

# insights

## High-end medical services attract affluent Chinese tourists

Trend reflects growing health consciousness in China after COVID-19 pandemic, experts say

SU XINCHENG  
KYOTO

Six times a year, a 36-year-old Chinese actress makes her way to Japan, not for the glitz of film industry events, but with a different purpose in mind: to take advantage of Japan's renowned advanced medical beauty treatments.

The Beijing-based actress has long been an admirer of Japan's aesthetic medical techniques, including treatments like Botox to smooth wrinkles and innovative procedures using stem-cell injections to help achieve a youthful appearance.

"The technology and service quality at Japanese clinics are exceptional," she said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Their focus on specialized research and the doctors' commitment to their skills deeply impress me."

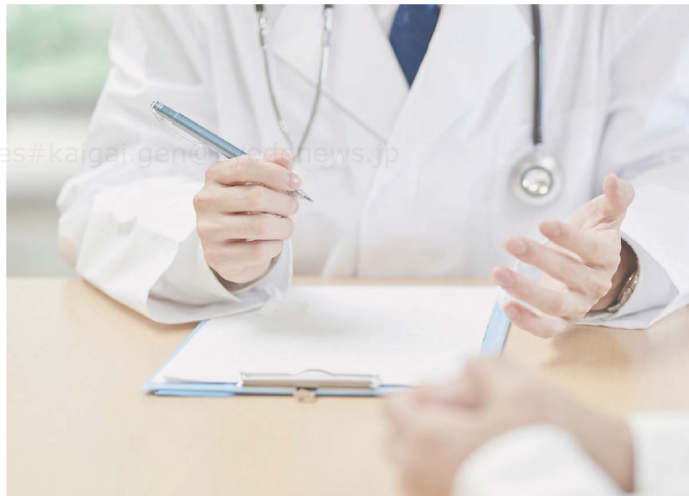
She spends about ¥2 million (\$13,800) on beauty treatments on each visit, during which she also travels to scenic spots and enjoys Japanese cuisine.

The actress is among a rising number of wealthy Chinese tourists who visit Japan primarily for medical services rather than the shopping-focused trips that brought many Chinese visitors in the past.

The current trend reflects a growing health consciousness in China after the coronavirus pandemic, travel industry experts said.

Clinics and other companies in Japan are trying to seize the expanding demand. Kenkoin Clinic, located in Tokyo's upscale Ginza shopping district, offers personalized preventive health care services, featuring some of the best imaging systems in Japan, including CT scans and MRI exams.

Prior to the pandemic, the clinic saw many Chinese patients each month, including those seeking health checkups, intravenous



infusions and supplements. The number dropped during the pandemic but is now steadily climbing back, with about 50% to 60% of the pre-pandemic patient volume having returned.

"The majority of our foreign patients are Chinese," said Hidetaka Mori, managing director of Kenkoin Clinic, adding that more than half of its sales come from Chinese customers.

Mori said that while doctors in China are usually too busy to talk with patients at crowded hospitals, the clinic makes sure to

allow plenty of time for its doctors to interview each of them.

"With personal concierges assigned to each, we ensure swift service and utmost privacy from check-in to departure, as patients want to avoid encountering others," Mori added.

The move is backed by the government, which is seeking to revitalize local economies with an expansion of inbound travel as the country's population ages.

In an attempt to boost medical tourism, the country introduced a medical visa

in 2011, now permitting foreign visitors to stay for health care purposes for up to one year.

The number of such visas issued jumped from 70 to 1,804 annually in the 11 years through 2022, but the actual figure for people visiting the country for medical care is likely to be much higher, as many also arrive on tourist or business visas, industry experts said.

The government estimates that in 2020, more than 10,000 visitors from China came for comprehensive medical examinations,

The government estimates that in 2020, more than 10,000 visitors from China traveled to Japan for comprehensive medical examinations, spending around ¥1.5 million on average. GETTY IMAGES

spending around ¥1.5 million on average. A smaller group of some 1,000 paid around ¥4 million to ¥5 million to receive advanced cancer treatments. Both spending figures include travel costs.

"Japan has a high reputation for cancer screening, while its proximity, cleanliness, safety, as well as the belief that there are many skilled doctors, are appealing to Chinese people," said Tsuyoshi Kondo, president of Friendly Japan, a Tokyo-based consulting company specializing in the promotion of Chinese tourism to Japan.

Beyond traditional hospitals and clinics, a diverse range of companies outside the health care sector have made inroads into the market in an attempt to attract more Chinese tourists.

The Japanese unit of Chinese tech giant Alibaba Group launched a new service on its Tmall Global platform, a cross-border e-commerce site, in September.

The service enables Japanese medical firms and clinics offering medical checkups to set up virtual outlets so that Chinese tourists can conveniently book medical services online before their arrival in Japan.

Tao Chengbin, operating officer and the head of the EC Marketing Department at Alibaba.com Japan said that Japan was the first overseas market for the company to introduce such a service, noting the popularity of the country's health care products among Chinese people.

"In recent years, the consumption style of Chinese visitors to Japan has been changing considerably, as they have started placing more emphasis on experiences rather than shopping," he said.

Tokyo-based Hirotsu Bio Science is one of the companies seeing business opportunities in utilizing the platform, offering more affordable medical services to Chinese visitors.

