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# Living in a Different Culture as a Student

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## 異文化の中の外国人学生

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### 和文要旨

留学生指導業務に携わる教員には、外国人学生の修学・研究上、生活上及び異文化適応上の問題に対し、適切な指導助言を行うことが要求される。そこで、留学生特設科目「日本事情Ⅲ」の期末レポートから、外国人学生の日本における現況、問題点、ニーズ（どのようなサポートを必要としているのか）等を探った。

その結果、外国人学生は自らの留学体験を高く評価していること、ホスト国である日本の住民とのより良い関係を構築するために異文化についての更なる知識を得たいと望んでいること等が明らかとなった。

### Abstract

The person in the educational advisory division can be requested to offer international students good help and proper advice to help them adjust to their new way of life and to help them find the best solution for any difficulties they may encounter.

This study examined the data that has been gathered from students' papers written in a class on "NIHON-JIJOU Ⅲ (Contemporary Japan Studies)" at University of Toyama<sup>1</sup> to understand how international students evaluated their experience in Japan, what is their overall state of mind in Japan, and to research the kind of support they need to lead a low stress and fruitful life in a different culture.

According to the examination into the data, international students put a high value on their living experience in a different culture.

The results showed that they need more knowledge of Japanese culture to maintain a good relationship with Japanese people.

[Key words: international students, culture, experience, support, needs ]

## 1 . Introduction

The purpose of this study was:

- 1) To understand how international students evaluate their living experience in a different culture
- 2) To realize international students' state of mind in Japan by means of the experience
- 3) To grasp the kind of support the students need

Since international students come from countries with different traditions, customs, climates, etc., they often encounter a great deal of stress. The result is that many problems arise. The person in the educational advisory division should be requested to help them find the best solution for their difficulty. Therefore, it is significant to study those items mentioned above in order to offer them good help and proper advice to help them settle in and adjust to their new way of life in Japan.

## 2 . Background of the Study

### 2.1 The frequency of crimes

In February 2006 a Chinese female, married to a Japanese, killed two kindergarten children aged 5 in Shiga prefecture. In November 2005, a Peruvian male killed an elementary schoolgirl aged 7 that was returning from school in Hiroshima prefecture. Back in 2003, in Fukuoka prefecture three Chinese males, who were former students at a university and Japanese language school, killed a family of four members: father, mother and little children. Most Japanese must have been shocked by these cruel murders, and they undoubtedly considered that Japanese society was not safe anymore. Many Japanese think that it is because of the growth of the non-Japanese' population in Japan.

In fact, the non-Japanese population has been increasing and the crime rate brought by them has also been increasing for the last few years. In 2005, 47,874 prosecuted criminal acts were committed by non-Japanese living in Japan according to the report of the Metropolitan Police Department. In a YOMIURI-SHINBUN newspaper article dated 5 May, 2004, the number of non-Japanese convicts was 5,671 in 2004.

### 2.2 The policy on receiving the international students

A Consultative Committee of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology submitted a report on the issue to the international students conference at the end of 2003.

The Plan to Accept 100,000 International Students, as suggested by a former prime

minister, Mr. Nakasone in 1983, has been realized. The number of the international students as of May 2003 was 109,508, and increased to 121,812 as of May 2005.

This report proposed that universities should select students who can lead sincere and honest lives and were suited to studying for the future. In the report, they made mention of the crimes committed by non-Japanese. The general thinking is that among those who entered into Japan as a student, there are many who are poor in scholastic ability and are not well behaved. Therefore, it was proposed that not simply a target number of international students would be sought, but Japan would also seek an improvement in the quality of the students in the future. The suggestion implies that the committee members regard international students as troublemakers and unwelcome visitors.

The Immigration Service Division started to screen students applying for entering into Japan more severely and strictly than before they did in the fall of 2003. The result is that the number of non-Japanese students, especially Chinese students, has been diminishing.

Japanese language schools are trying to work out how to deal with recruiting students. The people concerned with the international students at universities anticipated that the number of non-Japanese candidates would decrease in two years because almost all of the international students who want to be an undergraduate at a university learned Japanese language at a language school for one or two years before applying to the university for admission.

As an example, in our university, the number of non-Japanese candidates last year was over 80. It was about 20 this year. The prediction came true.

