, have also drawn international concern.

A congressional report detailing measures of torture allegedly used by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on al-Qaida detainees during interrogation, expected to be released soon, has added fuel to the hot disputes.

People rarely hear the US talking about its own problems, preferring to be vocal on the issues it sees in other countries. As a developing country, China is in the process of ensuring its citizens have access to the constitutional and social rights to ensure development. Part of this developmental process is the

acknowledgement and understanding of its own human rights issues.

A white paper on human rights released by the Chinese central government in May 2014 highlighted enhanced social fairness, justice and freedom of speech, along with raised living standards, improved social security system and further strengthened democracy and legal system.

The report noted that development across the country was unbalanced, uncoordinated and unsustainable, and that greater efforts were needed to bring higher standards to human rights protection.

In response to the uproar following the Ferguson case, the US Justice Department launched a civil rights

investigation and President Barack Obama pledged more police funding to ensure officers were equipped with uniform-mounted cameras.

However, many protesters believe these moves to be mere lip service, as they fail to fully address what is a widespread problem.

The US call for patience from its citizens runs counter to what it demands from other nations. China is open to dialogue and exchanges with other countries over its human rights issues.

However, should a country adopt double standards, being "loose" domestically and "strict" abroad, its contrasting principles could be taken as a disregard for human rights.

The United Nations General Assembly declared December 10 to be Human Rights Day in 1950, the day on which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. The day continues to be commemorated the worldwide human rights mission is far from complete.

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