Psychological Struggles
Of Korean International Students in Japan

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This paper examines the human relations of Korean international students in Japan. The data were gathered from the free-answer responses of 96 students at a national university to a request to write their opinions regarding foreign student life in Japan. Qualitative analysis of the data revealed three major categories: financial and systemic hardship, difficulties and rewards of their study experience, and reactions to Japanese society and human relations. The final category was further analysed and divided into four themes that form the major content of this paper: moral versus prejudiced, diligent versus inhuman, true feelings versus formal behaviour, and resignation versus perseverance. These data shed light on the nature of the psychological struggles of Korean students in Japan.

BACKGROUND

In 2001 there were 14,725 South Korean students studying in Japan, comprising the second largest national group after Chinese. At the University of Tokyo, which has the largest population of foreign students, there are nearly 500 Korean students, 24 per cent of all international students. They are clearly a major part of the increase of international students to Japan and have a significant presence at many schools and university campuses.

The huge influx of Korean students into Japanese universities from the mid-1980s has been spurred by their desire for advanced degrees and educational opportunities unavailable in Korea. Surveys on Korean students in Japan have shown that, more than students from other countries, they believe that a degree from a Japanese university is highly valued in their home country (Iwao & Hagiwara, 1991). However, more recent data indicate their concern that a degree from Japan – even from the elite University of Tokyo – will be less valued than degrees from the United States of America (Higashi Chiiki Kenkyukai, 1997). Although some Korean students who once would have gone to the USA for Japanese Studies are now coming to Japan, many are discouraged by the reliance on American and Western European research even in this area.

Some Korean students report that their images of Japan worsened as they spent time in Japan and along with language improvement (Iwao & Hagiwara, 1991). Compared to when they first arrived, Korean students who have been in Japan one year are less likely to see Japanese in such favourable ways as kind (shinsetsu), warm (atatakai), easy to get along with (tsukiayasui), easy to become close to (shitamiyasui), unprejudiced (henken ga nai), and trustworthy (shinrai dekiru) (Iwao & Hagiwara, 1991). Other Korean students say that at first they were impressed by Japanese people but as time passed they became upset that they did not get along well (ki ga awanai), and complained that they found it difficult to make friends (Suhara, 1996). They began to say that they could not understand what Japanese are thinking or feeling (honne ga wakaranai) and wondered about Japanese
attitudes toward them. Some became bothered that they are always reminded by Japanese that they are outsiders and from what is seen as an inferior country.

According to the U-curve theory of cultural adjustment this change is to be expected (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). The initially positive feelings students experience in their study abroad often turn negative after a while in a foreign country. However, attitudes should later improve, but at present there are no data to indicate whether or not this pattern holds in Japan.

There are anecdotal data suggesting that some Korean students learn to make a distinction between their self chosen road of study abroad and the suffering associated with it, and their attitudes toward Japan (Suhara, 1996). The previously mentioned study on Koreans at the University of Tokyo showed that nearly half of students’ attitudes towards Japan improved as a result of their study in Japan, while only 17 per cent claimed that they had worsened (Higashi Chiiki Kenkyukai, 1997). And surprisingly, the opposite was true of their attitudes toward Korea, with 26 per cent reporting that their image of Korea worsened and only 12 per cent claiming it had improved.

There are also data suggesting that attitudes toward Japanese become even more positive after returning to Korea and former students are more likely to look favourably on their experience in Japan (Iwao & Hagiwara, 1991). Students with Japan study experience were also more likely than students in Korea to see Japanese as warm and kind, trustworthy, frank, and responsible, and individualistic (Iwao & Hagiwara, 1991). Studies in Korea have shown that students who have studied in Japan are more likely than other Koreans to absolve Japan of responsibility for the colonial period and to see Japanese as peace-loving (Chung, 1998). They are also more open toward daily contact and even marriage with Japanese (Chung, 1998).

