

# Operational Challenges in Japan's Guide Interpreter System for High Value-Added Tourism

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## Abstract

This study examines the current status and challenges of Japan's National Government Licensed Guide Interpreter system following the 2018 amendment that allowed unlicensed individuals to work as paid tourist guide interpreters. Since 2020, Japan's tourism policy has shifted toward high value-added, quality-focused inbound tourism, raising concerns about a potential deterioration in service quality due to deregulation. While previous research has analyzed consumption trends and market size, few studies have explored the impact of human services, such as tourist guide interpreters, on traveler satisfaction and repeat visits. Drawing on prior studies of guides' influence on experiential value, this study investigates the historical and operational issues of the licensing system through a literature review and stakeholder interviews. In addition, a comparative analysis with South Korea, which pursues similar tourism policies, offers an international perspective on institutional design. The study concludes that guide quality is crucial for advancing high value-added tourism and provides insights for revising the qualification system and related policies. It also provides a basis for subsequent empirical research on the relationship between guide qualifications and traveler satisfaction.

**Key words:** National Government Licensed Guide Interpreter, Tourist Guide Interpreters, High Value-Added Tourism, Tourist Satisfaction

## 1 Introduction

Tourism is a key domain of cultural experience and international exchange. A traveler's understanding of local history, culture, and social context substantially shapes the depth of the tourism experience. In this context, the role of tourist guide interpreters is pivotal, especially in international travel where culture and language differ. They are often described as civilian diplomats and expected to demonstrate high linguistic proficiency and broad knowledge spanning history, geography, tourism resources, and society more generally. In Japan, individuals recognized as possessing such expertise are

certified as National Government Licensed Guide Interpreter, a national qualification with a recent pass rate of roughly 10 percent.

Japan revised the Licensed Guide Interpreter Act and the Travel Business Act in January 2018 in response to a rapid increase in inbound tourism. The 2018 reform abolished the exclusive-practice regulation, allowing individuals without the national qualification to provide paid guiding services. Since 2020, Japan has shifted its inbound tourism strategy toward high value-added development, leading to sector-wide initiatives aimed at improving service quality. Despite this strategic shift, concerns remain regarding the implications of

deregulation in a field requiring advanced expertise and closely tied to visitor satisfaction.

This study pursues three objectives: (1) to document the historical development and current configuration of Japan's tourist guide interpreter qualifications framework; (2) to identify key operational and institutional challenges following deregulation; and (3) to contextualize these challenges through a comparative analysis with South Korea. The impact of tourist guide interpreters' qualifications on traveler satisfaction remains an issue for future empirical study.

Methodologically, the study synthesizes materials from relevant ministries and agencies to reconstruct the historical development and current configuration of the qualification system, and analyzes operational issues through interviews with organizations and associations involved in tourist guide interpreting. The analysis draws on questionnaire surveys administered by the Japan Association of Guide-Interpreter Organizations, as well as opinion letters submitted to the Japan Tourism Agency by related organizations. For international comparison, the study reviews the current system in South Korea and conducts a comparative analysis.

In this study, all individuals who engage in interpreting and guiding for tourists are collectively termed tourist guide interpreters. Those who pass the national examination administered by the Japan Tourism Agency and hold a national qualification are referred to as the National Government Licensed Guide Interpreter, whereas those who complete training conducted by local governments and satisfy locally established requirements are referred to as the Regional Licensed Guide Interpreter. Tourist guide interpreters, whose primary domain is tourism and travel, are distinguished from conference interpreters, who specialize in international conference settings.

This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory approach, examining the institutional and operational foundations of guide interpreters' services, while positioning its findings as a basis for future empirical research rather than for

strict causal inference.

