

Aspiration and Adversity in International Exchange

Kikuchi Akinori and Takei Hajime

A Japan-Korea exchange program was abruptly cancelled just before a group of some twenty-one Korean high school students was about to depart for a summer school program in Japan. But the sentiments of both the Japanese students awaiting their visitors and the Korean students could not be contained by borders. They realized anew the importance of exchanges between them.

On the short flight from Tokyo to Seoul, Kikuchi Akinori took out a small notebook and began to scribble, trying to organize his thoughts on what to say to Mr. An, the principal of Joongsan Foreign Language High School in Ch'ungju province, Korea, and Mr. Yi, a Japanese-language teacher at the school: "Did we give up too easily? Were we being unfair to our students? Shall we reconsider the program? I can understand the position Korean schools must find themselves in because of these developments. But for all of us in the teaching profession, isn't it our duty to give students every opportunity to learn? Whatever the reason, this turn of events ultimately means that we have collaborated in robbing our students of the opportunity to learn."

A Single Phone Call

Kikuchi was a teacher at Chuo University Suginami High School in Tokyo. It was summer 2001. Ten years earlier he had taught Japanese language at a women's college in Daegu, the fourth-largest city in South Korea. Now assigned

to teach Japanese language and literature, he also taught introductory Korean in a class on "comparative expression."

That July Suginami High was completing preparations to hold a joint summer school for its own students and twenty-one students from Joongsan Foreign Language High School in Ch'ungju. Kikuchi was in charge of arrangements for the program on the Japan side. It was the first time Suginami High had ever attempted to offer homestays for foreign students, and from start to finish it was a totally new experience for the planners. Resolved to make it their very own, hand-tailored exchange program, they started out by matching each of the visiting students with a Japanese student at Suginami High and arranging for homestay accommodations. Final dates had only been decided in April, which meant that finding potential host families, fitting in successive meetings to prepare the teachers, and making all the other arrangements had to be done in a very short period of time.

The students had thrown themselves into creating a program of events for a camping trip in the mountains of Hakone. They had planned a cook-out they called the "Japan-Korea curry

competition" and a recreation program; they had produced handbooks for all the participants and designed a logo for matching T-shirts. In music class they had learned a repertoire of Korean songs. They made school flags for both schools to hang in the gymnasium. The brass band was still earnestly practicing the Joongsan High school song, and the art club had slaved over a huge banner, doing their best with the unfamiliar Hangul characters.

Just when they had completed all the finishing touches and were ready to welcome their guests, the call came: the exchange program had been called off. It was three days before the Korean students were scheduled to arrive in Japan.

Can Nothing Be Done?

In July the media had been reporting about the tensions between Japan and Korea over the "textbook issue." Both the Korean and Chinese governments had vociferously denounced the decision that spring by the Japanese education ministry screening panel to approve a new junior high school history textbook, despite many objections that it contained questionable interpretations of historical facts. Already stories of foreign exchange programs being cancelled as a result of the rising tensions were heard from all over Japan. News accounts gave the impression that anti-Japan sentiment in South Korea was so widespread as to make student exchange programs with Japan out of the question. The telephone call came just as Kikuchi had begun to worry that Joongsan High might have come under its influence as well.

Kikuchi's initial shock quickly turned to disbelief, then to indignation: "They didn't even consult us! They just decided unilaterally!" he fumed. But the decision was already final.

At a total loss, he wondered whether they really had no choice but to give in and accept it; how could he possibly explain it to the students? Finally, and with an aching heart, he told them how there are times when even the shared aspirations of learning through contact with people from the country next door can be thwarted by the actions of a third party. That was what had happened to their summer school. "No matter how difficult it is to accept," he said, "we've just



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got to face reality." Later, he could not help asking himself whether that was the kind of answer an educator should give his students. It was a painful and frustrating dilemma.

Collegial Support

Using an Internet mailing list for high school instructors of Korean in Japan, Kikuchi vented his reluctance to let the matter drop. "My feelings are too complicated to describe," he wrote. "I will never forget seeing all those students crying. I was weeping, too, as I thought of the tears of students on both sides, sharing the same anguish and frustration." Kikuchi desperately wanted to speak directly with the students and faculty at Joongsan High. A number of those on the mailing list sensed that urgency in his message. Takei was one of them. He decided that Kikuchi had to go to Ch'ungju, and he would go with him.

Takei Hajime, a social studies teacher at the Tokyo Metropolitan Hibiya High School, also taught Korean. His interest in and involvement with Korea went back ten years. Author of a book about historic monuments in Seoul, he was also translator of a Korean work on the era of the Japanese occupation (1910-45). Like Kikuchi, he

had long been on a Japan-based Internet mailing list for Korean language instructors.

