

## Awareness of the Wealth Gap among Thai and Japanese University Students Through an Intercultural Exchange Program

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(Received: July 27, 2020; Revised: March 1, 2020; Accepted: April 9, 2021)

### Abstract

This research project is aimed to identify the critical awareness among Thai and Japanese university students of socio-economic issues impacting the development of communities through the experience of cultural exchange with urban families and rural village school communities in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The impact of this program is studied qualitatively using individual surveys, activity analysis with photo data, and teacher observation. Results indicated students discovered an alternate view of wealth based on four domains of gross national happiness: psychological wellbeing, education, cultural diversity and resilience, and community vitality. The most influential educational activities for university students' changes in critical awareness were the village visits and homestays. These experiences changed students' preconceptions of what a fair and just society is. Students realized that wealth is not only a financial aspect but they also experienced wealth in human relations, an important factor of Gross National Happiness (GNH).

**Keywords:** Intercultural exchange program, Wealth gap, Critical thinking, Sustainable development goals, SDGs, Gross national happiness, GNH

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## ความตระหนักรู้เกี่ยวกับความเหลื่อมล้ำทางเศรษฐกิจของนักศึกษาไทยและนักศึกษาญี่ปุ่น ผ่านประสบการณ์การแลกเปลี่ยนวัฒนธรรม

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### บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความตระหนักรู้เกี่ยวกับปัญหาความเหลื่อมล้ำเชิงเศรษฐกิจและสังคมที่มีผลต่อการพัฒนาชุมชน ของนักศึกษามหาวิทยาลัยไทยและญี่ปุ่นผ่านโครงการแลกเปลี่ยนวัฒนธรรม โดยใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ การสังเกตการณ์แบบมีส่วนร่วม การวิเคราะห์ด้วยภาพถ่าย และใช้แบบสำรวจรายบุคคลเพื่อนำข้อมูลมาวิเคราะห์คำสำคัญ การวิจัยพบว่านักศึกษาทั้งไทยและญี่ปุ่นตระหนักรู้ถึง “ช่องว่างของความมั่งคั่ง” โดยผ่านประสบการณ์การใช้ชีวิตในหมู่บ้านชนบทมากที่สุด ซึ่งเปลี่ยนแนวคิดของนักศึกษาเกี่ยวกับนิยามของสังคมที่เท่าเทียม นอกจากนี้ นักศึกษายังตระหนักว่าความมั่งคั่งไม่เพียงแต่เป็นความมั่งคั่งด้านเศรษฐกิจ แต่ยังหมายถึงความมั่งคั่งที่เกิดจากความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างบุคคลอีกด้วย

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## Introduction

Short-term exchange programs for university students use approaches of experiential education (Kolb, 1984), cooperative learning (Johnson, & Johnson, 2009), and service learning (Palacios, 2010). These approaches are intended to design learning for cultural awareness, communication competence, and critical thinking. The effects of short-term exchange have been more extensively investigated on cultural awareness (Damen, 1987) and language learning (Nunan, & Richards, 2015). However, strategies of critical pedagogy (Breunig, 2005), the effects on critical thinking, and its relation to the concept of gross national happiness have been less researched. The purpose of this study is to explore the design of short-term study tours to experience socio-economic issues and document the changes occurring in Thai and Japanese university students' critical thinking, particularly on the theme of 'wealth gap'. This is also aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which is a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. These goals address critical global challenges, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, and peace and justice. The SDGs interconnect and in order to ensure no one is left behind, the United Nations has targeted achievement of these goals by 2030 (UNDP, 2015). Awareness of this concept is growing in Japan (MOFA, 2018) and Thailand (UNDP, 2018). SDGs are important factors in the development of Gross National Happiness (Kammann, 1984; Tideman, 2016), which emphasizes quality of life, and is an alternative assessment to Gross National Product. In this study, the following nine domains of GNH provide the framework for analysis of student awareness: psychological wellbeing, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards.