## 2 Trends in Research on Tourist Guide Interpreters

With the 2018 revision of the Licensed Guide Interpreter Act, market entry for tourist guide interpreters was liberalized. However, the Japan Tourism Agency positions licensed guide interpreters as 'those who provide high-quality tourist guiding', stating that they play an important role in supporting the high satisfaction of inbound foreign travelers. Although the importance of tourist guide interpreters is thus recognized, research on systemic and operational challenges related to tourist guide interpreters has not been sufficiently examined, apart from survey reports by some related institutions.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to changes in travel consciousness such as concerns for safety and security, factors such as the depreciation of the yen have coincided, leading to a sharp increase in inbound travel, particularly from neighboring Asian countries, and Japan has been highly rated as a destination for overseas travel.

According to the Japan Tourism Agency's survey report on Consumption Trends of Foreign Visitors to Japan (April–June 2023), more than 90% of visitors responded that they were satisfied, and almost the same proportion indicated an intention to revisit. However, such surveys do not appear to include any items measuring satisfaction with human-provided services, including tourist guide interpreters. Data such as 'what was purchased, how much was spent, and what was done' are important indicators for understanding the inbound market and its trends. At the same time, in tourism services where human resources play an extremely important role, factors such as how travelers feel and experience services provided by people, and how these affect their satisfaction, are also indispensable indicators. In particular, inbound travelers often value Japan's high-touch service culture (hereafter, *Japanese-style service*). We define it as anticipatory attentiveness grounded in cultural and contextual knowledge. It entails providing service

informed by the extensive social, historical, and emotional knowledge and background expected of a licensed tour guide. Because this is an important element in realizing Japan's goal of high value-added tourism, discussions concerning human services and satisfaction are critical.

As for the relationship between tourist guide interpreters and traveler satisfaction, overseas studies are informative. These studies have examined and verified how tour guide performance affects satisfaction through tours, as well as the skill elements required to provide interpreting and guiding services.

Hsu, Chan, and Huang (2009) examined the impact of tourist guide interpreters on foreign travelers who participated in package tours conducted in Shanghai. They confirmed that while the impact of tourist guide interpreters on overall tour satisfaction was limited, the performance of tourist guide interpreters had a strong direct impact on customer satisfaction. Regarding the relationship between the service quality of tourist guide interpreters and travelers' overall travel satisfaction and intention to revisit, Çetinkaya and Oter (2016) reported a survey of foreign travelers visiting Istanbul and suggested that there is a very strong correlation among these factors. Moreover, they investigated not only how tourist guide interpreters increase traveler satisfaction but also the impact of guides' performance on traveler satisfaction and intention to revisit, presenting an interesting study that argues that the presence and performance of tourist guide interpreters also affect the survival of travel companies. In addition, Syakier and Hanafiah (2021) clarified that tourist guide interpreters are deeply involved in revisit decision-making and destination evaluation.

In Japan, to examine the trends and current situation of the tourist guide interpreter system, Mako (2016) organized the historical changes and trends of Japan's licensed tourist guide interpreter system while comparing it with systems in other countries, and examined the need for training to ensure the quality of tourist guide interpreters and measures against unlicensed guides.

Studies include an analysis using the service quality

evaluation model regarding the service quality of the tourist guide interpreter and customer expectations (Takai, 2011), as well as research on the current status and challenges of Japanese tourist guide interpreter (Murakami, 2021). Furthermore, Takashima (2016) conducted an international comparison of the qualification system and training for the tourist guide interpreter and pointed out that, compared with other countries, public support is insufficient in Japan.

Although institutional and operational challenges have been examined in Japan, empirical research on guide service quality, traveler satisfaction, and behavioral intentions remains limited. This gap highlights the need for studies that connect qualification systems with experiential outcomes in inbound tourism. In recent years, discussions on the system and operation of the tourist guide interpreter have become more active, and as part of its materials for consideration, the Japan Tourism Agency has conducted surveys on current conditions targeting the tourist guide interpreter and related organizations, opinion surveys concerning qualification examinations, and surveys targeting foreign visitors regarding usage experience, intentions, and satisfaction needs. This study also uses portions of these survey results as reference materials for analysis. Moreover, research on the system and operation of the tourist guide interpreter, or on users, is positioned as an important interdisciplinary field for realizing Japan's strategy of high value-added tourism.