Takei had met Kikuchi one week before the cancellation. He remembered how Kikuchi's face had glowed with excitement as he spoke of his school's plans for the program. Takei wondered whether the media claims of an anti-Japan mood "throughout Korea" were really true. The actual situation in Korea might be quite different from the way the media painted it. In his e-mail, Kikuchi had written how he had still not been able to come to terms with the cancellation. Guessing that Kikuchi was likely to go to Korea to visit Joongsan High, Takei decided he wanted to accompany him. He, too, wanted to find out what had really happened.

To Ch'ungju

At 7:30 the morning of 11 August, Kikuchi and Takei met at a hotel in Seoul and headed out for the high school in Ch'ungju, which was located in a quiet town surrounded by mountains in northern Ch'ungch'ong province, about 100 kilometers southeast of Seoul. Boarding a rapid transit bus at the East Seoul terminal, they arrived two and a half hours later. Kikuchi talked non-stop during the ride. He gave Takei an exhaustive report of the preparations Sugunami

High had made to receive the Korean students and the care and thoughtfulness of the host families. One family had had matching cotton summer yukata made for the occasion, another had had their bathroom remodeled, and yet another family had been practicing greetings in Korean, such as "An nyong hasimnikka?" (How are you?). For each student and each family the planning and preparations had been full of drama and expectations. Kikuchi had to convey the sincerity of these people to the faculty and students at the school in Korea.

"I've got to find out what they think about the decision that trampled the anticipation, hopes, and eagerness to share that we've all been feeling. What will I do if the Koreans respond that all the blame lies with Japan . . .?" As if to drive away his doubts and anxieties, Kikuchi talked on incessantly.

Shared Sentiments

The high school was situated halfway up a mountainside in the suburbs of Ch'ungju. The head Japanese language teacher (Mr. Yi), the vice-principal, and the school's head teacher came to meet them at the entrance. When the principal, Mr. An, who was in a meeting, heard about their arrival, he immediately called them into his office. The first thing he said was, "We kept up negotiations with the provincial education office until three days before the students were due to leave, but in the end, they refused to give us permission to go. There is no way to apologize adequately to you and your school."

That meant that until just before the departure date Joongsan High had been doing all it could to keep the program on track. Other schools in the province had given up and cancelled their exchange programs with Japan, but the Joongsan students tried until the last minute to save the joint summer school in Sugunami. Mr. An described how their efforts had even been reported in the local press and television stations. The teachers at the school had discussed the problem and had decided that as a school, they would choose not to suspend the exchange program with Japan. An administrative order issued by the provincial office of education, however, forced them to cancel everything.



The exchange program logo: the Korean ideograph for "middle" (Kr. *joong*; Jp. *chu*) shared by the names of both schools, occupies the top of the cube, straddling the Hangul character of the Korean high school's name, Joongsan, on the left and the kanji character "sugi" of "Suginami" on the right.

As they listened to the account of what had happened on the Korean side, Kikuchi and Takei finally let down their guard and stopped feeling defensive. Joongsan High had not called off the exchange simply because of tensions over the textbook issue. The teachers at Joongsan High had been disappointed, too. It became abundantly clear that neither side had any desire to cancel the program; on the contrary, the deep disappointment was shared by both schools.

The Korean Students' Feelings

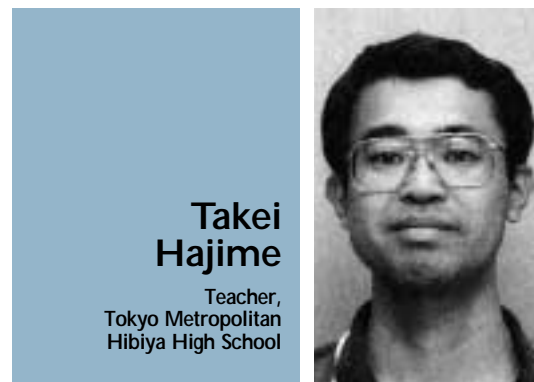
The students in the Japan exchange program were gathered together in a conference room. Kikuchi put on one of the T-shirts with the two-school friendship logo that they had made in Japan for everyone, and he stood before the tense-looking students. He began to describe the anguish and frustration of the students and families at Sugunami High when they learned the exchange had been cancelled. His words were calm but they pulsed with his aspirations for the exchange. Some of the Korean students in the room began to cry. He ended by stating with unswerving sincerity, "Whatever it takes, we want you to come to Japan."

