Mood Sours for Japan’s Other Asian Students
Hopes for Forming a Mutually Beneficial Relationship Remain Unfulfilled

By NORMITSU ONISHI
FUKUOKA, Japan — By any standard, Su Dake, a 26-year-old Chi-
inese student, should feel satisfaction with his six years spent in Japan.

He expects to graduate from college in April and hopes to enter a
master’s program in business management by working hard, and
sleeping only a few hours each night. He has paid his college fees and
won scholarships from his employer. In-
dividual Japanese have been kind to
him, like his boss, who called Mr. Su’s landlord when the faucets in his
apartment fell.

Still, he said he had never felt particularly welcome in Japan. Like
other foreign students interviewed recently, Mr. Su said he had not
made any Japanese friends here and planned to return to China after
earning his master’s degree.

“It’s a sad fact to be unable to become friends with the people here,”
Mr. Su said after delivering newspapers on a recent morning.

“Living in Japan is like staying in a hotel forever, never in a home. I’m
always waiting to go home.”

To many Asian students, Japan is merely a place to get a degree and
earn some money before returning home, often with the opposite
impression Japan had hoped for. Neit-
erwise is pleased. As one newspa-
per, Nihon Keizai, put it, if foreign students “tell everyone how they
hate this country once they go home, we should ask in what purpose we
are hosting them to begin with.”

Japan attained a two-decade-old goal recently by hosting play to more
than 100,000 foreign students at once.

But the fulfillment of the goal, an-
counced with fanfare in 1983 when Japan
saw itself as a beacon for Asia, has gone largely unreported.

The students, mostly from Asia, were to acquire Japanese knowl-
edge, learn the culture and help mend Japan’s relations with a contin-
tent that has not forgotten the country’s imperial past. Instead, news of
crimes committed by foreign stu-
dents has grabbed headlines and shaped their image.

Even in this city in western Japan, which is close to the Asian continent
and has traditionally had many Asian students and residents, the killing of
a family of four by a Chinese

student has changed attitudes.

In a sharp reversal of recent pol-
icy, the government has now tight-
ned visa requirements for foreign students, citing their involvement in
illegal activities. When the full effect of the strict rules is felt a few years
from now, the number of foreign students will probably dip below the
covered goal. To prevent such
decline would require either a loos-
eening of visa requirements by the Justice Ministry or fundamental
changes in Education Ministry proced-
ures for how Japan deals with
foreign students. Neither seems like-
ly.

Norifumi Ushio, director of the of-
fice of international student educa-
tion policy, said the budget for for-
ingre students was insufficient politically impossible to increase.

“There is now a mood in society that says, ‘Why should we support foreign students?’” he said.

The place occupied by foreign stu-
dents touch on the question of what kind of society Japan should be and
it forge closer ties with Asia, the

better to draw workers for its own

not necessary to respect Asians.”

In 1983, there were 10,000 foreign students in Japan. The number rose
steadily over the years, especially as Japan’s rental system was re-
xamined in the early 1990’s. Then, in the past five years, the number shot up
because of the growing wealth of Chinese and their desire to study abroad.
Asians now account for 10 percent of foreign students; Chinese make up 65 percent of the total.

A common problem for the Asian students is Japan’s high living costs.

Many work more than the legally permitted number of hours. Accord-
ing to the police, students account for one of every four foreigners arrested
in criminal charges. Most of the

charges are for things like theft and
shoplifting; the involvement of a Chi-

nese student in the killings here of a
couple and their two children, found
weighed down at the bottom of a river late last year, was an exception.

There are problems on the Japa-
nese side, too. Many colleges, suffer-
ing from a declining Japanese stu-
dent population, accept foreigners with little regard to their long-term
financial wherewithal. The problem of students working illegally attests
Japan’s need for cheap labor, even

as it has been unwilling to reform
immigration laws.

Kumikazu Sasaki, chief of inspec-
tion for foreign students at the Jus-
tice Ministry, said immigration offi-
cers would now examine the ability of a prospective student’s family to pay educational expenses.

Colleges where students overstay their visas will also be scrutinized, he said.

Organizations supporting foreign students called for simple government-
dal changes. Fumio Takano, the

leader of such an organization in Tokyo, said Japan’s rental students are cur-
rently a guarantor, among other assur-
ances — make it onerous for foreign

students to find apartments. Mr. Ta-

kano has called for a system of guaran-
tor for 200 foreign students.

Huang Tian Shu, 33, a Chinese stu-

dent who has been in Japan five

years, said she was rejected 10 times
before finding a nonprofit apartment.

At midnight, while Mr. Huang was

moving her things, she said the po-

tice stopped her, apparently because she suspected she was a thief, and

took her to the local station for inter-

rogation until the next morning.

“I felt discriminated against,” she

said.

Katsuya Tanaka, an official at the

National Police Agency, said the law

made no distinction between Japa-
nese and foreigners.

But Ms. Huang said it was not only
the police who looked askance at

foreign students. She works as a su-

ervisor of a dormitory for foreign

students, and she said, “Japanese

neighbors look at us as if they’re

asking, ‘Why are you foreigners here?’”

“I want to go back to China,” she

said. “It’s too hard in Japan. I can’t

see a future here.”

Asian students, above, in a Japanese language class in Fukuo-

ka. Many students say they have not felt welcome in Japan. Below, a Japanese immigration poster warns against illegally hiring foreign students.