However, there are signs that the experience for many is unsatisfactory. A study by Marui and Lee (1995) revealed the stresses on Korean students related to financial hardship, study pressures, and family-related troubles. Although economic problems were a major concern, students were also afflicted with other stresses such as worries about employment after graduation, housekeeping problems of living alone, and problems of the living environment such as climatic changes, high rents, and small living spaces. The nearly 10 per cent of married students who nevertheless lived alone were identified as a group particularly prone to stress. In a 1997 survey of Korean students at Tokyo University only half (54%) reported that they would make the same choice for study abroad if they could do it over again (Higashi Chiiki Kenkyukai, 1997).

The same survey reports that half of the Korean students experienced discrimination in housing and half believe that Japanese hold prejudicial attitudes toward Asians (Higashi Chiiki Kenkyukai, 1997). General attitudes toward Japan and Japanese are also divided, with half of the responses reflecting positive attitudes stressing advanced technology, high public morals, preservation of traditional culture and an adept incorporation of other cultures. On the other hand, negative attitudes included difficulty of human relations, low public morals, and problems understanding distinctions between true feelings and formal behaviours. Students reported that they experienced Japanese as anti-Korean, and looking down on Korea as backward. They also thought that Japanese regarded Koreans as too emotional and direct.

The increase of Korean students in Japan has been encouraged by Japanese government policy designed to internationalise higher education. One of the fruits of this investment is the development of human resources that contribute to cooperative relations between the
two countries. Students who come to Japan ideally return to Korea and become bridges with Japan in various fields. The long anguished history between Japan and Korea makes these cultural ambassadors especially important. Therefore the experiences of Korean students in Japan have a special significance for improving human relations between the citizens of these neighbouring countries. This study aims to examine some data that may shed some light on the nature of these human relations and related psychological struggles of Korean students.

**METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to examine the feelings of Korean international students regarding human relations with Japanese. The data were gathered from the free-answer responses of 96 students to a questionnaire written in Hangul on stress, living conditions, and health that was distributed to 505 students at Tokyo University in 1995. One of the major problems faced by researchers on foreign students is their reluctance to give honest answers. This study attempted to overcome this barrier by writing the questionnaire in Hangul and requesting responses also in Hangul.

Responses were received from 96 students, 77 (78.5%) males and 19 (21.5%) females. The largest number were between 30-34 years old for males and 25-29 for females; 51 (66%) males and 6 (32%) females were married; 58.7 per cent lived with some family member, while 36 per cent lived alone, including 10 per cent of the married males.

At the end of a questionnaire students were given the following item: "Please write freely your opinions regarding such matters as your expectations and reality of foreign student life in Japan, enjoyable or difficult aspects of study abroad, positive or negative aspects of Japan or ways of solving or overcoming problems."

Qualitative analysis of the data revealed three major categories of responses. One concerns economic and bureaucratic matters (47 responses). These responses consisted of complaints about the hardship of financing their education in Japan due to the high cost of living and the poor exchange rate. The need to work part-time jobs to make ends meet was mentioned as negatively affecting their studies and health. Comments were also received about the excessive demands of the immigration system and the poor treatment by officials at the immigration office. In addition, legal troubles and housing problems were mentioned.

Another category was related to various aspects of study, such as merits and demerits of study abroad and specific aspects of their situation at the university. These 52 responses are almost equally divided into positive and negative comments. Positive statements were made about the joy of being an international student and the excitement of new experiences in a different society. Some students wrote that encountering cultural differences was a good experience. The freedom of the research atmosphere and the opportunity to study among bright professors were also cited. On the other hand, some students noted how tough research was, specifically identified the lack of faculty guidance as a problem. Others cited the difficulty of adjusting to a foreign climate and cultural environment as adversely affecting their studies. Inability to enjoy life in Japan due to their financial pressures and research demands was also noted. Some students complained about poor university facilities such as library hours and limited places to study.

The third category of responses was about Japanese society and human relations with Japanese. Nearly 75 per cent of these 89 responses were classified as negative, and the other 25 per cent as positive. The remainder is paper will deal exclusively with this third category. The data are further divided into four themes that were identified: moral versus prejudiced;
diligent versus inhuman; true feelings versus formal behaviour; and resignation versus perseverance.

**MORAL VERSUS PREJUDICED**

Seventeen students expressed their feelings and perceptions regarding the manners, morals, and social attitudes and behaviours of Japanese. Some students pointed out the high morality and order in the society as a positive aspect of Japan and Japanese people. They felt that the sense of responsibility in Japanese helped make living in Japan easy for them and that this was an area for Koreans to model in building their own society.