## Design of the CMU-SGU-KU Exchange Program

### 1. History

Chiang Mai University (School of Humanities), Sapporo Gakuin University (International Exchange Center), and the Kagawa University (School of Education) have collaborated to develop a short-term exchange program, which has evolved through over ten annual iterations (2007 to present). It involved homestay experiences, inter-university student partner interchange, and culture learning activities. The trip length was 12 days in Chiang Mai, Thailand with an additional 4 sessions of pre-departure orientation studies and 2 post-event reporting sessions in Japan. The focus of this research is only on the Thailand portion of the exchange program. This program also involved additional annual exchanges of Thai students visiting Japan, which is not included in the present study.

In 2018, the program was held from March 2<sup>nd</sup> to March 14<sup>th</sup>, the focus of this 11<sup>th</sup> annual exchange was on the theme of fair trade and the wealth gap in Thai society and how this compares with Japanese society. The original purpose of the CMU-SGU-KU Exchange Program was volunteer cultural exchange in the urban university context and volunteer exchange with rural elementary schools. In this year, it has evolved to include social and economic themes based on the interests of the teachers leading the program.

**Table 1 Program Activity Design**

Day 1	Flight from Japan to Chiang Mai, Thailand. Meet student partners (buddies). Have dinner with Thai buddies. Orientation to neighborhood and hostel by buddies.
Day 2	Breakfast with buddies in hostel. Leave for elephant camp and bamboo rafting. Prepare for welcome party. Eat northern Thai traditional food and do Thai dancing.
Day 3	Japanese culture fair (volunteer program) at city high school. Free time in city with buddies—currency exchange and shopping. Fair trade store tour.
Day 4	Chiang Mai University welcome speech, Thai cooking class, Thai language class w/buddies
Day 5	Factory visits with Japanese companies in Thailand.
Day 6	Rural village homestay and volunteering: School tour, village tour, host family
Day 7	Rural village homestay and volunteering: Japan culture fair, host family
Day 8	Rural village homestay and volunteering: Village experiences with host family
Day 9	Urban temple tour and city host family
Day 10	Urban host family experiences
Day 11	Urban host family experiences
Day 12	City market with buddies, farewell performances and party

## 2. Program participants

The participants in the program included four university teachers, 16 Japanese students and 15 Thai university students. Some students from Japan received two university credits for the program after participation and submitting a report. Table 2 shows the number of participants and their roles in the program. Students from CMU, SGU and KU were recruited by announcement to all departments as an optional program.

Table 2 Participant Numbers and Roles

Teachers	Thailand		Chiang Mai Univ. 1- Japanese Dept.	Program Coordinator - recruited student partners - arranged homestays
	Japan		Sapporo Gakuin Univ. 1- Management Dept. 2- English Dept. Kagawa Univ. 1 - Education Dept.	Pre-trip planning and organizing - Student supervisors and counselors - Activity chaperones
Students	Thailand	5	10 - Japanese Dept 2 - Management 1 - Agro-Industry 1 - Tourism 1 - Veterinary Science	Interviewed partners, Hosted partner students for city activities; Gave orientation to Thai language and culture, Guided visiting student around town. Accompanied partner to village and stayed in village school lodging.
	Japan	6	6 - Education Dept KU 4 - English Dept SGU 2 - Humanities SGU 2 - Economics SGU 2 - Management SGU	Interviewed partners; Observed and reflected on experiences; Gave presentations on Japanese life and culture; Gave performances, and led volunteer teaching, joined 2 homestays.

### 3. Methodology

To investigate the question of, “what is the student awareness of the wealth gap in Thai and Japanese society?”, the researching teachers employed a qualitative approach to analyze photo data and reflective writing data of 31 Thai and Japanese students. A post-program reflective journal was requested from student participants and additional data was collected via observations, video/photo recordings and teacher retrospective journals.