However, there are indications that non-Japanese who want to enter into Japan as a student are increasing again according to the Immigration Service Division.

### **2.3 The Japan's policy toward refugees and immigrants**

Refugees came to Japan for the first time in May 12, 1975. By the end of that year, a total of 126 refugees had come to Japan from Vietnam. But Japan's policy did not accept them at the time. Japan did not allow refugees to settle in Japan until September 1978 when the Japanese government shaped a policy about "settlement" which gave Indo-Chinese refugees permission to settle in Japan. However, the number of refugees allowed to settle in Japan was limited to 500. The number of refugees allowed to settle was expanded to 1,000 in 1980, to 3,000 in 1981, to 5,000 in 1983 and to 10,000 in 1985. As of January 1988, there were about 6,200 Indo-Chinese refugees in Japan according to the United Nation High Commissioner for refugees. The population of the Indo-Chinese refugees as of 1991 was about 7,000, including about 700 people who had lived in Japan as international students or trainees in companies before the war in Indochina ended. As of December 2002, the number of refugees was 10,941. According to the

newspaper article<sup>2</sup>, 46 non-Japanese were certified as a refugee in 2005. There are not many refugees in Japan.

Concerning immigrants, none of the non-Japanese are permitted to enter into Japan as an ‘immigrant’. Japan has had a passive attitude about receiving non-Japanese.

## 2.4 Indifference & Exclusivism

It is said that Japan is an exclusive and closed society. In such a society, the problems that non-Japanese are confronting tend to be neglected. Nevertheless, whenever there is talk of some crimes committed by non-Japanese in the mass media, Japanese people take notice of their neighbors from different countries. Many non-Japanese can be uncomfortable under this situation. It is no wonder that they are thus not content with things as they are.

Non-Japanese tend to be isolated from Japanese people because of their different culture. It is advocated that exclusiveness causes discrimination, and discrimination prevents coexistence.

## 3. Methods

The data has been gathered from student’s papers written in a class titled “NIHON-JIJOU Ⅲ (Contemporary Japan Studies)” and offered as a cultural studies course to international students in fall semesters at the University of Toyama.

“NIHON-JIJOU Ⅲ” is a special course for international students. This subject is targeted for sophomores, juniors and seniors. The course is offered in the omnibus style; ten professors lecture on matters in Japan such as Education, Housing, Technology, Human rights and so on, once a week, for 90 minutes. I take charge of this class as a coordinator and also give lectures on different cultures and cross-cultural communication. The students write a short paper for each lecture and at the end of the course they have to submit a term paper. They are generally given 3 themes in the course. They choose one of them and write a paper on it.

Themes available in 2003 were as follows:

Theme 1: What did you learn from the course?

Theme 2: What is your opinion of living in a different culture?

Theme 3: What kind of cultural difference surprised or annoyed you?

Themes available in 2004 were as follows:

Theme 1: What did you learn from the course?

Theme 2: What is your opinion of living in a different culture?

Theme 3: What kind of cultural experience did you have in Japan?

Data collection occurred during a period of two fall semesters (2003/10–2004/3 & 2004/10–2005/3). Themes 2 and 3 were suitable for getting the data.

Among the total of 34 international students registered for this subject in 2003, 23 chose Theme 2, and 5 chose Theme 3. Among the total of 32 international students registered for this subject in 2004, 13 chose Theme 2, and 13 chose Theme 3. A total of 54 papers were examined.

Among the total of 34 international students registered for this subject in 2003, 19 were self-financed students and 10 were exchange students. They were all financed. Among the total of 32 international students registered for this subject in 2004, 23 were self-financed students and 2 were exchange students.

More distribution is on the < Table 1> & < Table 2 >.

#### **4 . Limitation of the Study**

The scope of the study is limited to 54 international students, and excludes any other international students.

#### **5 . Results and Discussion**

It does not seem that Japan has received non-Japanese warmly, and rather has treated them as troublemakers or unwelcome visitors for the last years. However, the results of the examination showed that the students do have a warm reception from the Japanese.