> Japanese are conscious about social rules and orders and I think it is good that they respect public morals.

> The Japanese respect rules, so it is convenient for foreigners like me.

> Japan is truly an advanced nation technologically. Sometimes I am reminded of my own country’s past, and realise that we have to put a lot of effort to achieve progress, and therefore I apply myself to my work. Most Japanese are kind I think. Therefore Korea also has to join the advanced nations, and in so doing will achieve spiritual freedom.

However, these positive impressions of Japan are not shared by some other students (5), who claim that on the contrary, Japan is not morally conscious enough to overcome the racial prejudice and discrimination that exist in society. These students feel prejudicial attitudes directed toward them or claim to experience discrimination. They believe that Japanese treat Americans and Europeans specially, and regard Asians far less favourably.

> The Japanese students in the laboratory discriminate against foreign students, especially toward Asian students compared with European students.

> What I don’t like about Japan is the Japanese discrimination and pride towards other Asians. I also don’t like the unity and exclusiveness of the Japanese.

Feelings of prejudice and discrimination were also expressed in descriptions of Japan as a society for Japanese only, but closed to others. Students attributed the strong sense of group-consciousness as creating a barrier for foreign students by making groups exclusively for Japanese. Some went further in declaring that this exclusiveness negatively affected their studies and human relations with Japanese.

> The Japanese closed, discriminating, and wrong way of thinking and ways of doing things are causing much stress that hinders my research and study.

> Group-consciousness (shudan-shugi) has continued since a half century ago as one of the Japanese strong points. But in fact, I cannot trust Japanese even now because of that.

> It is difficult to make true friendship with Japanese. I have been here over two years. But I have only acquaintance level relationships. We always are treated special, I feel. People are the same wherever you go, and if you can understand the environment around you I thought it was possible [to make friends]. In that way I feel it is very different from other countries.

In contrast to these views, was the perception of Japanese as kind. Several students (7) mentioned the kindness of Japanese as an impressive feature of their stay in Japan.

> People are kind in Japan. That is a very good impression I had.

> The Japanese spirit of kindness and not bothering others is something that we should learn from them.

**DILIGENT VERSUS INHUMAN**

Another major theme observed in responses on Japanese society and human relations with Japanese describes observations of Japanese at work; 23 respondents expressed admiration for the diligence and serious working attitudes of Japanese. Some (7) attributed these
attitudes and behaviours of Japanese regarding hard work and a sense of responsibility to Japan’s status as an advanced nation with a highly ordered and stable society.

- The Japanese have strong feelings of responsibility in their own work.
- I think that they are responsible and they engage in their given work with enthusiasm.
- Professors are always working eagerly.

In contrast to these positive evaluations of Japanese working attitudes, 16 Korean students also included complaints about the poor communication and lack of meaningful human relationships with Japanese people. While praising them as hard-working, they also described Japanese as closed (heisateki), preoccupied (yoyu ga nai), inhuman (hiningenteki), cold-hearted (joh ga nai), unemotional (kanjoh ga nai) and individualistic (kojinshugi). These students criticised an excess in work that led to an inhuman quality.

- What I can learn from Japanese is that they will certainly complete their work. But on the other hand, the communication with Japanese is problematic.
- The graduate students at the University are working hard, but most of them are zero in humane aspect. They may not be zero, but personally, I see very few students above 50 points.
- The Japanese in the lab are extremely different from Koreans. I speak to them, but they are reluctant to carry on a conversation with me. That may be why I feel so much stress.

These observations were not limited to Japanese students, but also included their academic advisers. While the lack of meaningful social contact with fellow students gives them stress, the absence of communication with their professors obviously has more direct ramifications for their research. Not only the lack of time with advisers, but also the absence of supervision and support were cited.

- There is not enough extensive communication with professors.
- Professors never praised nor encouraged in my three years of study.
- For 20 months, my academic advisor never mentioned about my research in our conversation.
- You can’t have enough communication on a wide level with professors, so it gives me a dreary feeling. I can’t feel Japanese are interested in human relations.