The end of program reflective journal for all student participants elicited perceptions and awareness of differences between rich and poor. The journal itself was part of the learning experience, as students put form onto their thoughts and what they learned. Since there are differences in the degree of comprehension of the students' Japanese, English, and Thai language, the questions were appended with both Japanese and English, and the answers were allowed to be written in either Japanese, English or Thai language. The post-program journal was opened from March 15th to March 21st, 2018 one week after the program ended. Attributes of the 31 student respondents are displayed above in Table 2.

### Photo Data and Analysis

During the program, teachers took a photo diary of activities that Japanese and Thai students experienced. The purpose of the photo data was to create a description and analysis of the activity design of these experiences, according to the methodology of visual ethnography (Van den Scott, 2018). The design of the learning experiences was based on the values of active learning and critical thinking discussed earlier. Of the over one thousand photos and videos, the following 12 photos were chosen by teachers to illustrate the activities that led students to a change in awareness and influenced the student comments in the post-program survey.

Table 3 Photo Analysis


Activity Photo	Activity Description
 <p>Figure 1</p>	<p>Japanese students toured a Thai rural village guided by their host family children. They had no common language to speak, so communication was through play or gestures. They would handle items, touch each other in games or hold hands. Japanese students were surprised at the fun children had in a rough, simple, environment, often walking barefoot.</p>
 <p>Figure 2</p>	<p>Travel to the host family home was often with host mother or father driving a motorbike with 1-2 children and the Japanese student in back. For many students, it was the first time to ride a motorbike, and the challenge and strangeness of a simpler lifestyle was a culture shock. Students drove away from the school to a completely unknown world, not knowing where they go.</p>

Table 4 (Continued)





Activity Photo	Activity Description
 <p data-bbox="373 622 469 651">Figure 3</p>	<p data-bbox="679 331 1382 701">In a host family kitchen here, children or parent would show the visiting student how they lived. The floor is made of bamboo, and sometimes animals (chickens, goats) live underneath. Some electric appliances are used—rice cookers, hot water pots, televisions and mobile phone chargers. Sometimes children would give gifts of personal possessions to their Japanese ‘brothers/sisters’.</p>
 <p data-bbox="373 1081 469 1111">Figure 4</p>	<p data-bbox="679 763 1382 1081">In the Thai elementary school, a one or two day program included sports events, classroom tour, and eating together in lunch room. All Thai children wore uniforms, but Japanese noticed the socks were dirty from the road dust or worn out with holes in them. For a volunteer activity, Japanese did a culture fair of various Japanese skills and games with the children.</p>
 <p data-bbox="373 1426 469 1456">Figure 5</p>	<p data-bbox="679 1135 1382 1496">In the Japanese culture fair, a Japanese student was dressed in a red “happi coat” to make a festival atmosphere, and was accompanied by a Thai university student as an interpreter. Here the pair leads a game of “karuta”, with Thai children learning the hiragana characters of Japanese language through a card game. Each Japanese chose a skill to teach as exchange.</p>
 <p data-bbox="373 1787 469 1816">Figure 6</p>	<p data-bbox="679 1518 1382 1839">This photo shows children learning Japanese paper folding (origami) of common animals. Taught by 16 Japanese university students and 6 Thai university students, over 100 Thai primary school children participated in the culture fair, a rare opportunity in a rural community. Japanese could have contact with ordinary people and avoid tourist relationships.</p>

Table 5 (Continued)