Two students from China described their experience as follows:

- ① Very soon after I came to Japan, I tumbled off a bicycle on my way to a Japanese language school and had a fracture in the arm. At the time, I could not understand Japanese language very well. I was in such pain that I was crouching down by the roadside. An old lady passing by approached me. She asked me what happened. Because I could not tell her about the accident in Japanese, I just showed my arm. The lady understood what had happened to me and was kind enough to call me an ambulance. I appreciate her kindness.
- ② I was working part-time in a restaurant to get my living. Less than two months after I started to work, I was knocked down by a car and was taken to the hospital by an ambulance. I had been crying since I was got on the ambulance. The manager of the restaurant I worked in rushed to the hospital and he helped me a lot. He went to the police office in my behalf and solved all problems about the accident. I appreciate what he

has done for me.

Besides these two students, several of the students mentioned the goodwill of Japanese people. Three out of nine Malaysian students thanked some professors who were concerned about them in class. Those professors always asked them whether they could understand what the professor said or wrote on the board. The reason the professors paid attention to them may have been due to their prominent appearance in comparison to the appearance of students from China and Korea. Since the Chinese and Koreans resemble Japanese people in appearance, professors do not notice them. Moreover, professors understand that Malaysian students have a big problem with learning KANJI, and it should be to their detriment. The international students from countries where KANJI is used are rarely asked whether they could understand the Japanese language. Although many Japanese people tend to understand that there is a similarity between Japanese language and Chinese language in writing, this cannot be said to be true in all cases.

Japanese students are also kind to international students. They help international students with studying, and invite them to have fun together to overcome being isolated. One certain Japanese student invited an international student to her parents' home during the spring vacation. This international student is inspired that the Japanese student has invited her. These experiences contributed toward understanding the Japanese.

According to the examination into 54 term papers, the major problems of international students living in Japan were:

#### 1) LANGUAGE PROBLEM

The language must be a barrier for all international students. Forty-three students out of 54 referred to the language problem. The language problem, in general, should be the most pressing concern. It causes various difficulties. For non-Japanese, to lead a satisfactory and productive life in a new country, they must obtain a basic understanding of the language and culture of the settlement country. Especially, for international students, it is not sufficient to have a basic understanding of the language to study at a university.

It must be difficult not only to keep up with studying but also to find a part-time job if they cannot understand the Japanese language very well. The language problem directly links to the financial problem. In addition, it is difficult to promote friendship with Japanese people.

There is a regional dialect in Toyama, and local people speak in the Toyama Japanese, naturally. Professors came from various regions. Some professors speaking in their home dialect cause students embarrassment because the students have difficulty understanding their lectures. Regional language will sometimes prevent the establishing of friendly relations

between local people and international students. This is another problem.

## 2) FINACIAL PROBLEM

Over 70% of the self-financed international students mentioned their difficulty in making a living. They are under financial pressure more or less. Their parents cannot provide them with enough money, because there is a widening gap between a developed country like Japan and developing countries like some Asian countries. Most self-financed international students have to work part-time for their living, but the compatibility of work with studying is not easy.

In spite of their severe economical situation, they did not view their working experience negatively or unfavorably. On the contrary, they regarded it as of much value; it broadened their horizons and developed perseverance. They considered that the working experience was necessary for their growth and maturity. They also considered it a good chance to learn about Japanese society. Through a companionship at their workplace, they can learn Japanese ways, customs and rules. Experience taught them a good lesson.

## 3) OTHER PROBLEMS

The various problems were invited by misunderstanding, poor information or wrong information.

### 〈PROBLEMS CAUSED BY LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF JAPANESE CULTURE〉

Some Chinese students mentioned that quite a few Chinese students were under the illusion that their culture is similar to that in Japan, even if they learned about Japan before coming to Japan. The actual experience of staying in Japan made them realized that Japanese customs and rules were different from those of other countries. Lack of understanding Japanese customs and rules will interfere with human relations. Moreover, it cultivates a false image.

A Chinese student described a terrible experience brought by the incorrect information as follows:

This is one of my unpleasant experiences. When I was studying at a language school, I always walked to school. One day, I was caught in a shower on my way to the school. There was a convenience store. I found many umbrellas in an umbrella stand in front of the store. I have heard that anyone can use public properties in Japan. So, I had no hesitation to take an umbrella from the umbrella stand. I walked away holding the umbrella. I heard someone shouting behind me. A lady over took me and I have been blamed for taking the umbrella. She called me a thief. I apologized what I did. I was so

sad. I endured humiliation.

Below is an unpleasant experience invited by a lack of information.