The startup opened a store on the e-commerce website featuring its N-Nose tumor check system, a new testing technology that uses eelworms to detect signs of a variety of cancers from urine samples.

Through the service, priced at 1,095 yuan (\$153), consumers can buy a test kit via Tmall Global and receive it before coming to Japan. After collecting a urine sample on arrival in the country and submitting it to one of around a dozen designated pharmacies in Tokyo, they can then receive the results after returning home.

Toshiki Mano, a professor at Tama University Institute for Healthcare and Long-Term Care Solutions, said that in addition to China, there are many potential patients in Asian emerging countries such as Vietnam who are likely to become interested in medical services in Japan.

"The market for medical tourism is likely to expand considerably, as the scope of services has widened from treatments to cosmetic surgery, health examinations and regenerative medicine," Mano said.

Nevertheless, Japan faces challenges in further expanding the sector, including weak recognition of its medical services abroad and hospitals' limited capacity to accept foreign visitors while offering the same level of care as local patients. Developing translation services at regional institutions will be another hurdle.

The payment structure also needs to be reviewed, as foreign visitors, who are not included in Japan's public health insurance system, face much higher charges than local residents not only for medical fees but also for medicines, Mano said.

"While it is understandable that medical fees for foreign visitors are double compared to Japanese because of additional services such as translation, it is a problem that prices of medicines are two to threefold higher," he said.

Still, Mano sees room for further growth. "It's evident that the industry's growth is robust and multifaceted, as its coverage area may expand to such new sectors as wellness," he said.

## Tree that saved eight from 2011 tsunami feted through storytelling

DAISUKE SHIMOZAWA  
SENDAI  
KYODO

Unbeknownst to many, there is an old, withering tree in the city of Kesennuma, Miyagi Prefecture, that remains standing nearly 13 years after miraculously saving the lives of eight residents after they climbed its branches to escape an impending tsunami following the March 2011 earthquake.

Keiko Onodera, 62, a local resident who lost her father to the disaster, has written a story that frames the life-saving Japanese zelkova tree as a hero to teach people about the tsunami, triggered by the mega-earthquake, that wrought destruction on the community. The tree is said to have been planted on a bluff that juts out over the Pacific Ocean called Asahizaki in the wake of the 1896 Sanriku earthquake, which occurred off the country's Pacific coast in the Tohoku region

and resulted in two huge tsunamis decimating thousands of homes, causing over 20,000 deaths.

While its exact height and age are not known, the zelkova, a deciduous tree related to the elm, has gained popularity among locals owing to its folklore as a "protector of the people."

On March 11, 2011, a tsunami with a height of over 10 meters engulfed the area in the wake of a 9.0 magnitude quake that ravaged the region. Figures from the National Police Agency have put the death toll from the disaster at 15,900 people, while 2,523 people remain unaccounted for.

Onodera took refuge in an area near the cape where the tree stands, but her father died. The eight local residents who had evacuated to the bluff were able to escape the tsunami due to what appeared to be a stroke of luck—a ladder drifting by their location that they used to scramble up the zelkova tree. All

eight of them narrowly escaped death.

Several years later, Onodera learned that the tree was dying due to salt damage, and thought of telling its heroic story before it was too late. She began writing her tale, titled "Keyaki no Omori" ("Thoughts of Zelkova"), in the winter of 2020 and completed it in three months.

"I wanted to give a shape to (the tree) before it disappears," she said.

In the story, the tree is personified, narrating the story of the approaching tsunami and its own role as savior of the people.

"I have made a wish that none of those clinging on to me fall off," Zelkova, the tree's name in the story, says.

The tale tries to remain close to the hearts of residents still grappling with the loss of family and friends today.

"People work on the beach and go out to fish, bearing the sorrow of losing their family members and friends," Zelkova says in one

part. "I am pleased and encouraged when I see them."

In May 2023, Onodera began thinking about how to pass on the story of the zelkova tree to children born after the earthquake and tsunami disaster. Coincidentally, she ran into Misato Kikuta, a 22-year-old senior student at the Tohoku University of Art and Design, a local resident whom she had known from her village.

Born and raised in Kesennuma, the Kikuta family home near the zelkova tree was completely destroyed by the tsunami. Kikuta was just nine, and her grandparents were among the eight who climbed the tree.

Kikuta, who enjoys painting as a hobby, willingly accepted a request from Onodera to provide the illustrations for the story. "I wanted to contribute in any way I could," Kikuta said.

She made a series of sketches while recalling her grandparents' experience and the scenes of life in the district before the disaster struck. Her illustrations, seven of which are rendered in color, depict the eight people gathered beneath the zelkova tree, among other images.

The drawings were unveiled at a recital held by Onodera in late October, at which she read her story in front of elementary school children in Kesennuma, who attentively listened to the story.

Kikuta said that, at first, she was afraid her elderly relatives would be reminded of their bitter experience, but they were both pleased with her illustrations.

Onodera and Kikuta aim to introduce a story recital and the illustrations on YouTube, with plans to add eight more drawings to the work by the end of March this year.

"We would like to keep telling people (regardless of age) about not only those who lost their lives but also the people who survived the disaster, and the actions of the people in our hometown," Onodera said.



A zelkova tree that withstood the tsunami triggered by the March 2011 Tohoku earthquake and saved the lives of eight residents in Kesennuma, Miyagi Prefecture, has been immortalized in a short story. KYODO

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