Observations of Japanese at work extend to attributions of spiritual emptiness. Some Koreans see the Japanese working style as pitiful since it makes them limited human beings who don’t know how to enjoy life. Their lack of social skills, the limited nature of interpersonal contact, and lack of interest or understanding of foreigners are all seen as negative aspects of Japanese attitudes toward work.

- They don’t know how to enjoy themselves.
- As long as I stay in this country, I feel pity for them. Because they work so hard; but for what? They may have much money but I feel that they are unhappy people.
- There are so many Japanese who don’t know how to rest. Therefore it is difficult to live with them. There is a proverb saying that those who don’t know how to rest, don’t know how to work.

TRUE FEELINGS VERSUS FORMAL BEHAVIOURS

Nine students mentioned the Japanese sense of distinction between true feelings (honne) and formal statements (tatemae) as problematic in their relationships with Japanese. They regarded Japanese as distinguishing strongly between their private feelings and those that they are willing to express. These distinctions in Japanese behaviour made understanding problematic.

- It’s hard to interact with Japanese, because I don’t know what they’re thinking.
The difficulty of communications with Japanese is a problem. I have become tired of the way they cannot open themselves and reveal their attitudes.

However, other students were more negative in their interpretations of the usage of these distinctions. Some claimed that Japanese are polite to your face but talk badly about you behind your back. Others said that Japanese kindness is simply a facade of good manners concealing a prejudiced character. Trusting Japanese was made difficult by these kinds of behaviours.

The way in which Japanese distinguish in their hearts between honne and tatemae is hard to understand. The research lab is a silent battleground. To win one can only write one's dissertation.

The unbelievable amount of individual attacks that occur in talk behind your back means basically a feeling of trust doesn’t develop. The difficulty of communications with Japanese is a problem. I have become tired of the way they cannot open themselves and reveal their attitudes.

Some students cited the ritualistic nature of Japanese behaviour as problematic. These students saw certain behaviours as done automatically out of a sense of propriety, rather than from a genuine feeling. They therefore felt thwarted in their attempts to establish more intimacy with Japanese.

Because Japanese are so individualistic they sometimes lose their humanity. When I give something just because I want to, they immediately return something, so I feel uneasy. Japanese obey rules well, but they lose their flexibility. But you get used to this lifestyle and it becomes convenient. Daily interactions are okay, but it is hard to have conversations in which we open our hearts.

You feel a psychological barrier as Japan and the Japanese are so formal and don’t have spirituality, so it is very hard to get close.

RESIGNATION VERSUS PERSEVERANCE

The responses of students also revealed how they chose to deal with the conflicts they encountered in Japan. Unfortunately, some found that the disappointments were too great to overcome. They simply resigned themselves to putting up with the situation until they could obtain their degree and return home. Others resolve to keep making an attempt at communication despite the setbacks and discouragement they face.

My expectations are so different from reality that I feel a disappointment in myself and in Japan and human relations here. Not only in the research room but outside as well, it is hard to make Japanese friends -- actually I should say it is impossible.

Despite difficulties, I keep trying to develop contact with Japanese students and professors that involves mutual understanding.

I had no particular expectations, I just wanted to study so I decided to come here. It is hard to understand Japan from inside the lab. However, from the atmosphere and students’ attitudes I feel that I don’t fit. Now I just want to hurry and graduate to escape. Until then, I can just endure.

Some students develop an attitude as an adversary. They reject Japanese because they feel rejected by them. Their nationalistic feelings as Koreans are thus strengthened. Then they resolve to utilise their study to acquire knowledge that will enable Korea to overtake Japan.

I am aware of the contradictions in understanding Japan. In particular, the degree, almost to a sickness, that they hate Korea and Koreans. Some Japanese reject U.S., but distinguish between omote and ura (front and rear or outside and inside). I realised that I didn’t feel my self-pride as Korean, but now I enthusiastically encourage myself to persevere in defeating Japan.
Other students learn to develop a new and more open perspective, looking at Japanese and Koreans objectively without prejudice. Although they are critical of Japanese they also begin to look critically at their relations with fellow Koreans. Communication and understanding are viewed as requiring mutual effort to become more open and flexible.