Based on the foregoing review of prior studies, two research gaps can be identified. First, while a substantial body of empirical research has examined the relationship between tour guide performance and tourist satisfaction, limited attention has been paid to the institutional and operational frameworks that underpin guide services, particularly qualification systems. Second, in the Japanese context, although previous studies have discussed the historical development and deregulation of the guide interpreter system, few have systematically examined its relevance to the recent policy emphasis on high value-added tourism.

In response to these gaps, this study positions itself as a foundational analysis that examines how the institutional and operational characteristics of the guide interpreter system may shape the quality of human services in high value-added tourism.

**Table 1.** Overview of Japan’s Licensed Tourist Guide Interpreter System

| Category  | National Government Licensed Guide Interpreter   | Regional Licensed Guide Interpreter  |
|---|--|--|
| Qualification pathway                           | Examination (held once per year)   | Training provided by local governments   |
| Implementing body                               | Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), acting on behalf of the Japan Tourism Agency   | Each prefecture/municipality   |
| Registration authority                          | Prefectural governments  | Prefectural or municipal governments   |
| Exam subjects                                   | 1) Written Examination<br>2) Oral Examination  | Completion of training and registration requirements defined by local governments          |
| Passing criteria (FY2024) (Written Examination) | Foreign-language written exam: typically, 70 points or higher per language<br>Japanese Geography, Japanese History: typically, 70 points each<br>General Knowledge, Practical Work of Guiding: 30 points each (50 point maximum per subject) | —  |
| Exemptions                                      | Foreign language and/or other subjects may be exempted if specific conditions are met.   | —  |
| Registered numbers (as of April 1, 2024)        | 27,590   | 3,782 across 42 regions  |
| Post-registration training                      | Required once every five years (standards set by organizations registered with the Japan Tourism Agency)   | Varies by local government; some may lack binding regulations (e.g., Hiroshima Prefecture) |

**Source:** Author’s reconstruction based on JTA, etc.

**Note:** Because Regional Licensed Guide Interpreter must complete training and registration conducted by prefectures, municipalities, or other local governments under independently or jointly formulated plans, certification systems vary by jurisdiction (telephone interview with Hiroshima Prefecture, July 2023).

### 3 Research Method

This study combined multiple data sources, including (1) governmental and quasi-governmental reports (Japan Tourism Agency; Japan National Tourism Organization; Japan Travel and Tourism Association), (2) organizational documents (Japan Association of Guide-Interpreter Organizations), and (3) statutory and regulatory texts in Japan and South Korea. All tables and figures were reconstructed from these sources, with

citations provided in captions and the reference list.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders from the Japan Association of Guide-Interpreter Organizations and related organizations (July 2023). In addition, the study referred to the results of a questionnaire previously conducted by the Federation among its members and related stakeholders. The analysis employed descriptive synthesis and qualitative content analysis, supplemented by descriptive analyses. Quantitative indicators such as examination pass counts

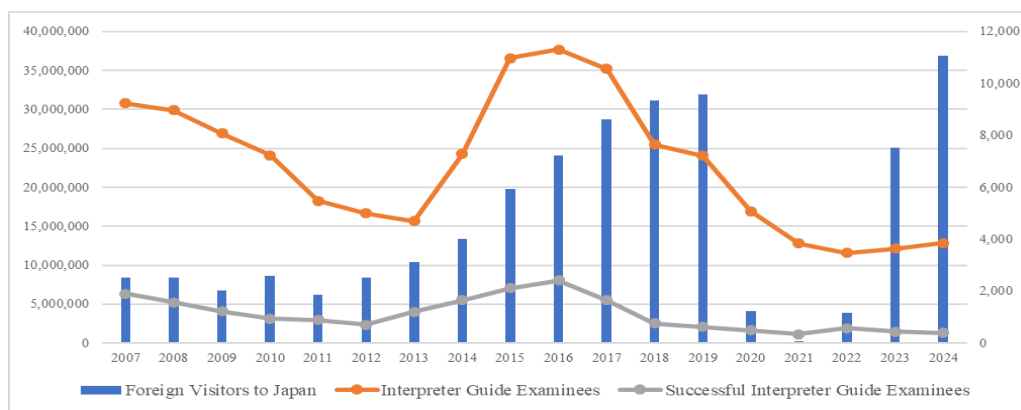
and registration numbers are reported descriptively to illustrate institutional trends. Figure and table inputs, variable definitions, and computation steps are documented in each caption, and dates of access for web-based documents are included in the references. This study adopts an exploratory empirical approach.