Activity Photo	Activity Description
 <p data-bbox="373 629 469 660">Figure 7</p>	<p data-bbox="679 338 1382 562">In the rural areas, there was also a disparity of family income. Many of the village host families had middle class homes, but in a tour of the countryside, students saw the rougher houses, like this one, for contracted farm labor families.</p>
 <p data-bbox="373 965 469 996">Figure 8</p>	<p data-bbox="679 674 1382 898">Japanese students only spent 2-3 days in the village, but formed deep brother-sister bonds in that time. It was an emotional farewell, as everyone realized the family-like sharing of life together would end, and that saying goodbye would be forever.</p>
 <p data-bbox="373 1308 469 1339">Figure 9</p>	<p data-bbox="679 1010 1382 1375">Meals were simple in the village. This is a school lunch for the young elementary school students. We discovered most of the younger students in this school were immigrant children from Myanmar. Their parents found agricultural work in the fields of the larger land owners in the area. The minimum wage in Thailand was significantly higher than in Myanmar, which attracted these economic refugee families.</p>
 <p data-bbox="373 1688 469 1720">Figure 10</p>	<p data-bbox="679 1397 1382 1765">In contrast, when the Japanese students returned from the village to the city life of Chiang Mai, they experienced a comparatively high-income society. This restaurant setting shows the elegant and well-apportioned meals that middle-class and upper-class Thai families could experience. Japanese students also had 1-2 nights in a city homestay during the second week of the program.</p>



Table 6 (Continued)

Activity Photo	Activity Description
 <p data-bbox="389 613 502 645">Figure 11</p>	<p data-bbox="710 331 1386 651">In the city of Chiang Mai, huge shopping malls within a high technology society were prevalent. This lifestyle is familiar to the Thai university students who were partners with the Japanese students. In their free time together, they went to entertainment centers with movie theaters equipped with electronic ticketing and displays.</p>
 <p data-bbox="389 972 502 1003">Figure 12</p>	<p data-bbox="710 667 1386 1037">The program closed with a ceremonial party with performances by both Japanese and Thai university students. They felt a bonding and comradery at the party. When asked what was the ‘best’ part of the experience, students usually answered the visit and homestay in the village. Surprisingly, this activity was the most challenging for lifestyle and communication.</p>

### Student Survey Question Summaries

After completing the program, teachers requested students to write a reflective journal on the theme of ‘wealth gap’, asking the following three questions to the 31 students, who wrote or ‘said’ their reflections:

- (1) How do you feel about the ‘wealth gap’ in the world, in the country, and in the community?
- (2) In your opinion, why does the ‘wealth gap’ exist?
- (3) How can we solve the problem of ‘wealth gap’?

#### (1) How do you feel about ‘wealth gap’ in the world, in the country, and in the community?”

Students from Thailand made comments such as, "I feel sorry for poor children" (ID 11), "There are people who are in a more difficult situation than myself" (ID 10), "Economic disparity arises due to difference in class" (ID 26), "Thailand has a big gap between rich and poor" (ID 16) and other comments. The disparity they felt here is that the life of any university student is different from other people living in Thailand. Community people who actually joined the village program were families of elementary school children in rural areas, including about 20 immigrant families from foreign countries (Myanmar). They felt a disparity by comparing the lives of their hosting families and children with their own life.

Meanwhile, Japanese students also felt the disparity between Japan cities, Thai cities, and Thai villages. Comments were: "When I compare the homestay between the village and the town, I felt the difference in the surrounding environment and living" (ID 8), "The difference between rich and poor in Thailand's city and village is clear and bigger than Japan" (ID 19), "I was able to notice the difference between rich and poor that cannot be seen in Japan by experiencing a homestay in the village and homestay in the city" (ID 21), "I was able to feel something like a disparity between the village and the city" (ID 15), "I was living in Thailand realizing that Japan is living extraordinarily luxurious"(ID 7), "At first I thought that the difference between Japan and Thai was amazing--sanitation, transportation etc... Japanese don't realize our daily life is unconsciously a high standard" (ID 23), "I feel that the wealth gap in Japan is whether people get high income jobs or not, but in Thailand, it is whether people are able to go to a good university or not. Further, I noticed that it is important whether people can manage college tuition or not in Thailand." (ID 1), "This is a country with differences in regions, very rich and poor" (ID 5), and "The bottom of the lower part of society cannot be seen... The principal teacher said that we will stay in a "rich house" during the homestay in the village, but in Japan it is probably a house like a poor family" (ID 22).