One day, right after I came to Japan, I took out the garbage. At the time I did not know that I had to separate garbage according to type. So, I put all garbage in a garbage bag. A near neighbor brought the garbage bag to the language school where I was studying. I was reproached for being unreasonable. I suffered humiliation.

Many problems were thus caused by a lack of understanding Japanese customs and rules. One student pointed out that international students collected objects from dumping grounds but they do not perceive that this conduct is a crime. The other student stated that international students would like to obey rules and regulations, but they do not know about them. They want to adapt their way of life to the new circumstances to avoid getting in trouble or to be hated by the local people.

#### 〈PROBLEM OF HUMAN RELATIONS〉

Understanding culture for a student is important not only to adjusting to new environments, and to take the necessary steps to respond to their needs, but also to establish friendly relations among peoples. Different manners are sometimes a barrier to promoting friendly relations.

Several students stated that Japanese people frequently expressed their sincere thanks and excuses, but international students did not like what the Japanese did. Therefore, they were regarded to be ill-mannered and impolite. In China, the people sit up straight in front of only God and ancestors. Generally, they have no custom of sitting straight. One student was afraid that this different manner would be misleading. This student is worried that the Chinese seem to be rude.

One Korean student pointed out that the politeness in Japan differs from that in Korea. For example, Japanese people have a sense of belonging and they are polite to members of their group or neighborhood, while they are rude to the others. Korean people respect elder people. However the Japanese seem to be indifferent toward them.

Many students consider that most Japanese are modest and they are hesitant in giving their advice. Compared with the Japanese, Chinese and Korean people show their feelings plainly and give their opinion frankly. Although it is usual for them to speak directly, they seem to be obstinate and uncompromising for the most Japanese.

One student referred to the strong group feeling that many Japanese people have. It is not



easy for international students to understand this feeling, however they feel that it helps promote mutual help. The other student thinks that being punctual and orderly is a good example for non-Japanese to follow in order to start to gain their trust with the Japanese.

International students realized that the ambiguity and concession experience is necessary to be in good with the Japanese. Otherwise, they feel awkward with Japanese people.

There was not any particular change in results related to the difference of the length of stay in Japan.

## 6 . Conclusions

The focus of this study was to understand how international students evaluated their cultural experience in Japan, and also to realize their state of mind in Japan based on their experience in receiving good help and proper advice, by helping them find the best solution for their difficulties, and furthermore, to understand their need to lead a happy life.

According to the examination into the data, students received a warm welcome from the Japanese people. As it is pointed out, whether international students are happy or not in a different culture depends on how they are treated by the local people. This is a good result.

Most students put a high value on their experience of living in a different culture to broaden their horizons, to stand upon their own legs and to improve their ability to overcome difficulties. Besides, they valued that their experience contributed toward understanding of their own culture. They generally hold a good opinion of their experience living in Japan. However they have some fears and worries over their life in Japan. To avoid conflicts with Japanese people, they need more knowledge of Japanese culture, how the Japanese think and act, and how they treat others and so on.

To satisfy the needs of the students, there is a solution. International students will be provided with cross-cultural training in the “NIHON-JIJOUⅢ” class. This is a culture study by an immersion experience and is a good way to understand culture.

### Words of gratitude

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### NOTES

- 1 . In October 2005, Toyama University was integrated with two universities in Toyama prefecture to make the University of Toyama.
- 2 . ASAHI-SHINBUN, 2 February, 2006

<Table 1>

	2003		2004	
The number of students registered for the subject	34		32	
	Financed	15	Financed	9
	Self-financed	19	Self-financed	23
The number of students that chose theme 2 or 3	28		26	
Distribution of students by their status in the university	Non-regular student	10	Non-regular student	1
	Regular student	18	Regular student	25
	Senior	0	Senior	0
	Junior	1	Junior	1
	Sophomore	17	Sophomore	24
Distribution of students by nationality that chose theme 2 or 3	China	16	China	18
	Korea	5	Malaysia	6
	Russia	4	Russia	1
	Malaysia	2	Vietnam	1
	Ukraine	1		
	Total	28	Total	26

<Table 2>

	LENGTH OF STAY IN JAPAN	
	2003	2004
Less than 1 year	10	1
More than 1 year~ Less than 2 years	2	6
More than 2 years	16	19
	(28)	(26)

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