Study in Japan is difficult because of research itself, but also life in the lab. Especially in my case, my whole school life is in the lab. Now my research is not progressing so I feel lots of stress. And my Japanese colleagues in the lab with whom I am always in contact are so different from Koreans. Even if I speak to them they don’t really respond much, so I feel stress. However, even between foreign students I often feel the same tension. Therefore, the interaction between Korean students may be even worse than that with Japanese.

Because I enjoy my research, I try to cope with difficulties of life and fulfil various roles as student, wife, and mother with appreciation and effort. As a foreigner, I feel I must accept a country’s cultural differences and try to resolve problems. Foreigners and Japanese need to mutually rid themselves of prejudice and resolve from their particular social position to recover their humanity.

COMPARISONS WITH KOREAN STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Comments by Korean international students in this study show both positive and negative aspects of their experience as foreign students in Japan. Some are impressed by the Japanese sense of responsibility and serious approach to work. They also find a general sense of respect for rules and good public behaviour impressive. Some are moved by a kindness exhibited by Japanese.

On the other hand, some students are disturbed by a feeling that Japanese are closed to them and lack sufficient interest, understanding, or compassion for their situation as foreign students. The general lack of interaction and the difficulty of understanding the little communication that does take place were mentioned as causes of discontent. And the perception of prejudice was seen as a strong barrier to human relations.

However, these negative perceptions are hardly surprising since foreign students in any country experience considerable stress and become discontent and complain about the host country people. Even in the USA, which has a long history of accepting foreign students, an established system of support services, and a reputation as a friendly society, for many years foreign students have reported difficulty making friends with Americans (Alexander, et al., 1976). The difficulties of Korean foreign students are also experienced by foreign students everywhere, sojourners to foreign lands, young students anywhere, or Korean students in Korea or abroad (Leong & Chou, 1996; Ward, Furnham, & Bochner 2001). Therefore, one of the challenges for researchers is to determine how much of the negative experiences or perceptions of Korean students in Japan are due to these other general factors and how much are specific to being a foreign student in Japan.

Comparison with Korean students in the USA shows that they also experience considerable difficulties, although of a different nature than those met by Korean students in Japan. Those in the USA encounter problems that are based more in the difficulty of managing daily life, in particular, language demands and related communication problems. However, while language problems are relatively easily overcome by Korean students in Japan, communication problems linger. Problems in Japan seem more related to their interaction with the manners, customs, and social attitudes of Japanese. In the relatively safer and seemingly more similar Japanese society, Korean students manage daily life more easily than those in the USA, but human relations problems weigh heavily on them.
Although some students anticipate it, prejudice and discrimination bothers many Korean students in Japan. But looking at this situation in an international perspective, we can see a similar phenomenon occur in the USA. Many foreign students are concerned about what they perceive as prejudice or condescension from Americans (Althen, 1995). In the USA, this prejudice is partly due to ethnocentrism in Americans who regard the rest of the world as revolving around their nation. But there is also the aspect of the loss of status suffered by foreign students when they come to the USA and trade in their professional status for student status which commands little respect. They are then vulnerable to feelings that natives do not treat them with the respect that they deserve relative to their age, experience and status in their home country.

Similar phenomena occur in Japan where ethnocentric attitudes toward other Asians certainly exist. And even more than in the USA, foreign students may suffer from status loss, especially in graduate schools. Japanese graduate students tend to be young, usually just out of college, and generally inexperienced in society. Foreign students, on the other hand, are older and often come with work, military, and family experience. But in the hierarchy of their department they find themselves at the bottom, due to their language difficulties and inability to serve as a respected senior (sempai) who will help the Japanese student now and in the future.

The well-established system of welcoming foreign students in the USA ensures that Korean foreign students experience fewer problems related to the foreign students system of the university or in human relations. In Japan their problems are due more to what may be issues related to introducing foreigners into what had long been an exclusively Japanese university system and general society. Although the USA has tremendous ethnic conflict, there is an ideology of openness and ethnic diversity that contrasts very sharply with Japan’s ideology of a monoethnic nation. The more problematic historical relations between Korea and Japan compared to those between Korea and the USA would also indicate the likelihood of greater interpersonal conflict for foreign students in Japan (Lee & De Vos, 1980).