Among other things, participants saw that the regional disparity between the urban areas of Thailand and the rural areas is greater than the overall disparity between Japan and Thailand.

## **(2) In your opinion, why does the "wealth gap" exist?**

The most common reason cited by Thai students about the cause of the difference between rich and poor was: "Economic opportunities, educational opportunities, opportunities to satisfy needs are different" (ID 27), "economically blessed people also have more opportunities. Since there is a chance to go to a better school, rich people become richer with good jobs, while poor people do not get good opportunities" (ID10), "the most important thing is where you were born... the opportunity to receive education will be different depending on the economic situation of the house" (ID 17), and "rich people in this world have better chances than those in poverty. No matter what you do, a rich person is highly possible to succeed" (ID 12). It was an opinion that economic and educational differences will arise due to the family wealth one was born into.

In addition, there are opinions that "globalization causes sudden change and some people can not keep up with the change" (ID 11) and an opinion that it is due to everyone is different (ID 25). Another said, "Whoever made this world deliberately set a disparity, so people share resources and compassion, and know that they will help each other when in trouble" (ID 24). Students perceived disparity as a given due to fate, trials, or lessons learned.

Similarly, Japanese students commented like the students in Thailand about the disparity in educational rights: "a lot of people cannot escape from family, regional, regional and domestic conditions" (ID 19), "parental home situation, income" (ID 21), "I think that the 'wealth gap' will occur between urban areas, where people gather a lot and there are many money transactions and the rural areas where there are limited local transactions" (ID 8), "the school which I was studying originally, the place I lived" (ID 18), "There is a chain each depending on the family I grew up" (ID 7), "the desire to be superior to the opponent instinctively... that greed has appeared as richness is the difference of rich and poor" (ID 20), "Everyone in this world has different values and ways of thinking" (ID 23), and "it is natural for income to differ as educational background changes... I think many poor people have a low educational background. It also applies to Japan that the high level of educational background and income are proportional" (ID 1).

However, other views were that, "people in rich countries regulate the view of poor living" (ID 4), "if poor people do not question their current life and feel that they are happy, they may not want to change their lives. I think that is a reason why there are also people who do not feel 'wealth gap', even if they are poor." (ID 19), and "I felt that both lives are rich, village life is not economically rich but people were involved and rich in human relations. Living in the city was rich in economy and there were few obstacles to a good life, but the affluence of human relations is not as much as the village. I felt that the 'wealth gap' is a difference in values (ID 9). Students realized that the standard of richness includes not only an economic scale but also human relations and the richness of the community.

### **(3) What should we do to solve the "wealth gap" problem?**

In order to correct the gap between rich and poor, Thai students cited the efforts of the country, individuals, and the poor themselves. As a national effort, "We should deliver education on business and money management to lower middle-class and lower-class people." (ID 14), "the country should give equal opportunity to everyone" (ID 27), "It should not be temporary aid to spread money, or people should be able to act independently with sustainable policies" (ID 17), "To nurture consciousness that thinks publicly and give an even level of education (ID 26), and as individuals, "We must help each other by donating what we need for their daily life" (ID 11), "to donate things" (ID 10), "to donate goods" (ID 10), "empower poor people to survive by themselves...we can do the best is to make everything equal so that 'wealth gap' will not happen around us. (ID 12) " If there is a person in trouble in front of us, we can only do it by helping with the power of the individual" (ID 24), and "we should not distribute money or temporary aid, but sustainable policies should allow poor people to be independent... citizens should try not only to rely on welfare, but also to spare no effort to live." (ID 17).

Meanwhile, Japanese students proposed (as countries, individuals, and the poor themselves), that the role of the country is "to secure the minimum life and gain enough money for the people to live" (ID 8) and, "To share things and technologies in the world... For example, exporting a lot of technologies from developed countries to developing countries, importing a lot from fair trade from developing countries" (ID 19), "it will be useful for more people if we make regulation for constant support across the country; such as monthly support to people who are in need, instead of fundraising activities." (ID 7), and "If we can receive equal education until 15 years old regardless of races or nationality, I think ... poor people will disappear" (ID 1). Thai students often proposed individual solutions, while Japanese students tended to recommend structural governmental measures and sustainable life support measures.