## 4 International Comparative Analysis of the Tourist Guide Interpreter Systems

### 4.1 Japan's Tourist Guide Interpreter System

Japan's qualifications for tourist guide interpreters originated with the enforcement of the Licensed Guide Interpreter Act in June 1949. The Licensed Guide Interpreter, a national credential with the broadest scope of practice, has been the central qualification. Subsequently, local governments introduced the Regional Limited Licensed Guide Interpreter in 2006 and the

Special Exception Licensed Guide Interpreter in 2012 under the Act on the Promotion of International Tourism through the Simplification of Travel for Foreign Tourists. With the 2018 revision of the Act, the title was changed to the National Government Licensed Guide Interpreter, and the Regional Limited and Special Exception categories were unified into the Regional Licensed Guide Interpreter. Following this revision, Japan now recognizes two formal categories of tourist guide interpreters: The National Government Licensed Guide Interpreter and the Regional Licensed Guide Interpreter, with only the former requiring a national examination (see Table 1). A major feature of the 2018 reform was the abolition of the previous exclusive practice regulation, allowing individuals without licensed qualifications to engage in paid guiding. However, the protected title system remains, and unlicensed individuals may not use the designation licensed guide interpreters or similar titles.



**Figure 1.** Trends in the Number of Inbound Visitors to Japan and the Number of Examinees and Successful Candidates for the National Government Licensed Guide Interpreter Examination (Unit: persons)

**Source:** Author's reconstruction based on JNTO and JTA

The Licensed Guide Interpreter Examination is held annually. As of April 2024, 27,590 individuals are registered, while the number of examinees has sharply declined since its peak around 2016. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022, examinees dropped to 3,472, and numbers have not since recovered (see Figure 1). For the Regional Licensed Guide Interpreter, 42 regions have introduced the system, with 3,782 registered

as of April 2024.

Article 2 of the Licensed Guide Interpreter Act defines licensed duties as providing interpreting and guiding services for remuneration, meaning accompanying foreign visitors and offering travel-related explanations in a foreign language. The Japan Tourism Agency specifies detailed examples of tasks across itinerary stages such as assembly, transit, destination, lodging, and meals (see

Table 2).

Japanese licensed guide interpreters, who qualify through examinations or mandated training, are expected to possess advanced knowledge and competencies. The National Government Licensed Guide Interpreter must pass the national examination and undergo periodic

training, ensuring continuous skill development. In addition, Japan's qualification framework provides written-test exemptions under specific conditions; these criteria likewise indicate that Japan requires comparatively high levels of expertise (see Tables 3 and 4).

**Table 2.** Examples of Explanatory Duties of Licensed Guide Interpreters

| Itinerary Stage    | Examples of Explanatory/Guiding Tasks   |
|--------------------|---|
| Assembly/Briefing  | Explain highlights and their background; provide detailed explanations of sites (geography, history, culture); explain Japanese currency, including the figures and buildings depicted. |
| In Transit         | Explain not only the names but also the context/background of scenery and facilities visible from the vehicle.  |
| At the Destination | Explain not only the names of tourist spots but also their background; translate signboards and supplement with knowledge to meet individual requests.                                  |
| Lodging            | Explain how to use hotels/inns and the background of buildings; explain the history and characteristics of the inn system.  |
| Meals              | Explain chopstick use, table manners, and ingredients (effects and reasons); explain the history and culture of ingredients and cooking methods.  |

**Source:** Japan Tourism Agency (2014) Current Status of Licensed Guide Interpreters and Background to the Review of the System.

