Problems of Japanese international education and exchanges

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I. Introduction

According to the result of public opinion survey conducted by the author in September 1987, the majority of Thai people (574 responses or 64.9% of the total 884 responses) will send their children to continue studying in Japan if they have a chance, while only 18.8% of the responses thought otherwise. However, if they can choose the country to send their children to study abroad, 32.7% of the responses preferred U.S.A., 26.8% preferred Japan, 15.0% for England, 8.7% for Australia, 6.6% for Germany, 2.5% for France and the rest 6.6% for others. (Banyat Surakanvit "Report on Thai Perceptions of Japan and Thai-Japanese Relations." in "Thai-Japanese Studies". April-June 1987, page 8-22, Japanese Studies Center, Thammasat University)

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We can say that these attitude survey results are the representative views of Thai people, and are very useful for our discussion on Japan’s future role in international education and exchanges, particularly between Japan and Thailand as well as ASEAN as a whole.

Why many Thai people are wanting to further their studies in Japan or willing to send their children to continue studying in Japan and why not? This problem should be discussed before going to talk about Japanese present activities and future roles in international education.

II. Main reasons for studying in Japan

Many people are now interesting in Japanese studies and Japanese language and looking forwards studying in Japan. The main reasons are:

(1) The success of Japanese economic development has been widely recognized as an economic superpower and a model of modernization for the developing countries.

(2) Japan has also successfully developed its science and technology and some technologies are in the front line of the world.

(3) The influence of Japan in international trade, investment and economic cooperation as well as cultural exchanges has been rapidly increased, thus, Japan has become a country of great interest.

(4) The availability of educational and training scholarships from Japanese governmental and private organizations and foundations makes its possible for some students to have a chance to study in Japan.

(5) There are also many countries which having scholarships for sending their students to study in Japan as well.

(6) The economic return of studying in Japan is relatively high when comparing to other countries.

(7) The benefit of studying in Japan is greater than studying in home country.

From the above reasons, there are a large number of foreign students who are now studying in Japan and the numbers of foreign students are rapidly increased during the past decade.

At present, it is said that there are totally about 22,000 foreign students in Japan in which the private students or non-scholarshiped students are about 18,000. (Quoted from ASAHI Newspaper, February 7, 1988). And the numbers of foreign students in Japan are increased yearly at the rate of about 20%. Foreign students who come from China, Taiwan, Korea and the Southeast Asian countries are the majority, over 80% of the total number.

It is interesting to note that the number of students from China has increased rapidly to nearly about 6,000 students in total.

III. The difficulties of studying in Japan

However, why some people do not want to study in Japan even they have a chance? And why some people prefer other countries than Japan?

The reasons may be depend upon each individual interests, but the main reason might come from the difficulties of studying in Japan.

The fundamental problems which foreign students have to face during their studying in Japan are that :

(1) They have to learn Japanese language up to a certain level in order to communicate with Japanese people and living in Japan.
(2) They have to put much effort in learning the language to the level of university education in order to understand the content of specific subjects of their studies. Thus studying in Japan have a harder time than in some other western countries with a more accessible language, namely English language.

(3) The cost of living and housing in Japan is relatively high, particularly for private students or non-scholarshiped students.

(4) They have to overcome the so called “culture shock” and adapting themselves to the Japanese ways of thinking and practice as well as the Japanese education system which is still very much closed to foreigners.

From the above reasons, it could be said that studying in Japan is more difficult than one might expected. The burdens of some private foreign students coming from Asian countries are also heavier due to the highly appreciation of Japanese yen in recent years, particularly for those who do not came from the rich family. Nevertheless, studying in Japan is still attractive and the numbers of foreign students who coming from Asian countries are considerably increased in this recent year because of the actively promoting for the increase of foreign students in Japan by the Japanese government, universities and private Japanese language schools. On the other hand, students from Asian countries themselves are not fully informed about the real situation and conditions of studying and living in Japan. They do not only face the difficulties of entering and learning in Japanese universities but also great problems in adapting to the Japanese society and the bias perspective towards Asian people.

IV. The problems of Japanese international education and exchanges

Since 1983, the Japanese government has issued a new policy in promoting the international education and exchanges by setting a target to increase the number of foreign students in Japan to the level of 100,000 by the early part of the 21st Century and the general opening of the Japanese education system to foreigners, these movements are considered to be a part of the so called policy “Internationalization of Japan”, and will play a key role in the sense of fostering the development of intercultural understanding and communication.
However, in order to discuss and search for Japan’s future role in international education and exchanges according to the title of this symposium, the present problems should be examined and some actions should be taken to solve those problems properly and immediately.

The first major problem is that the number of dormitories for foreign students is not sufficient and the reasonable price of rental room or apartment is still limited. The facilities for students life and living should be much improved.

The second problem is that the lectures and the textbooks being used in the university are mostly in Japanese language, foreign students who have learned Japanese language for only one or two years could not fully understand the whole context, particularly for the students who did not familiar with a writing system based on the chinese one. Thus instead of learning another foreign language in the general course of education, more special classes of Japanese language for foreign students should be set up in order to help the study of some certain subjects which are the purpose of study.

The third problem is that due to the high cost of living in Japan, more scholarships should be provided to foreign students who have a certain qualification of performance and coming from the relatively poor family.

The forth problem is that since studying in Japan needed much effort and the students have to face with the pressure of alienation and adaptability, a kind of counselling services from the student affairs office of the university and some kindly attentions from the adviser or professor are necessary.

The fifth problems is that the good environment of studying in Japan should be concerned not only by the university but also the community and both public and private organizations.

The sixth problem is that Japanese people should not deal with foreigners neither with the feeling of inferiority complex nor superiority complex. The balanced consciousness is preferable and very important. In this sense, the over sympathy and over take care to foreign students are also unpreferable.

Finally, the foreign students themselves should know and understand of how to live and have a good relationship with people of different culture and society. Both Japanese and foreigners have to have the attitude of willing and accepting diversity.

This attitude of understanding and learning of each other and finally accepting each culture and identity will contribute to the development of international education and exchanges in the long run.

V. Conclusion

The fundamental problem of present situation of international education and exchanges is that how Japan could quickly take effective actions to improve the quality aspects of foreign students in Japan? This quality aspects is more important than the increase of the quantity aspect. The better quality of student life in Japan in both education and living environments will lead to the level up of Japan’s international education and exchanges performance in the future. Finally, some more considerations should be put in fostering the on going development project for the purpose of increasing social benefits and contribution to the society of those countries where foreign students come from.