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Problems Caused by Cultural Differences

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文化の相違によって起きる問題

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和文要旨

異なる文化の中で暮らしていると、様々な困難に直面することも多い。どんな文化においても、生活の中には必ずその文化特有の習慣・マナー・生活のルール等がある。それを理解し、身につけることが誤解や批判を招かないためには必要である。小稿では、留学生センター留学生指導部門に持ち込まれた幾つかの問題を検討し、その原因と予防について考察した。

1. Introduction

According to a study of visas by the Immigration Bureau, the total number of non-Japanese with residential visa status that allows them to study at a university or a technical college was 129,568 in 2006. The total number of international students in Japan was 117,927 as of May 1, 2006 according to the Japan Student Services Organization. Over 90% of the students are from Asian countries. 74,292 students are from China, and the number of Chinese students decreased by 6,300 from that of the previous year.

At the University of Toyama, a total of 319 international students are enrolled and the population of Chinese students as of May 1, 2006 is 196. They accounts for 61% of all international students. Of the international students, about 22% are from Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Bangladesh.

Most educational institution that received international students set up a division (or section) for offering the students help and advice in adjusting to their new surroundings and to help them find the best solution for any difficulty they may encounter. I am the person in the help division set up at the University of Toyama---a National University Corporations in the Hokuriku district.

The services provided by the division of the University of Toyama are as follows:

- ①Provide Help and Advice for International Students
- ②Offering Cultural Education Opportunities
- ③Provide Consultations and Information about Studying Abroad
- ④Provide Intercultural Education

These services are available not only to international students but also to Japanese students, staff members of the university and local Japanese people living outside of the university. They are all invited to take their various problems to the division for assistance. More than 90% of the past problems were not of a very serious or severe nature so that the division was able to provide solutions.

Examples of some minor problems of the international students are provided for reference.

- 1) A friend/relative of mine wants to study at University of Toyama. What advice should I give them?
- 2) My Japanese is not very good. I have difficulty writing papers in the Japanese language. I am worried about not getting credits. What should I do?
- 3) My friend sent me a parcel from the USA. Yesterday a delivery person came to my room with the parcel. He said that I had to pay more than 10,000 yen to get the parcel. I refused to pay. He left and took my parcel with him. What should I do?
- 4) I need documents to receive money from my parents in my home country. Where can I get these documents?
- 5) I have no money now. Unfortunately I received a letter from the university ordering me to pay school fee by the end of this month. I will be able to pay next month and I would like them to wait until then.

These problems were simple to solve. However, the rest of the problems were a harder to deal with because the main reason behind the problems are due to cultural differences.

It is only natural that there are differences among cultures. Needless to say, the Japanese culture is different from that of other countries where the international students came from and it complicates these problems.

In this paper, some cases that seem to be caused by the cultural differences will be considered to find out how to prevent these problems in the future.

2. Presentation of Cases

2.1 Complaints by International Students

〈Case A〉 Male / Graduate student

I have had very good exam results since I entered this university. Consequently I applied for various scholarships and I was selected as a candidate based on an examination of my career papers. But I did not succeed in the interview. I want to know why I failed. I was polite enough to my interviewers. I am confident that my Japanese is more than adequate. Why was I not selected? I wonder if I was justly treated. I am irritated.

〈Case B〉 Male /Undergraduate

I am sure that my academic counselor dislikes me because his attitude to me lacks warmth. He sometimes ignores me. I wonder if I was rude to him at some time. I always tried to be polite to him. I am deeply depressed.

〈Case C〉 Male/Undergraduate

I am discriminated against by the Japanese people because of my prominent appearance. I would like to work part-time as a clerk in a convenience store or as an attendant in a restaurant but they refuse to hire me. I am competent. Japanese people like the whites but dislike the colored, especially blacks. They say 'yes' on the phone but they say 'no' after they meet me.

The above cases may not seem to be serious or even rather trivial. Nevertheless, the essence of the problems pointed out emerged while I was assisting these students.

2.2 Complaints & Criticism against International Students

The complaints and criticisms articulated by Japanese people who have encountered international students are :

- They do not keep a promise.
- They are not punctual.
- They always justify their actions and never apologize.
- They are obstinate and never compromise.
- They are not cooperative.
- They are selfish.

Some staff members of the administrative office have expressed annoyance with international students.

Degree students enrolled in the undergraduate or graduate programs that are having financial difficulties are eligible to apply for tuition exemption (complete or half) if they demonstrate an exemplary academic record. Although it generally takes a lot of money to study abroad, a large number of the self-financed international students came to Japan with the idea that they could easily find financing. They expected to earn their living and tuition fees by working part-time in Japan. Concerning the tuition fees exemption, many international students have the misunderstanding that any international student has a

right to be exempted from the tuition fees without reserve. Therefore, they confronted the staff vigorously when they were not exempted. Some students have lashed out at the staff in the past. Rightly, this approach is totally unacceptable. Because of their combatant attitude, they are considered to be persons who criticize those people that don't agree with them.