**Table 3.** Criteria for Exemptions from Examination Subjects (2023 Standard)

| Subject/Category | Exemption Criteria (examples as defined in 2023)                            |
|------------------|---|
| Foreign Language | Exemptions based on official proficiency results (per annual JTA standards) |
| Other Subjects   | Exemptions as specified (per annual JTA standards)                          |

**Source:** Author's reconstruction based on JTA, etc.

#### 4.2 Comparison with South Korea's Tourist Guide Interpreter System

South Korea, like Japan, positions tourism promotion as a core national growth strategy, and its geopolitical and linguistic circumstances are comparable; thus, its system offers a relevant point of comparison. Tourist guide interpreters in South Korea are defined as individuals who combine diversity, creativity, and expertise, who support

foreign visitors in understanding Korean history and culture from entry to departure, and who serve as public relations ambassadors by facilitating communication with the world (Korea Tourist Guide Association).

The qualification was renamed the Tourist Guide Interpreter in 2004 and established as the country's sole nationally recognized interpreting credential. Administered by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, it authorizes holders to guide foreign tourists and introduce Korean culture. The annual examination is commissioned to the Human Resources Development Service of Korea (see Table 4). Occupationally, the Tourist Guide Interpreter is classified as Leisure and Tourism Service Workers. Candidates must pass the examination and then register with the Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism (Tourism Promotion Act, Article 38). Recent examination data indicate comparatively high pass rates. In 2018, 1,503 of 3,356 candidates passed the first stage (45%), and 1,251 of 2,041 passed the second stage,

yielding a final rate of 61%. After the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2024, 1,114 of 1,475 candidates passed, for a 75.5% success rate. These rates exceed Japan's pass rates of 12% in 2023 and 10% in 2024.

South Korea's system differs from Japan's in three key respects: (1) mandatory employment of qualified guides by travel agencies; (2) explicit penalty structures for violations; and (3) centralized oversight linking qualification, registration, and enforcement. These features constitute a more integrated governance framework than Japan's deregulated model.

However, these rules are not necessarily observed strictly in practice. In South Korea, some travel agencies have raised issues by attracting tourists at prices lower than usual and coercing them into domestic shopping and optional tours for the purpose of earning commissions and

intermediary fees. Particularly at such agencies, in order to further reduce costs, unqualified Tour Conductors and foreign residents in South Korea have been employed as licensed tourist guide interpreters; instead of wages, tourists are encouraged to shop, and a portion of the commissions thus generated is paid as remuneration, cases that have become an industry problem. It has been argued that this structure promotes the spread of low-quality tours, and to prevent such issues, the Seoul Metropolitan Government has strengthened street-level awareness activities and enforcement against unlicensed guides in famous tourist spots within the city frequently visited by foreign tourists, such as Jongno, Myeongdong, and Cheonggyecheon (Seoul Metropolitan Government press release, 16 October 2024).

**Table 4.** Outline of South Korea's Tourist Guide Interpreter Examination

| Item                                    | Primary Examination (Written)  | Secondary Examination (Interview)   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Examination subjects</b>             | History (40%), Explanation of Tourism Resources (20%), Tourism Laws & Regulations (20%), Introduction to Tourism Studies (20%) | National perspective & sense of mission; Specialized knowledge & application; Etiquette, conduct & sincerity; Accuracy & logical expression |
| <b>No. of Questions / Time / Method</b> | 25 questions; 100 minutes; Multiple-choice (4 options)   | 10–15 minutes per person (Secondary); Interview   |
| <b>Passing Criteria</b>                 | At least 40% in each subject and an overall score of 60% or higher   | 60% or higher   |

**Source:** Author's reconstruction based on the Human Resources Development Service of Korea, etc.

**Note:** Foreign language test (before the first-stage written examination): one language selected from English, Japanese, Chinese, etc. Since 2007, may be substituted with an official score report (e.g., TOEIC ≥ 760, JLPT N1).

Nevertheless, in recent years there have been moves to revise the system so that, if certain conditions such as having resided in South Korea for a specified period are met, it would be possible to obtain tourist guide interpreters qualification without taking the examination; industry groups have voiced concerns about the potential impact on the quality of tourist guide interpreters and employment.

