Dimensions of Identity[1] and Foreign Students[2]

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Abstract

Our societies have been globalizing, and so has our educational environment. In this paper, identity of foreign students in Japan is re-examined from a perspective of Cultural Studies. The author attempts to apply the theory of cultural circuit to identity issues in relation to other cultural processes such as representation, consumption, and regulation, taking the stance of non-essentialism. In addition, the author gives a suggestion of revised communication model and briefly compares it with other communication models with a focus on identity. Finally, the author suggests a problematic area in communication with foreign students in Japan.

Keywords: Identity, Circuit of Culture, Classification Systems, Communication, Identity-Filter Model

1. Introduction: Globalizing Educational Environment

In our globalizing contemporary societies, students enrolled in higher education as well as scholars and researchers will have to demonstrate academic excellence within intercultural environments.   In addition to their academic expertise, psychosocial skills are of critical importance to cross-cultural success, both of which can be an accumulative burden for sojourners.   Empirical observations by Shigematsu (2001: p. 2) and Sodowsky & Plake (1992: pp. 53-59) have indicated that negative outcomes may result in perceiving prejudice, affiliating with their own national group, and avoiding the use of language of the host culture.   With the growing number and importance of foreign students in the US, for instance, it has become of increasing importance to research how they adjust to life on campus (ibid.).

Japan as a target country for studying abroad is not an exception to this global phenomenon.   The total numbr of students from abroad reached 109,508 as of May 1, 2003, according to a press release of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MECSST: November 11, 2003), and it reached the mark of 100,000 set by the Nakasone cabinet in August 1983.   Although this number seems far lower yet compared among the West, the rate of increase has been higher than ever in the past three years.

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[1] Identity as a cultural process in relation to other cultural processes as defined in the circuit of culture.
[2] Foreign students in this article refer to those who are enrolled in higher education.

'Along with massification of studying abroad, purposes of experiences have become more individualized nowadays.... Studying abroad is no longer a privilege only for the young, and the growth in the number of students of privately financed (shihi) is predominant' (translated: Ishizuki, 1989: p. 40).

As a matter of course, establishment of *'proactive'* support system (Yokota, 1999: pp. 16-17) and *'operational improvement'* of foreign student advising (Shiratsuchi, 1999: pp. 36-50) have become an urgent matter for school officials whose responsibilities lie in the context of school administration.

Furthermore, identity has become a critical issue that is globally recognized in the complexity contemporary societies have brought to us. It is, in other words, one of the focal points in social science and humanities: it locates itself at the crossroads of academia. The main feature on its popularity is that identity links individual and social dimensions of human life, pointing both to the immersion of our being in culture and social relations, and to our individuality. Cultural developments nowadays have also contributed to placing the issues of identity at the centre of public attention. Therefore, the author attempts to apply theories of identity to the foreign students in Japan. Hopefully, this present study reveals some hidden dimensions of the struggles in the process of communication that both foreign students and school officials have been experiencing, so that the identity politics in its process becomes more visible.

2. Identity and Foreign Students:

Identity issues of foreign students appear in various fields of literature indeed, e.g. personality psychology, counseling psychology, intercultural communication, anthropological studies, and socio-linguistics to name just a few. Most of these studies have focused on psychological perspectives. In this article, however, primary concern lies in the scope of identity dimensions, and the issue is speculated in an interdisciplinary fashion. First, identity is viewed from a cultural point of view. By bringing in its quarry of knowledge and information from Cultural Studies, perhaps we may be able to reveal some social reality that is anti-humanistic (Hall, 1996: p. 343), so that identity issues of foreign students are reviewed from a wider perspective. Second, identity issues are closely related to the meaning of one's existence in relation to others; therefore, philosophical dimensions in communication should be fed in. Third, acculturation studies in the field of personality psychology should play an important role in the assessment of one's standing in foreign environment.