### Discussion and Comparison of Thai and Japanese Participants

First, regarding the cognition about the difference between rich and poor, when we look at the characteristics of each journal sample, ID 27 (male) for Thai students said, "The difference between rich and poor is natural, but wealth is also only a superficial evaluation. We are not necessarily happy because we are rich", thus he recognizes that economic wealth and happiness are not directly linked. ID 11 (male) also recognizes his disparity from the poor children, because he says, "I feel unfamiliar to see poor children." ID 13 (male) did not deepen recognition about the disparity, ID 14 (male) said that "the circumstances are unavoidable in the world's major economic systems" and "there is a difference in rich and poor in any country". ID 17 (female) also said that "the difference between rich and poor is unavoidable" but "with the poor people with sustainable policy, we should make it possible for self-reliance". ID 10 (female) recognizes the difference between her own happy environment and those who do not have such advantages, thinking that they have a "more difficult life than mine". ID 26 (female) said that "economic disparity arises due to difference in class," and describes the necessity of education to learn public spirit. While ID 25 (female) said, "Because each person has a different way of thinking and customs, I think that it is natural to have a wealth gap. I think that it is important to open our mind, make our eyes see things in many ways, and accept the situation as it is."

ID 2 (female) regards there is "a big problem in communicating in a foreign language", and said that multilingual learning enables us to grasp the actual condition of people in the other country and eliminate the difference between rich and poor. ID 12 (female) said that "the gap between rich and poor" remains "anywhere in the world, the country, and the region", "it is difficult to solve quickly". ID 24 (female) gives a person who creates this world to know that people are compassionate to those who are in need of help and resources are compassionate, helping each other with each other. ID 24 (female) says "the difference of rich and poor is the most obvious one that represents the unfairness of the world". ID 16 (female) accepts "the reality" that the gap

between rich and poor is great in Thailand, but also that each other can coexist by helping each other. In this way, Thai students are aware of ways to coexist with disparity through compassion, cooperation, and assistance, even though it is difficult for Thai students to accept the reality that there is a gap between rich and poor, and correct economic disparities.

Next, in Japanese students, ID 4 (male) said, "When you see life, you feel a disparity, but when you look at people who are adapting to that life and make you happy, there is no disparity for them." It is objective to meet and see how people live in this program. Also, we are aware of the richness other than economic wealth, and the "disparity" itself is based on the living conditions of a rich country, comparing its standard of living and defining it as "poor life". And the parties recognize the living abundantly and the different standards of richness.

ID 8 (male) said, "Although Chiang Mai was a big city in Thailand, I had never felt poverty fundamentally, but when comparing the homestay between the village and the town I felt a difference in the surrounding environment and living." He said that he recognizes the regional differences in Thailand, especially the difference between urban and suburban areas. In addition, ID 8 (male) said, "...in order to revitalize local cities, I believe that we can correct the disparity from the urban area by comparing it with my hometown, and using the network to publicize the charm of the area. ID 19 (female) feels that "the difference between rich and poor in Thai cities and villages is clear and bigger than Japan." On that basis, he said, "In the city there are many higher cars than the village, and clothes are also close to Japan of make-up and eat," which markedly distinguishes the regional differences in Thailand more than the gap between Japan and Thailand doing. In addition, "Although it may be ideal that everyone is equally rich, I do not know if such a world is really right and happy," he says, while maintaining diversity, and also recognizes the significance of enjoying the richness of the people.