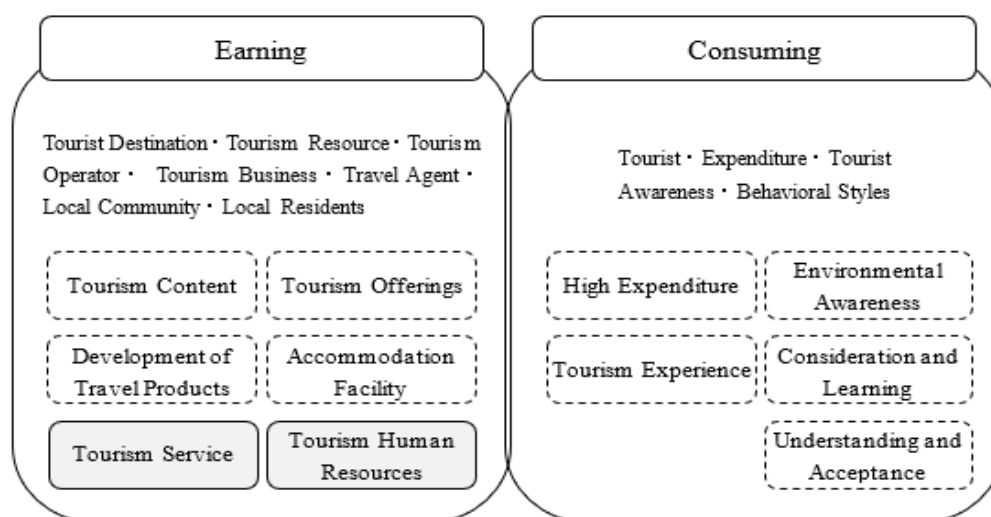
### 5 High Value-Added Tourism and the Role of Guide Interpreters

Since 2020, in government tourism policy, the expression affluent segment, which referred to consumers who spend at high price points such as wealthy travelers and executive travelers, has disappeared, and the more inclusive expression high value-added has come to be used extensively. As one example, in the 2022 Tourism

White Paper, the previously frequent expression affluent segment is no longer used, and instead the expression high value-added appears frequently. The Japan Tourism Agency defines high value-added in tourism and travel (or high value-added travelers) as follows.

- (1) Travelers whose on-site (destination) consumption amounts to 1 million yen or more, or whose total expenditure per trip to Japan is 1 million yen or more.
- (2) Travelers who, not only having a large expenditure per trip, generally exhibit strong intellectual curiosity and inquisitiveness, and who place importance on deepening their own knowledge and gaining inspiration by encountering regional traditions, culture, and nature through various experiences during travel.

In this way, the pursuit of high value-added has become an important element indicating a new strategic direction for the future across tourism services in general, including markets, travelers, destinations, and tourism facilities. High-expenditure and high-price consumption are expected to have spillover effects on Japan’s overall economy and other industries, playing an important role not only in tourism but also in regional economic revitalization. Thus, high value-added tourism encompasses not only expenditure but also qualitative experiential value, including satisfaction and cultural understanding. In this respect, tourist guide interpreters contribute directly by shaping experiential depth and cultural interpretation.



**Figure 2.** Definition and components of high value-added tourism

**Source:** Author’s reconstruction based on Tourism White Paper and JTA policy documents.

Furthermore, high value-added can broadly be classified into ‘value-added enhancement from the earning side’ (i.e., earning power) and ‘high value-added from the consuming side’ (i.e., consuming power). The former includes destinations, accommodations, tourism facilities, and human services, that is, the receiving side of tourism, and broadly encompasses travel companies and local residents. The latter refers mainly to travelers and, as noted above, denotes travelers who consume high value not only in terms of monetary expenditure per trip but also in other qualitative aspects (Figure 2).