Several international students at times disgust ordinary Japanese citizens. International students have a number of opportunities to increase their knowledge of Japanese culture and customs. As an example, home stay or home visit programs are provided in conjunction with various groups around the area. There were two instances where a certain student did not attend the program even though he did not have an official leave on the appointed day.

* In addition to these cases, a Japanese complained about a very serious problem but it is impossible to reveal it in this paper owing to personal information protection by the Act, Cabinet Order and Others.

3. Background Discussion

3.1 Communication Styles

Hall (1976) argues that there are two ways or types of human communication styles. These are high-context communication and low-context communication. The characteristics of high-context communication are indirect style, group-oriented values, spiral logic, listener-oriented style and context-based understanding. It is pointed out that Japan has the high-context communication style. As the well-known Japanese proverb says “ISHIN, DENSHIN (以心伝心)”, Japanese people put a high value on “SASSHI” ---- this means that even if you do not tell all of the details, I understand what you have in mind. We understand each other by tacit agreement.

Hall (1976) characterizes Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, and Mediterranean languages as high-context in conversational style, while almost all the Han Chinese students at the University of Toyama point out that China has the low-context communication style. The low-context communication style is just the opposite of the high-context communication style.

I have asked nearly 150 Han Chinese students and over 100 Japanese students in the last 7 years in classes a specific question; whether they state plainly contrary opinion when they cannot agree with their academic counselor. Almost all Han Chinese students replied that they would not hesitate to voice an objection directly. All Japanese students replied that they did not want to express contrary opinion. Approximately 2/3 of the

Korean-Chinese students replied the same as Japanese students did. A Japanese student said that he might express modestly and humbly his contrary opinion to superiors (such as his academic counselor) if he encounters a matter of life and death. All Japanese students answered that they would try to the utmost to avoid conflicts caused by expressing their opinion. International students could not understand such attitudes. Concerning the Malaysian students, most of them replied that it depends on the situation. All students that came from Russia, Latin America and European countries replied that they would express their contrary opinion without restraint.

I asked students if they had to give a contrary opinion to professors, how to they would express it. Chinese students, the students that came from Europe (including Russia) and Latin America students replied that they would say as follows: "I think you are wrong / I disagree with you. My opinion is ○○." Japanese students replied that they would use honorific wording and say as follows: "I see. I have believed ○○ until today, but I may have misunderstood because your opinion is △△." This is a very delicate mode of expression. They never use contradictive words. They do not deny. First, they accept other's opinion even if they do not agree with it and then state their opinion. This is of much note. Normally, Japanese people do not like direct expressions. They prefer ambiguity and indirectness. They consider that modesty is a virtue, especially, when they refuse someone's offer and request. They show a humble attitude. Besides, they say I'm sorry easily and frequently. Such difference of communication style is partly because of the cultural differences between the groups.

3.2 Attitude and Behavior

Attitude and behavior can have a major impact on human relations. For Japanese, it is sometimes difficult to accept the attitude and behavior of some international students. When Japanese people meet with the following student, how will they react? Many Japanese do not view the student's action in a favorable light.

One female student that came from Korea was openly eating a custard pudding from a cup with a plastic spoon during the class. When she was given a warning that this was not permitted, she justified her action before she apologized. She pleaded that eating something during class is usual in her country. This excuse is not acceptable here. We surely can find Japanese students eating something small such as POCKY or chocolate by stealth during class. Attitudes and behaviors certainly have changed in Japan, but eating openly during class is still an alien custom to many Japanese. It is said that the Japanese way of life has become thoroughly westernized since World War II. Modern Japanese are becoming more individual-oriented as the old forms of group behavior fade away. But this

is not to say that Japan is no longer in touch with its roots.

The obnoxious attitudes that the international students unconsciously present to the Japanese people interfere with efforts to promote goodwill between the Japanese people and the international students.

3.3 Intercultural Adaptability

As has been mentioned, there is a difference in communication style, attitude and behavior between Japanese citizens and those of other countries. When people live in a different culture, it is necessary for them to follow the customs and to adjust to the new circumstances in order to lead a non-confrontational life and avoid displeasing people.

Most international students have some knowledge of Japanese culture (but it is not sufficient to avoid problems) and try to be polite to others in the same fashion that Japanese people do. They try to be careful about their speech around people senior to them and use respectful terms in addressing their superiors. They strive to learn the honorific expressions. Nevertheless, some conflicts still arise. The cause of the conflicts is their misunderstanding about the meaning of the word "ADJUSTMENT". They sometimes equate adjustment with submission. Therefore, it seems that they express resistance to the Japanese way. A certain Muslim student was unwilling to bow in an opening ceremony. He explained that bowing to someone signified to Muslims the worship of idols and he could not "obey". On one hand several Moslems disapprove of the Japanese way. On the other hand, they requested that we secure for them a place for prayers on campus. Most Japanese people would like to receive international students warmly. In return, students are expected to study hard, be well behaved and respect the local customs.