2.1. Development of Identity

2.1.1. Circulation of Identity

First of all, the concept of *'identity'* was coined by Erik Erikson in 1950s, and it has been broadly studied in the field of personality psychology ever since.   Moreover, *identity* is placed in the *circuit of culture* in more recent Cultural Studies as illustrated in Figure 1.
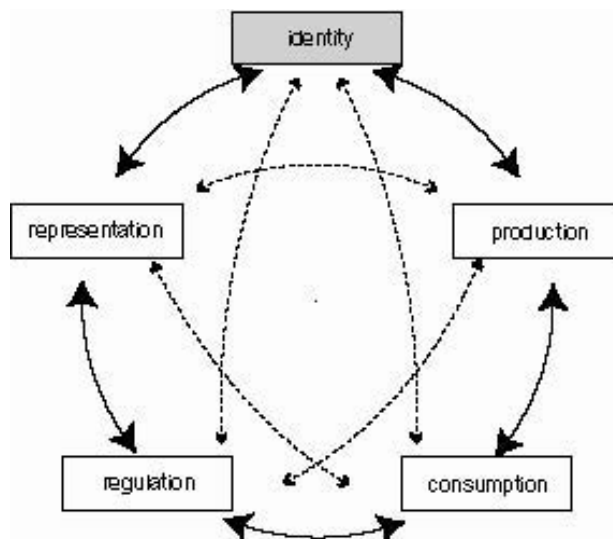

Figure 1:   Circuit of Culture

It is not a linear, sequential process (Woodward, 1997).   According to this circuit, *'Identities are produced, consumed and regulated within culture   creating meanings through symbolic systems of representation'* (ibid.).   Identity located in this circuit is significant in the sense that the issue is seen not as separate and independent but as intertwined with the other cultural processes: production; consumption; regulation; and representation.   For instance, in our consumer-led societies as a result of globalization, newly formed identities prevail over national, local identities.

> *'Consumption is the articulation of a sense of identity.   Our identity is made up by our consumption of goods—and their consumption and display constitutes our expression of taste.   So display—to ourselves and to others—is largely for symbolic significance, indicating our membership of a particular culture'* (Mackay, 1997: p. 4).

The relationship between one's identity and consumption may seem difficult to grasp; however, it can be easily observed in our day-to-day life.   For instance, we often give a wry smile over souvenirs given from abroad, finding them to have been produced at home.   This particular wry smile is a sign of disappointment toward multinational production systems of local specialty.   Likewise, it is true that some of us as well as

some foreign students lead life as 'global consumers'; they may feel detached from the older identities that were defined by previous generations.   They enjoy consumption of products, such as Nike and Gap, which are globally shared among the youth.

Similarly, identities are often consumed or 'bought' and such consumption propensities are very often kept under surveillances and regulated.   Identity as a consumer product can also be observed in the name of education.   That is, the number of overseas students admitted on campus may be a sensitive issue especially among school officials who believe it to be the only internationalization parameter of educational environment.   However, if it is the case that accepting foreign students is a countermeasure for decreasing student population of a school, it is not too much to say that identities of foreign students are victimized in a business practice.   Also, regulations of foreign students are found in the change of immigration control strengthened by Ministry of Justice (November 11, 2003: http://www.jpss.jp/news/tuutatu.html).   Along with the change in immigration policies, identities of foreign students may well be affected as well.   According to this notification, the number of illegal over-stays of foreign students has been again on the rise, and crimes committed by foreign students have become a social concern in recent years (ibid.).   It is true that this policy change will surely influence the extension of period of stay in terms of financial, legal status of each student, which might lead to change in one's identity as a foreign student.   It is always the case that the regulatory forces coexist with one's identities.

Identification with old certainties or national traditions is no longer applicable in our globalizing societies.   In other words, one must carefully observe identities from social rather than national:

> *'Those from Japan are Mr. Toyota, who is a business executive of a large corporation in Tokyo, and Ms. Honda, a shop assistant in a small shop in a small town in Shikoku.   Those from Germany are Mr. Müller, who is an executive director of a large firm in Frankfurt, and Ms Schmitz, a clerk in a small firm in a small town in northern Germany.   We assume that they can communicate in a common language.   Which pair would be most similar in their thought and behavior patterns?   According to the conventional culture argument, Mr. Toyota and Ms Honda would form one cluster and Mr. Müller and Ms Schmitz the other, because the pairs would be based on shared national culture.   The subcultural model suggests possibility that the close pars may be Mr. Toyota and Mr. Müller on the one hand and Ms. Honda and Ms Schmitz on the other, membership of each*

> *pair being determined by similarities of gender, occupation, firm size, and place of residence'.* (Sugimoto, 1997: p. 24)

It should be noted that, in the process of globalization, cultures are often crossed over, and so are identities. Encountering a foreign student, we can no longer rely on our conventional references over nationality, culture, or any other categories that used to shape our own individual recognition of others.