The findings of this study suggest several implications regarding human service requirements for high value-added tourism. First, Japan’s national guide qualification system institutionally demands a high level of linguistic proficiency, knowledge, and cultural interpretive skills (Sections 2 and 4). Second, deregulation since 2018 has weakened the linkage between such expertise and market evaluation or employment conditions (Sections 4 and 6.1). Third, comparison with South Korea indicates that institutional designs linking qualification, employment, and quality control are crucial

for sustaining the value of human services (Section 4.2). These findings descriptively clarify the institutional conditions underpinning experiential depth and cultural understanding in high value-added tourism.

In this regard, tourist guide interpreters, who are expected to provide high-quality human services and considered to influence travelers' satisfaction, play a crucial role in realizing high value-added tourism and travel. Therefore, tourist guide interpreters are required to possess skills that embody comprehensive service quality, such as high levels of knowledge and performance, and for that purpose, sufficient discussion and verification of systems and operations are necessary.

## **6 Challenges and Future Directions for Japan's Guide Interpreter System**

As noted in Section 1, our findings are descriptive rather than causal and the underlying mechanisms and policy implications warrant further examination using more rigorous causal research designs.

Based on the analyses presented in Sections 2 to 4, the first challenge concerns the insufficient market and employment recognition of the expertise held by qualified tourist guide interpreters.

Here, based on interviews conducted with stakeholders of the Japan Association of Guide-Interpreter Organizations, among others, this study examines the challenges faced by licensed tourist guide interpreters. The materials used for this consideration are as follows:

- (1) Interviews with stakeholders of the Japan Association of Guide-Interpreter Organizations (July 2023) [in Japanese].
- (2) Questionnaire survey conducted by the same federation targeting related organizations (14 organizations) (July 2023) [in Japanese].
- (3) FY2023 Survey Results on Tourist Guide Organizations conducted by the Japan Travel and Tourism Association (Dec. 2023–Jan. 2024) [in Japanese].
- (4) Summary of Tabulated Results of the Questionnaire

Survey of Licensed Guide Interpreters conducted by the Japan Tourism Agency (Dec. 2023) [in Japanese].

(5) Survey on Needs Required of Guide Personnel conducted by the Japan Tourism Agency (Mar. 2024) [in Japanese].

(6) Interim summary materials of the Japan Tourism Agency's Study Group on the Revitalization of Guide Personnel (June 2024) [in Japanese].

### **6.1 Employment and Recognition Issues**

The employment situation of tourist guide interpreters in Japan remains unstable despite the system's long history. The deregulation of the Licensed Guide Interpreter Act in 2018 expanded market entry by allowing unlicensed individuals to provide guiding services. While this reform aimed to address labor shortages and promote tourism flexibility, it has also blurred the professional boundaries between qualified and unqualified guides. As a result, the occupational identity of tourist guide interpreters has weakened, and the recognition of their professional expertise has declined.

Interviews and organizational reports reveal persistent issues regarding compensation, employment type, and working conditions. Many licensed guides are engaged as freelancers or part-time workers, receiving remuneration based on fluctuating tourist demand rather than stable contracts. This precarious employment structure undermines both income stability and long-term career development, discouraging young or mid-career professionals from pursuing guide work as a sustainable occupation.

In addition, customers often have limited awareness of the distinction between licensed tourist guide interpreters and unlicensed interpreters. The lack of public communication about the significance of the national qualification system has contributed to a decline in perceived professionalism. Reestablishing the social recognition of TGIs as certified experts in language and cultural mediation is therefore essential for restoring both occupational prestige and

service reliability.

### 6.2 Systemic and Operational Challenges

Beyond employment conditions, Japan’s tourist guide interpreter system faces three systemic challenges: (1) the absence of a unified quality-assurance mechanism after deregulation; (2) limited emphasis on professional competencies beyond language skills in the current examination; and (3) fragmented governance across national, local, and organizational actors.

