

Foreign Students' Exchange Program: New Implications for Japan

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An encounter with a different culture and/or a different value often produces economic and societal developments. When people see and hear of things that had been unknown before, the first reaction might be curiosity, hatred, fear, and so forth.

However, after a certain amount of time has passed, people eventually come to realize and accept the fact that alien factors and differences in value indeed exist. This recognition inevitably affects the established governing mechanisms and the predominant social order. Furthermore, these changes can pave the way for transforming the basic structure of a society or a nation, the essential ingredient for making it leap forward.

Historical Cases in Japan

With this thought in mind, if we look back over Japanese history, at least three such examples can be observed. The first is the period around 600, the era of Emperor Suiko. The name of this Emperor comes from the meaning of "guessing the past." Under this Emperor's rule, Japan seriously faced a foreign power, China. In this situation, Prince Umayado took a series of initiatives, such as introducing the Constitution and an administrative system, to modernize the Japanese governing structure. In this experiment, the governing model was, of course, "China." It was around this period that Japan sent many young students to China to learn her culture and advanced social governance systems.

Almost 1,200 years later, in 1863, the Meiji Restoration occurred. In this revolution, the leading model was the then-dominant power, "West European countries." At that time, Japanese leaders were very enthusiastic about inviting European experts in various fields to make this nation "Westernized." Experts invited were military advisers, drafters of laws, university professors, world-class architects, and so on. In this period, as in the previous example period, Japan sent a lot of ambitious students to Europe.

The third example is the era of reconstructing Japan, which began in 1945 just after the devastating defeat of the Second World War. This experience of defeat forced Japan to take after the American way. The leading model then was "the United States." Japan followed American guidance in introducing the market mechanism, the democratic governance principle, corporate rules and competitive policies, and so on. The goal at that time was to install sustainable economic development capability, because Japan definitely needed economic reconstruction. Many young students and businesspeople went to the US to learn her culture, ways of thinking, business style, and business skills. Fortunately, we were successful in acquiring those cultural and economic methods that enabled Japan to be a world economic power.

And, probably, now Japan has again entered a transforming stage to change her economic and social structures. The economy matured, the population diminished, and social values lost flexibility. These factors in combination have provided people with a feeling of occlusion, a feeling of being blocked. In

these conditions, no leading model is given. Consensus for a direction of change is eroded and collapses.

Japan's New Challenge

Under these circumstances, a leading model can be created and invented only by scrutinizing our own established society itself - what is wrong, what should be modified, what is inadequate, how we could transform ourselves. We Japanese have to look into our own society and ask ourselves these sorts of questions, and find solutions.

In other words, a major task facing us is to identify the problems themselves. For that purpose, it is important for Japanese society to accept a large number of foreign students who have diversified values and different views. At the same time, let a large number of Japanese youths go and learn abroad to get accustomed to foreign values and foreign ways of thinking. That is the reason that Japanese people now emphatically advocate, "we need to open the country to the world again."

Currently the Japanese government has officially declared, "For the sake of making Japan more open, by the year 2020, we will achieve a targeted goal of "300,000 foreign students studying in Japan on an annual basis."

In the global perspective, foreign students studying abroad have reached a level of about 3 million. The most popular destination is the US, the second is Great Britain, and the third is Australia. It is fairly easy to understand why. These are English-speaking nations, and young students are eager to master English. Furthermore, they are attracted to the Anglo-Saxon culture and atmosphere.

By contrast, as of the year 2009, the number of foreign students studying in Japan is only 120,000-130,000. If we compare this number with the total number of university students and graduate school students in Japan, the percentage is around 3.5%. This percentage is too small compared with France's 12% and Germany's 13%. Therefore, Japan wishes to raise that percentage to at least around 10% by the year 2020.