In this present study, construction of identity is reviewed from socio-cultural perspectives. Identity can be defined as the sense of belonging to a certain group that forms a culture, and this sense of belonging tells an individual who he/she is. Variants of identity are diverse: religious, ethnic, sexual, racial, linguistic, national, social, and socioeconomic (Segal, 1997: p. 221; Nakamoto, 1999: pp. 15-24). In addition, identity emerges from others' idea that makes one feel he/she belongs to a particular group.

> *'A further necessity in adjusting to a new culture must be the monitoring of the behaviors and reactions of one's self and others around one's self. It may also be the case that conscious, critical thinking about intercultural incidents, the generation of rival hypotheses that explain conflict other than those from their own cultural framework and the creation of a new set of ideas about social interaction are critical to adjustment'* (David Matsumoto, Jeff LeRoux, Charlotte Ratzlaff, Haruyo Tatani, Hideko Uchida, Chu Kim and Shoko Araki Available online 26 July 2001)

In other words, identity is equivalent to one's social relationships, his/her complex involvement with others, and in contemporary societies, it seems that identity variants are often confronting within an individual. Also, the dynamics of one's identity is reciprocal to the others, and the same complexities take place in them as well. Therefore, studying the relation between one's identity and its effect on communicating with others is important.

2.1.2. Production of Identity

The construction of identity involves three phases: representation systems, shared history/ethnicity, and difference. First, identity, as a cultural process, is constructed through verbal or non-verbal representation systems. According to Saussure, conceptualization of the world is heavily linguistically biased; in other words, practice of representations signifies one's cognitive processes (Culler, 1976: p. 19). Clinging to one's regional accent or dialect can be interpreted as verbal, and appearing in ethnic costume for an international festival is a well-illustrated example of non-verbal representation that derives from one's identity.

> *'Representation is the production of meaning of the concepts in our minds through language.   It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the real world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events'* (Hall, 1997: p. 17).

Representations, whether verbal or non-verbal, enable the constituent members of a certain cultural group to exchange meanings.   As a result, belonging to the same culture means to *'share a broadly similar conceptual map'* and *'the way of interpreting the signs of a language'* (ibid.: p. 19).   Linguistic competence, therefore, plays an important role when one's social integration is taken into account: a study shows that, in the case of the US, the stress is amplified among students from China, Japan, and Korea due to the fact that the only official languages in those countries are the native languages (Oropeza, Fitzgibbon & Baron, 1991: pp. 280-284).

> *'Because of differences in language, nonverbal behaviors, values, norms, attitudes, rules, systems, and all the other manifestations of culture, intercultural adjustment is replete with conflict, frustration, and struggle. They are, in fact, inevitable because of cultural differences, at least on the level of manifest behaviors (despite possible cultural similarities in underlying psychological goals and intentions). These conflict-arousing contexts are seeped with emotion, often negative.'* (Matsumoto, et al, 2001: p. 485)

In addition, a research shows that Japanese nationals with a *'volunteer spirit'* or teachers feeling obliged to talk with their students are the only ones who can help foreign students with social integration (Cigler and Matsuoka, 1998: p. 65).   Living in an environment where one is compelled to use a language other than one's own is not only stressful, but also characteristic of identity deprivation.

Secondly, in the respect that foreign students transfer to reside in a new cultural environment, a shared past and race/kinship, as *'essentialists'*[3] (Woodward, 1997: p. 11) argue, would often be attributed to the basis in the construction of identities.

> *"I'm very much a creature of the planet,"* says Mr. Reza, born in Glasgow of Mauritian parents. *"I don't belong to any particular land mass.   My skin is brown but I don't feel Mauritian.   I feel more British when I go abroad.'* (Giles, 1997: p. 6)

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[3] Essentialists refer to those who believe that there is one clear, authentic set of characteristics which a certain group share and which do not alter across time; whereas, non-essentialists would focus on differences, as well as common or shared characteristics among the members of a group.   In this article, the author takes a non-essentialist approach to identity.