**BARRIERS TO UNDERSTANDING**

The problems of Korean students in human relations with Japanese can be partly explained by differences in sense of self and communicative style. Encounters with natives for foreign students are often uncomfortable or problematic because of a difference in what discussion topics and styles of interaction are considered appropriate. The different sense of “private and public selves” between peoples of different cultures means that the difference of what aspects of the self are regarded by an individual as expressible in public and what aspects are considered as purely part of the individual’s private world leads directly to misunderstandings and conflicts (Barnlund, 1989). Cultural differences, specifically differences among expectations concerning how acquaintances and friends will behave are the source of human relations problems between foreign students and the natives (Brislin, 1993).

Communicative style among Japanese is characterised by marked distinctions among public and private, expressed in Japanese by expressions such as inside (uchi) and outside (soto), front (omote) and rear (ura), tatemae and honne. While such distinctions are universal, they appear to be especially extreme in importance among Japanese (Doi, 1986).

Although they are often struck by how similar the cultures are, some Korean students express confusion about the Japanese distinction between honne and tatemae. They claim
that they do not understand what the person is thinking. Or they understand *tatemae* is being used but find it offensive and it strikes them as dishonest or insincere.

Korean students appear to expect more intimate communication in their interactions with Japanese. They expect the research lab to become an intimate setting in which members become part of the *uchi* rather than *soto*. But they find that the environment is cool and members remain aloof or individualistic, in particular from the foreign student, who may not be admitted into the inner circle that does exist. The result ranges from disappointment to negative attitudes toward Japanese.

Foreign study in Japan is filled with problems related to economic and systemic barriers. With the exception of those who receive Japanese government scholarships or similar support, the financial problems of Korean students in recent years are severe. These problems can be overcome simply through the allocation of more scholarship money, but other barriers to their study remain that must be overcome. The experience of Korean international students in Japan is characterised by mixed reactions to the quality of the study environment. Their experience with immigration officials is negative, although relaxation of regulations is likely to lead to improvements. The remaining barriers may be more in human relations and this is an area where we will have to turn our attention.

The negative feelings of Korean students are not surprising because of the long history of animosity between Japanese and Koreans. Surveys still indicate the existence of mutual distrust between the neighbours. Koreans are educated to regard Japanese as aggressors historically who now have something to offer due to their advanced economic development. Because relations are still strained, the experiences of Korean students in Japan have a special significance for evaluating the potential benefits of international educational programs involving foreign students.

But while young Koreans have heard about Japanese prejudice, they have never experienced it themselves and are therefore relatively open to changing their attitudes. Whether the problems they encounter in Japan are problems related to foreign students anywhere or whether they are problems particularly for Koreans in Japan is the question we need to ask. Historical data on the problems of foreign students indicate that the nature of Japanese society’s high degree of cultural homogeneity may lead to difficulties (Nagai, 1977). Although there has been openness in Japan to adopting and absorbing foreign cultures, it cannot be denied that there is also the closed attitude that the society is composed only of Japanese and others should not be allowed in. Japanese are often accused of having a particular problem in relating with foreigners and this is a great handicap in fulfilling major roles and expectations in the global community. The recognition that international educational programs involve a mutual meeting of people of different cultures and mutual learning is clearly essential.

The increase in international students in Japan has been fostered by Japanese government policy designed to internationalise higher education. This investment in bringing students from various countries to Japan and joint efforts in education and research is aimed at contributing to the development of human resources that are essential for international cooperation. Ideally, the students who come to Japan eventually return to their home countries and become bridges with Japan in various fields. However, it is obvious that many students are dissatisfied with the education and social treatment they receive in Japan. Although they appear to become more positive after returning home many do not come to fulfil the ideal of becoming cultural bridges between their home country and Japan.
Student exchange represents a possible source of resolving the difficult relations between people of different countries. However, the results of this survey indicate several areas of concern where the hardship of Korean student life in Japan may interfere with such a desirable outcome for them. Overcoming these hardships is both a personal challenge for students and also an important priority for the government and universities in making a success of the dramatic program of internationalising Japanese higher education.

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