ID 20 (female) recognized that the gap between rich and poor in the world and the domestic is expanding, "There is a habit of human beings wanting to compare themselves with themselves" "Instincts to want myself to stand as dominant over others. She was thinking that "that the desire to appear as rich is the difference between rich and poor." On top of that, in order to rectify the gap between rich and poor, if "rich people's way of thinking should be reformed", and rich people were able to reach out to the poor even a little, the difference between rich and poor could be corrected. She stated that rich people's awareness reform is necessary.

ID 21 (female) said, "Although I realized that I experienced a homestay in the village and a homestay in the city, I could notice the difference between rich and poor that cannot be seen in Japan," "there is clearly a disparity" Along with the necessity of correcting, "people's values are different, we are not directly linked to wealth equality". ID 28 (female) prefers that international cooperation is necessary to rectify the difference, even with the same disparity, "Education is commonplace in Japan, but there is still educational gap in Thailand". ID 18 (male) said that he felt that "there is too much difference", "From the living environment, what to eat, the number of

motorbikes and cars, etc. are all different". As a corrective measure, he said, "I participate in many volunteer activities and it will be useful for the locality," and presents a subjective solution from a personal perspective of what to do as a college student.

ID 3 (male) noted that "I am aware that the difference between rich and poor is not an easy problem, but I think the wealth gap should not be there. There are people who do not feel well-being and dirty their hands with crime to get some stimulation." He feels the desire for richness seems to lurk behind the problem. In addition, "I thought that people who have a lot of money are happy, but I noticed that participating in the Chiang Mai program is not limited to it, there is also a human connection to richness and happiness," There was an awareness that it the standard of happiness can be other than economic value. ID 15 (male) realizes "the disparity between the village and the city" from experience. However, the cause of the disparity is considered to be "because policies and laws differ depending on the country, it is likely that disparity will occur depending on the way of thinking born out of it". ID 6 (male) said, "It is regrettable that there is a gap between rich and poor in the world," and those in Japan are "blessed with all aspects and they must thank their parents... Recognizing that we are living a wealthy life, I can donate to poor people by myself and invite them to Japan, embracing the feeling that rich choose some kind of support." ID 7 (female) learned from experience that "unlike in Japan, I could not really get used to it, because I could not spend so much comfort at the hotel. Unlike a clean and comfortable hotel I had imagined, it was a shock that there were insects in the bed and the toilet. The shower's spray was bad. After returning from Thailand to Japan, I cherished taking small things into consideration like the water, and realized that the normal life in Japan is extraordinary living." Due to this kind of immediate experience, this is an example of how students are moved to recognition of disparity.

In addition, as a remedy for the disparity, if you make a rule in the country such as individual monthly support for people in need, it will not it be a useful policy for a broad spectrum of people. There is a necessity for a sustainable support system to encourage independence of consumers, such as micro finance as pioneered by the Grameen Bank. ID 9 (female) said, "I felt that both lives were rich, the village life was economically not rich, but people were involved and rich in human relations". In the city, there was no hindrance to life, but the richness of human relationships was not as strong as in the village. I felt the gap between rich and poor is a difference in values". She noticed the richness of human relations and is grasped the conflict between both the benefits and negative aspects of economic development. On that basis, ID 23 (female), recognized that the "the difference between Japan and Thailand is amazing; such as hygiene, transportation, etc. Although I felt it was big, I experienced life in the village, I feel that the difference is not a great thing... Furthermore, if we increase opportunities to contact the disparities and problems of the world from junior high school in classes, we could increase those who understand the idea of young people and those

who want to be of help, want to do something. I think that such activities should be carried out". ID 1 (female) recognizes that a certain kind of fate is decided by the family one is born into, but the difference of Japan is due to getting a high-income job, while in Thailand it is whether you go to a good university. She mentioned the importance of giving equal education to all people up to age 15, that is to say, spreading Japanese standards, which will cause the number of poor people to "disappear". In ID 5 (female), feels that "Thailand is a country that has very different differences in wealth and in regions", and that "Japan is a very blessed country". She said, "I cannot hide my surprise, especially in the disparity between village life and Japanese life." However, as a specific solution, she said, "I feel that I can only do things I can do little by little, such as raising funds and recycling old clothes." The ID 22 (female) said, "The bottom of the lower part of society cannot be seen" and "I thought the border of the middle class is different between countries and regions. For example, during the homestay in the village, the principal was saying it was "a house of rich people", but in Japan it was probably a house like a poor family." As a remedy for the disparity, it can be said that "developed countries should be consider aspects of well-being other than money" and not just economic wealth.