Although Mr. Reza does not identify strongly with any particular social groupings, nor see himself as belonging to a nation-state, he admits his national identity as an English is accentuated abroad.   In this socio-cultural perspective, it is not too much to say that identity is equivalent to one's personal history.   Reemergence of national identities results from transnational shifting of economic and cultural life since one's shared past has been highlighted as a result of cultural transfer.   Although this particular phenomenon may seem contrary to the process of globalization that attenuates the bonds of nationality based on belonging to a clearly defined nation-state, culture shock as a trigger of mental uncertainty may well play the role of a primordial amplifier of one's national identity.

Furthermore, identity is formed with the existence of others marked by difference. In other words, identities rely on what makes one distinguished from another (Woodward, 1997: p. 9), very often with a classification system socially constructed through language and representation.   Saussurean linguistic theory argues that binary position—the most extreme form of marking difference—is essential to the production of meaning (Hall, 1997: 'The work of representation' in Hall, S. (ed.) *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*).   Furthermore, as Gates (1993: p. 497) maintains, *figure of speech* functions to organize categorization as in Europe/non-Europe, and white/color.   'Race', according to Gates, is not a biological essence but a social and linguistic construction of category.

Likewise, then, it should be noted that the classification between Japanese students and foreign/international, or exchange (*"ryuugakusei"* in Japanese) students itself is conductive to strengthening identity among the foreign students in Japan. Moreover, internal classification structure is far more complex because it may separate the students of *'kokuhi'* (government-financed) from those of *'shihi'* (privately financed).   A *kokuhi* student in Japan receives a monthly scholarship after the screening process administered by MECSST, which leads to the construction of economic as well as social identities among others.   Labels such as undergraduate and graduate students may as well have an effect upon their identities within a group that shares the same nationality.   In addition, the family situations, gender issues, housing situations, and economic factors all contribute to classification systems that are particularly culture specific.   If the Japanese society is characterized by patriarchal discourse of gender as Ogita (1986: pp. 34-36) describes, for example, educators of foreign students should pay extra attention to female foreign students because their identity crises are far more complex than those of male students.   Consequently,

difference in any of these classification systems above contributes to the construction of identity among foreign students.

2.1.3. Communication Models and Locating Identity

In order to observe what really is going on in the process of communication, whether intercultural or interpersonal, one must define a philosophical stance that projects its process.　In other words, communication is about how relatedness with others is defined.　Here, Buber's model is employed in order to illustrate personal stances that vary in four different patterns of interpersonal relations.

According to Buber, interpersonal relation is defined as a way of finding *quality* in others.　To simply illustrate Buber's Relationship Model (trans. Kaufmann), the quality that is seen in others projects or reflects upon oneself; also, the qualities of relationship can be illustrated as in Table 1.　That is, the supreme form of you, Thou, is the projection of a high quality in a relationship; whereas, by seeing the other as it, then, 'I' falls into the state of 'it'; therefore, building meaningful relationship with others is no longer possible.

Table 1: Scope of I and Thou

Quality of Relationship	Recognition of Self	Recognition of the Other
Standardized	I	you
Supreme	I	Thou
Degrading	I	it
Dying	it	it

Identity construction is based upon the existence of others; therefore, it is possible to interpret this chart as the transitional phases that involve in identity issues that reflect upon the relationship with others (Kameyama, 2002: p. 315).　Grossly simplified, standard to Supreme quality relationship, therefore, can be seen as identification with others; also, degrading to dying relationship can be interpreted as identity crises.

What can be consolidated from above is that identity is multi-pronged, which means that one lives with, constructs, and changes various sub-categories of identities, meeting with socio-economic situations, other individuals, and cross-cultural environments.　Or rather, identity itself is iridescent.　That is to say, in the author's personal observation combining cultural theorists, then, identities can be hypothesized

as something similar to a filterable projector screen that is versatile in color just like a cinematograph that is defined in the field of illuminating engineering or a lighting system in theater arts[4].   As in Figure 2, one's identification is cast by the illuminant onto the projector-filter as an identity, and projected so that the other individual can visually interpret it as angstrom.   In the actual process of communication, the luminous intensity varies in accordance with one's illuminace and its angle.   The recipient's interpretation also varies in accordance with its luminance.