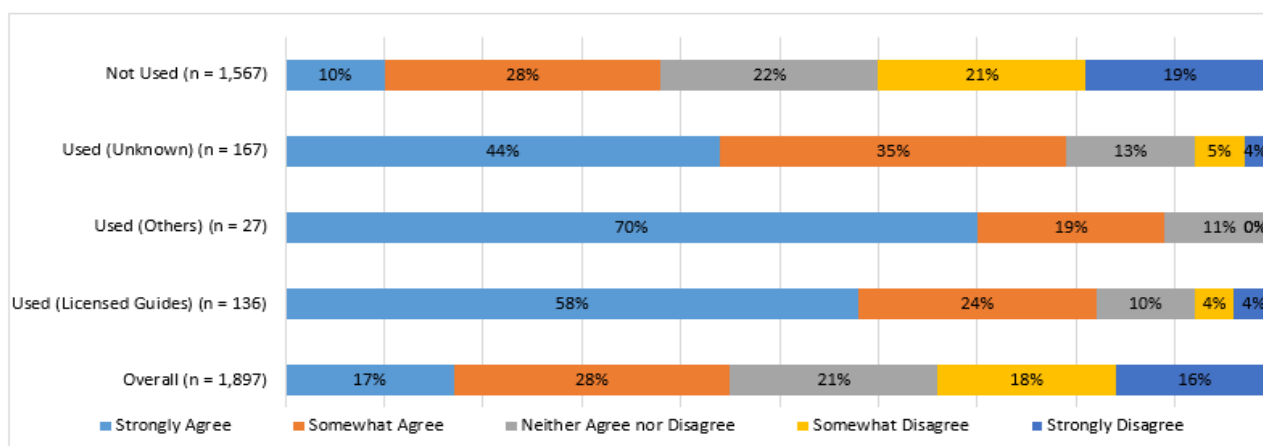
First, the 2018 deregulation eliminated mandatory licensing requirements without providing alternative quality assurance mechanisms. Although a registration system for qualified guides remains, its connection to actual employment practices is weak, and no centralized structure exists for matching qualified guides with employers or monitoring service quality across regions.

Second, the current examination and certification system, despite its linguistic rigor, places limited emphasis on

professional ethics, customer interaction, and cultural interpretation skills. By contrast, South Korea’s system incorporates these competencies more explicitly through periodic re-certification and mandatory association membership. Japan’s reliance on a one-time qualification test, without subsequent evaluation, restricts the system’s capacity to adapt to evolving service expectations.

Third, the fragmentation of responsibilities among ministries, local governments, and private associations leads to uneven policy implementation. Although the Japan Tourism Agency promotes high value-added tourism, coordination between national certification and local tourism operations remains insufficient, producing inconsistencies that impede uniform service quality.

To address these issues, Japan should reestablish an institutional quality assurance framework that balances flexibility with accountability. Such a framework would integrate certification, employment matching, and continuous professional development within a unified governance structure (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Intention to use Tourist Guide Interpreters among foreign visitors

**Source:** JTA (2024), Survey Results on Needs Required of Guide Personnel.

### 6.3 Policy and Research Implications

From a policy perspective, strengthening the institutional foundation of Japan’s tourist guide interpreter system is indispensable for realizing the government’s vision of high value-added tourism. Tourist guide

interpreters serve as cultural mediators who translate Japan’s intangible values—language, manners, and traditions—into meaningful tourist experiences. Their expertise therefore constitutes a form of institutional capital, linking service quality with national branding and sustainable tourism development. Policy priorities should

include:

- (1) Establishing a standardized registration and quality assurance mechanism that differentiates certified TGIs from unqualified guides;
- (2) Promoting public awareness campaigns highlighting the value of qualified guides; and
- (3) Introducing ongoing training and evaluation systems to maintain professional competence.

From a research standpoint, future studies should empirically assess the relationship between guide qualification status and customer satisfaction, as well as examine how institutional frameworks shape perceived service quality. Quantitative analyses incorporating customer feedback could complement this study's qualitative findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the link between professional certification and service value creation.

Ultimately, ensuring the service quality of tourist guide interpreters is not merely a labor or training issue but an institutional imperative. The sustainability of Japan's high value-added tourism strategy depends on its ability to maintain cultural authenticity and service excellence through a robust, well-coordinated qualification system.

The institutional and operational issues identified in this study can be empirically examined in subsequent research. Future research may further examine these relationships using guide qualification status as a key explanatory variable.

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