In order to achieve that goal, the Japanese government has put forward the following five measures: 1. creating attractive universities; 2. offering incentives to study and providing

one-stop services regarding the necessary procedures; 3. improving the procedures of entrance examinations, enrollment in universities, and entry into Japan; 4. improving and creating a favorable environment in which foreign students can devote themselves to studying without anxiety; and 5. after their graduation and completion of courses, helping foreign students by supporting them in finding jobs.

Competition among Universities Intensified

In line with the above-mentioned government guideline, many Japanese universities have launched a variety of programs with the aim of attracting foreign students on to their own campuses, and at the same time, have tried to send their Japanese students abroad.

One more factor that has activated Japanese universities' enthusiasm for foreign students is the declining population. The Japanese population has begun to decrease; therefore, in Japan, higher educational institutions such as universities face severe competition in attracting excellent students. This sort of framework and these sorts of changing conditions have accelerated a trend to woo and get qualified foreign students who are willing to study in Japan.

Let us look at such a competitive reality in the case of private universities. I would like to take an example from the Kansai area. In Kansai — the Osaka, Kobe, and Kyoto area — there are many universities, and these universities, like the universities in the Kanto area including Tokyo and Yokohama, have shown a strong preference for recruiting foreign students.

My university — Kwansei Gakuin University located in Hyogo Prefecture — is no exception. The university is one of the most prestigious private schools in Japan, which traces its foundation in Kobe back to 1889, by an American missionary, Reverend Walter Russell Lamburth. Therefore, Kwansei Gakuin University has a long tradition of exposing its Japanese students to foreign culture and foreign values. And now, the university has renewed its enthusiasm for bringing foreign factors on to its campus. In other words, the university is participating in a race to attract foreign students.

A variety of programs have been introduced and created for this purpose. For example, the Graduate School of the university offers a number of programs where English is the medium of instruction. Among these are the MBA and doctoral programs of the International Management Course in the Business School, and the Master's program in the International Strategy Area in the Graduate School of Policy Studies. The Graduate School of Science and Technology has established a double degree program with its foreign counterparts, such as Wacana Christian University in Indonesia.

Furthermore, the university recently created a new department, the School of International Studies, which is expected to function as an entity to accept foreign students who have just graduated



Japanese students listen to a speech by a foreign student

from high schools in their home countries. In this department, we anticipate that foreign and Japanese students, mixing with each other, will learn together and work together.

Tsunami, Earthquake & Nuclear Power Plant Accident

As of the year 2010, about 600 foreign students are studying on the Kwansei Gakuin campus. The percentage of foreign students vis-à-vis all enrolled students is about 3-4%. Among the prestigious private universities in Japan, except for a very few, this 3-4% percentage is commonly observed.

In essence, because of introducing similar sorts of incentives and measures, severe competition has not brought about any differentiation, at least as of now. But the current stage is still just a starting point. Within a few years, a clear winner will emerge in this highly competitive race. I do hope that my university will be one such winner.

Kwansei Gakuin University plans to raise the number of foreign students from the current 600 to 700 within two years. However, the recent tsunami, earthquake and nuclear power plant accident in the northeastern part of Japan may hinder that optimistic and bold plan from materializing. Some would-be foreign students may change their minds about coming to study here in Japan. If such is the case, at least next year, newcomers from abroad may decrease in number or at least show a flat trend.

However, as I wrote in the early part of this essay, Japanese society needs a radical reshuffle and has to bring about new elements for renewing its dynamism and vitality. Once a common goal is given, Japan has a peculiar strength to make every force work for it. The recent tsunami, earthquake, and nuclear plant accident may become such a clue and opportunity. Therefore, I strongly believe that, sooner or later, the Japanese will concentrate their efforts to attract and invite foreign students more to prove that our goal can be satisfied.

Lastly, just for your reference, as of the year 2006, approximately 76,000 Japanese citizens went to various countries around the world. Among them, roughly 47% went to the US, 27% to China and Chinese Taipei, 8% to the UK, and 4% to Australia. (Probably, if the latest data were available, China and Chinese Taipei's share would have risen). **JS**

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