Then it was the Korean students' turn. Kikuchi and Takei listened as they talked about their own sense of loss. Some described how they had put aside studying for term-end exams and devoted themselves to Japanese conversation

practice. Others had prepared special gifts for their homestay families. There were students who had practiced songs and dances to perform at the summer camp. Their eager, excited anticipation came across vividly, and the crushing letdown later when the program was cancelled was painfully clear. Kikuchi realized that everyone on both sides felt the same discouragement, the same anger, and the same helpless frustration.

Most of the students who had signed up for the program were in the Japanese language course, but two were studying other languages. Since Joongsan High specialized in foreign languages, it offered several language courses besides Japanese. They could have chosen to go to Canada, China, or some other country for language training, but they had specifically set their sights on the program in Japan. It was easy to see how strongly Mr. Yi, who taught Japanese as a second foreign language, had emphasized the significance of the program in Japan. (In South Korea, all students in high school are required to study English and one other foreign language.)

Kikuchi heard about two students who had sent protests by e-mail to the official residence (Blue House) of the South Korean president. The provincial office of education apparently had responded by demanding, "What kind of things are they teaching you at that school?" The school administrators were unperturbed by the official knuckle-rapping. On the contrary, the



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A teacher of social studies and Korean language at Tokyo Metropolitan Hibiya High School. Takei has pursued a special interest in Korean history and society since 1991. He has appeared on Japanese-language broadcasts by the Korean public service broadcaster KBS presenting analyses of Korean history, and is author of *Souru no okyu meguri* [Imperial Palaces in Seoul] and translator of *Souru ni kizamareta Nihon* [Japan's Imprint on Seoul] and *Na Ilbon Canda* [Let's Go to Japan].

principal and his staff spoke proudly of what the students had done. (In Japan, students at Suginami High had sent e-mail messages to Prime Minister Koizumi to protest the cancellation, but they got no response.)

Meeting Face-To-Face

Perhaps partly because a month had passed since the program's cancellation, most of the students said they thought that political issues and school exchange programs ought to be treated separately. Most of their teachers agreed. In the early 1990s, when Kikuchi and Takei first became involved with South Korea, issues in the private and public spheres often overlapped. That night, at their lodgings, they reflected on how much the atmosphere in Korea had changed since then.

Kikuchi had always taught his students that international exchange and the understanding of different cultures need not be limited to person-to-person exchange, but should include other types of exchange as well. As he listened to the students and teachers at Joongsan High, however, he realized the tremendous significance of meeting and talking face-to-face. It was not the two countries, not even the two schools—it was individual students he really wanted to bring together. One by one, he recalled the faces of the Japanese teenagers who had been paired with the Korean students for the exchange program. He now knew firsthand that the only way for people to settle troubled emotions between them was to meet face-to-face.

Takei, for his part, always tried to convey to his students his belief that in order to know another culture, they should try to look at it from the other's standpoint as well as their own. Absorbing everything the Korean students and teachers were saying, including their painful grappling with the issues connected to the textbook controversy, he felt that it was time to take a closer look at the societies of both countries. What you hear is often very different from reality, and Takei realized that the reality in South Korea was not at all like the news media image of uniformly pervasive anti-Japanism. He sensed no anti-Japanese sentiment at Joongsan High. As long as we look at Japan and Korea on the level

of the country-to-country relationship, he thought, we cannot see each other accurately.

Kikuchi and Takei had the same thoughts. What we need is not an abstract "Japan-Korea relationship," but bonds built on the experience of and hope for meeting each other face-to-face. In the simple act of meeting, the two Japanese teachers and the students and teachers at Joongsan High had each discovered something about the other.

Epilogue: On September 12th, Suginami High School held a student-led panel discussion about the program and its cancellation. Initially, the discussion seemed to focus on topics like the textbook issue and how government officials should treat national war memorials, but before the three and a half hours of debate were over, it had expanded to confirm the importance of individuals in exchange and the need to keep trying, as high school students, to understand other cultures. (*Translated by Luke Morehouse*)



About this Article

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Translated from the original Japanese, "Kokkyo o koetakatta kokosei," published in the December 2001 issue of *Gaiko Forum*. For the younger generations of Korea and Japan who readily accept music, film, and other aspects of the subcultures of each other's country, the ROK and Japan are steadily becoming "near" not just geographically but otherwise. More and more Japanese high schools choose Korea as the destination of their school trips. Korean schools, too, send students to Japan for cultural exchange programs. Young people's endeavors to learn from each other are sometimes frustrated, however, by political events. Even then, they and their teachers do not give up their belief in the value of cultural exchange.