Figure 2:   Identity-Filter Model
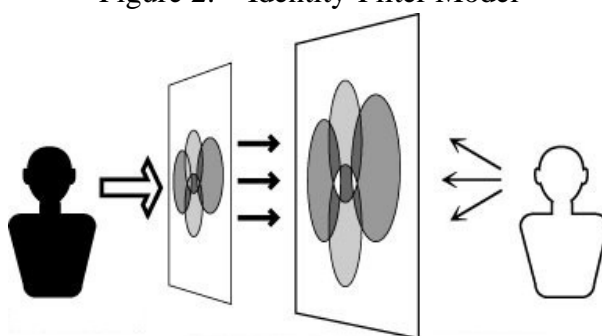
Therefore, the location of identity in a communication model becomes resembles the filter illustrated in Hashimoto's model of non-verbal communication process (1985) and the semiotic domain in Yamaguchi's model (1986); also, the projector screen of identity is the domain of 'the market of meaning' defined by Matsuoka's editing model (2001).   The relationship between those involved in communication affects lighting angles and creates the neutral transactional sphere defined as 'between' by Stewart, 'spiritual child' by Zephyr, or 'interhuman' by Buber (Stewart, 1982) if the angles are mutually confronted, and communication process of understanding becomes convergent.

Accordingly, then, a foreign student may experience situations in which he/she projects him/herself at a time as a person of a particular nationality, at another as a student who calls for academic supervision from a college professor, still at another as an individual in love, and so on.   In other words, a foreign student not always hopes to present his/her image as a 'foreign' student to others encountered.   It is almost like a game of 'hide and seek' of identities, except that the rules of this game are decided on the negotiation with the value systems of counterparts.   Nevertheless, some Japanese

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[4] Terminologies are borrowed from lighting technology.   Refer to the Dictionary of Lighting System in Theater Arts available in Japanese: http://homepage2.nifty.com/ka-i-ka-n/butai.htm

school officials often meet foreign students frowningly or tensely, which results from their own biases toward the word, 'foreign', in which the author sees as a social ill because these individuals deny multiple color layers of identities that students attempt to project.

2.2. Identity Crises and Foreign Student Advisor[5]

> *'Just now everybody wants to talk about 'identity'. As a keyword in contemporary politics it has taken on so many different connotations that sometimes it is obvious that people are not even talking about the same thing.... Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent, and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty'* (Mercer, 1990 in Rutherford, 1990: p. 43).

Identity crisis occurs because of the dilemmas between what is supposed to be fixed and of the reality that brings about drastic changes in one's economic, cultural, or social environment. As Gauntlett maintains, fluidity of identity is experienced practically by any individual.

> *'Even those who would say that they have never given any thought to questions or anxieties about their own identity will inevitably have been compelled to make significant choices throughout their lives, from everyday questions about clothing, appearance and leisure to high-impact decisions about relationships, beliefs and occupations'* (Gauntlett, David, 2002: *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*, Routledge, London and New York. (Extracts available at www.theory.org.uk).

In other words, it should be noted that identity is not fixed. It is a personal understanding of one's lifestyle. Indeed, this lifestyle has certain continuity; however, one's ambulation or mobility itself ceases its continuity (Giddens, 1991: p. 53), which results in psychological uncertainty. The experience of doubt and uncertainty is adaptive to stressful life of foreign students in Japan with difficulties in housing, children's education, language, and human relationships (Shigematsu and Shiratsuchi, 2001 cited in Murphy-Shigematsu, 2001: p. 3). Any of these stressors may become a cause of identity crisis. According to the *Acculturation Curve* designed by Hofstede (1991), some individuals remain in the negative state: those who continuously feel

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[5] Generally, a foreign student advisor offers student counseling to international students and provides information and advice on student life, human relationships, visa status, etc. He/she at times serves for psychological difficulties an international student might be experiencing.

discriminated and believe to be unaccepted. Indeed, all human societies are characterized by 'uncertainty avoidance' (March, 1976) that can be found in the fields of science technology, law, religion (Hofstede, 1991). The state of uncertainty is defined both individually and socially; in addition, it is synonymous with the degree of threat, which is felt by members of a certain culture, over as-yet-unrecognized factors (ibid.). Therefore, intercultural encounters bring about uncertainty a cause of identity crises on both those who are native of the host culture and the sojourners. To be more specific, Japanese nationals are also experiencing culture shock to some degree when encountering foreign students.