To summarize the individual characteristics of these respondents, Japanese students realized the disparity between Japan and Thailand and reconfirmed the richness of Japan's economic and comfort level. However, it became clear that the program also helped students recognize the connections with people lost from the mainstream economy and discover richness in society that cannot be measured monetarily. Also, Japanese students felt: a) growing appreciation for their favorable Japanese environment, b) sympathy for others and c) a sense of duty to rectify disparity.

### Discussion on Absolute and Relative Poverty

As a second framework of analysis, the student experience of absolute and relative poverty was compared. Teachers noticed that after the exchange program, students in Thailand expressed their awareness of ways to coexist with disparities as acceptance, compassion, cooperation, even though it is difficult to accept the reality that there is a gap between rich and poor, and correct economic disparities. To summarize the individual characteristics of these respondents, Japanese students realized the disparity between Japan and Thailand and reconfirmed the richness of Japan's economic wealth and comfort. However, the disparity felt by students here is a disparity due to relative poverty, and considering the situation that absolute poverty also exists in Thailand, Japanese and Thai students were able to observe and experience poverty as a different way of life.

According to the the World Bank (2016), the absolute poverty rate is defined as "Groups or individuals whose living standards are lower than the minimum living standards of US\$1.90 per day". This line was originally \$1.08 per day which was set based on purchasing power parity exchange rates (PPPs) published in 1993, the line had revised to \$1.25 per day correspondingly

PPPs in 2005, and upped to \$1.90 per day in 2011. According to the most recent estimates in 2015, 10 percent of the world's population lived on less than \$1.90 a day, compared to 11 percent in 2013. That is 26% down from nearly 36% in 1990 (World Bank, 2016).

On the other hand, in industrialized countries, on the premise that people living in absolute poverty do not exist, an alternative poverty rate generally used for domestic poverty discussion is called the "relative poverty rate". This rate adjusts household income by taking household income calculated as less than 50% of median as poverty. Through this calculation, the poverty rate of Japanese children has generally risen from around the mid-1990s, and it is estimated at 15.7% in 2009. The targeted poverty rate of working-households with children is 14.6%, of which the adult's target of one household is low poverty rate of 50.9%, which is very high for households with two or more adults (OECD, 2019; Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2014). In this way, the absolute poverty rate is gradually decreasing, but there are still disparities in developed countries, especially in Japan, as the poverty rate of children of single-parent households becomes a more serious problem. In this program, students experienced poverty in the economic sense, as relative poverty. In terms of the nine domains of gross national happiness (Kammann, Farry, & Herbison, 1984), the program in this study facilitated students to experience and reflect on four domains: psychological wellbeing, education, cultural diversity and resilience, and community vitality.

## Conclusion

Through this qualitative study, it became clear that students immersed in a ten-day bi-cultural exchange program with village/city homestays recognized the connection with people lost in the background of society and identified richness other than monetary wealth. Also, participants expressed appreciation of their own favorable urban living environments, they also felt sympathy for others and a sense of duty to rectify disparity. From the photo analysis and student reflection summaries, the homestay in the village emerged as the primary activity where both Thai and Japanese students realized the difference between the richest and the poorest. Importantly, they recognized that "psychological well-being" in GNH exists in the life of the village, and that psychological wealth is a priority that can supplement economic poverty. As mutual aid in community life is being lost in developed countries, this short-term exchange experience clarifies the significance of happiness brought about by cooperative responsibility and richness of human relations.



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