Regarding Chinese students, a Chinese student information network is already established in the area or on campus and they seem to survive quite well without being involved in Japanese society. Therefore, it appears to be unnecessary for them to adjust to Japanese culture.

4. Discussion and Comments on the Cases

There are some similarities among these three students; case A, case B and case C. Having talked with them over their problems, when compared to Japanese students, they often used the opposition word "BUT". They also used the word for pretext frequently. Not only did these three students use these words but international students often tend to use them as well. There is a possibility they will be criticized for accepting other's opinion. Furthermore they are apt to justify their actions by providing excuses. Frequent words of

opposition and pretext are bound to disgust people.

The student in case A, who has been living in Japan for more than 5 years, was interviewed for scholarships several times but was not successful in receiving one. He expressed doubt that the selections were fair. Having had a consultation with him, he made a sour face for no particular reason (at first I thought that he was angry with me). He looked to be ill-tempered in spite of the fact that he did not appear angry. His attitude was self-defeating. It has been difficult to regard him in a favorable light. He did not impress interviewers as a pleasant person. It is thought that he impressed the interviewers as a sincere student but left them with an unfavorable impression as a person. The most important factor in succeeding in an interview in Japan is to favorably impress the interviewers. An engaging smile is a very positive asset and the student did not seem to have one.

The student in the case B has lived in Japan for more than 5 years, and is very serious and rather compulsive. Since he is very polite and does not have an obnoxious attitude, it is difficult to accept what he says at face value. I thought that he might be imagining to be disliked. While I was talking with him I found one possible thing that might have given his professor an unpleasant impression. He did not budge an inch no matter what I said. He seemed to cling to his beliefs too much. Moreover, he might take an all-or-nothing approach because he seems to like to always have the matter settled on his terms. It is sometimes necessary to compromise with others even if you don't agree with them. This is one of characteristics of Japanese culture.

The student in the case C, has been living in Japan for less than 3 years, and feels that he is discriminated against. The reason why he thinks so is that he feels that Japanese people are always scrutinizing him and his actions. This may be true. Normally people gaze at something unfamiliar. But we cannot say that gazing at people because of their looks is discrimination. The people in this small area rarely have a chance to see African people. Therefore they might stare at him out of curiosity. The reason why he could not get a part-time job is because of his excess of self-confidence. He seemed to have perfect confidence in his ability. He is very positive about his success. The Japanese people do not like people that radiate confidence. In this society, people of humility are revered. Japanese people love the virtue of modesty. Besides, he is apt to rationalize his actions to justify them.

Fortunately, he eventually found a part-time job. He is now very popular as a speaker at intercultural meetings given by some civic groups. The locale people are interested in his country and its culture.

To keep a promise is important not only in Japan, but also in most societies.

Punctuality is also very important in Japan. Time consciousness may be peculiar to Japanese; that is, one should not cause a problem by being late. In Japan, not being punctual or breaking a promise will invite distrust. If Japanese people are going to be late because of circumstances beyond their control, they call ahead. This is viewed as common sense in Japan. However, many international students are quite unconcerned about it, even if they have lived in Japan for quite awhile and they are quite proficient in the Japanese Language.

5. Conclusion

International students live in a culture and experience a life style that may be different from their home country. Therefore, many problems may arise due to cultural differences.

When international students study in Japan, they are virtually a citizen of this country as well as a student since they lead a private life in Japan. They may have various opportunities in which they can directly experience Japanese culture and the Japanese way of life. That will also provide them with very good opportunities to teach their way of living and culture to Japanese people. For Japanese, international students may draw their attention and be compared with Japanese.

There are always morals and rules for life that most people observe. Therefore, it becomes necessary for international students themselves to practice the Japanese way of living, Japanese manners and Japanese public morality in order to maintain a friendly atmosphere in dealing with Japanese people and to have an enjoyable educational experience. In Japan, there is an old well-known saying, "GOU NI IREBA, GOU NI SHITAGAE (When in Rome, do as the Romans do.)". This means that it is necessary for people to learn and follow customs and habits of the place where they are visiting. Many of the complaints and criticisms against the non-Japanese are because a result on not knowing the customs and habits of the Japanese. As was pointed out earlier, different communication styles exist in different cultures and they might bring about unnecessary conflicts among people. Customs peculiar to the international student will unconsciously create problems in their dealings with the Japanese people.

On the other hand, Japanese people also have to learn the customs, habits and way of thinking of the non-Japanese if they wish to avoid conflicts. Globalization has been around for a long time and is intensifying. It is a fact of life and we will not be able to avoid being exposed to many different cultures in today's world. There are many non-Japanese coming from various part of the globe. As of the end of 2005 one of every 64 people living in Japan today is classified as non-Japanese according to the Ministry of

Justice.

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