Culture shock of foreign students, according to Althen (1995: p. 88), is partially status-related.   That is, in the case of the US, where the status of university students is relatively low, those who come from one of the many countries where students are accorded considerable respect are often disturbed by the gap, especially those who have experience of employment.   .

> *'Most new foreign students will experience the discomfort of being treated as stereotypes rather than individuals. The natives will treat them as "foreign students" or perhaps "Orientals" (or Latinos, or Arabs, etc.) rather than individuals.   This experience is often perceived as demeaning"* (ibid.).

Whether or not the social status of students in Japan is higher than that of the US, one can easily imagine the hedge between students and *shakaijin*, fully-fledged members of society who have business experiences.

However, identity crises due to culture or status shock, according to Adler, can be viewed more positively and even necessary a profound cross-cultural learning.

> *'… a set of situations or circumstances involving intercultural communication in which the individual, as a result of the experiences, becomes aware of his own growth, learning and change. As a result of the culture shock process, the individual has gained a new perspective on himself, and has come to understanding his own identity in terms significant to himself'* (Adler, 1972: p. 14)

Therefore, identity crises can be interpreted as a key to personal growth in the process of acculturation.   This is exactly the point where the role of a foreign student advisor becomes of the foremost significance.

3. Identity as Determiner of Communicative Stance:

One can observe various identity strategies in acculturation studies.   As Berry (1997) points out, two factors should be taken into account when cultural adjustment

takes place.   In other words, the two stances decide upon the strategies for adjustment to the host culture: (1) identification with the host culture and (2) identification with the home culture (Berry, 1997; Van Oudenhoven, 2000).   When these two elements are combined, then mainly four patterns are theoretically plausible: Integration, Assimilation, Separation, and Marginalization.   Integration refers to positive attitude toward both own culture and host culture; assimilation (positive toward host culture and negative toward own culture); separation (positive toward own culture and negative toward host culture); and finally, marginalization (negative toward both cultures).

As a matter of course, integration perspective (positive identification toward both cultures) is ideal from an intercultural point of view; however, the other perspectives, even marginalization, should, too, be regarded as rather affirmative because it is impossible to presume that each perspective is static and fixed (Berry & Sam, 1997).

Similarly, Black, et al. (1999), did a study among overseas business executives as sojourners.   According to their 'Allegiance Model' as in Table 2, own culture and host culture are replaced with one's parent firm and local firm respectively.

Table 2: Allegiance Model

		Allegiance to the parent firm	
		Low	High
Allegiance to the local firm	Low	Free agents	Heart-at-the-parent-company-expatriates
	High	Going native-expatriates	Dual citizens

Although there is a clear difference from Berry's study in the subjects of research, the four categories of free agents, heart-at-the parent-company-expatriates, dual citizens, and going native-expatriates are parallel to the notions of marginalization, assimilation, integration, and assimilation respectively.   In this model, free agents, who respond with marginalization perspective, possess low allegiance to either firm.   Allegiance is heavily dependent upon one's sense of belonging; therefore, marginalization also gives some indication of being free agents—more individualized form of cultural adjustment.

The sojourners' allegiances compared in these above studies are different: one is in the scope of host culture, and the other is in the scope of parent company; however, the parallelism of those four cultural adjustments indicates the degree of belonging to other than one's own (past identity) determines one's standing in an intercultural context.

4. Conclusion:

As our social surrounding has become globalizing, identity has become an issue worthy of recognition, and so has that of foreign students along with internationalization of educational environment. The author has paid special attention to various dimensions of identity, attempting to analyze them from a viewpoint of Cultural Studies. Identities are produced, represented, consumed, and regulated in our contemporary societies, and this circuit has been verified in the case of foreign students. The study has revealed the overall complexity of identity issues and the influences on communication between Japanese nationals and foreign students. In reality, however, foreign students employ various patterns of cultural adjustment strategies in our society depending on the counterparts in the process of communication. Therefore, identity or identities appear to be iridescent, varying across time and situations, so one should interpret them as a creative adjustment process for personal growth in culture shock.

Japanese counterparts, especially those whose responsibility lies in interacting with foreign students, should be aware of the versatile characteristic of identity and its dimensions and mechanism of fluidity in order to be perceptive to human complexities that their students attempt to demonstrate. Otherwise, the communication process with foreign students may pose a high risk of remaining one-way, or jug-handled, which suppresses the hidden dimensions of identity complex.

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