

〔論 説〕

Cultural and Structural Impediments Affecting Localization of Management in Japanese Overseas Subsidiaries

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Abstract

Perhaps the greatest challenge that Japanese companies face in their expansion abroad is how to deal with the cross-cultural environment of the foreign subsidiary. As the number of Japanese foreign subsidiaries increase, it is becoming increasingly important for Japanese organizations to effectively utilize the talents of non-Japanese employees. This paper uses original data to demonstrate that Japanese organizations experience great difficulties in integrating host country nationals (HCN) into the management process of their foreign subsidiaries. Quantitative and qualitative data was gathered from Japanese subsidiaries in Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. A model, developed from statistical analysis of the quantitative data gathered, illustrates that difficulties experienced in communication and dealing with cultural differences lead to international human resource policies that impede the integration of HCN managers. This paper discusses the particular attitudes and cultural traits of Japanese individuals, organizations and society that appear to be inhibiting effective cross-cultural human resource management. The consequences of the lack of HCN integration are examined and remedies are suggested.

1. Introduction

For decades during the period of Japan's rapid post-war economic development, most Japanese companies followed an export strategy with limited foreign direct investment. However, with the dramatic rise of the value of the yen after the Plaza Accord in 1985, foreign direct investment by Japanese companies greatly increased. Now more than ever before, Japanese companies face the challenge of how to integrate host country national (HCN) managers into the management process of their overseas subsidiaries as well as that of the parent companies themselves. The high cost of maintaining so many parent country national (PCN) managers at foreign subsidiaries and complaints by HCN employees and local authorities underline the importance of utilizing the talents of non-Japanese in their organizations.

For many years scholars have recognized the importance of the human resource management,

especially in the international environment. Desatnick and Bennett (1978), in their study of managing MNCs, concluded that the primary causes of failure in multinational ventures stem from a lack of understanding of the essential differences in managing human resources, at all levels, in foreign environments. Though certain management philosophies and techniques have proved successful in the domestic environment, their application in a foreign environment too often leads to frustration, failure and under-achievement. Consideration given to international human resource management (IHRM) policies and practices is as important as the financial and marketing criteria upon which so many decisions to undertake multinational ventures depend. More recently, other scholars, such as Pucik (1992: 61), assert that the human resource function as a competitive tool in an environment of global competition is replacing the traditional sources of competitive advantage.

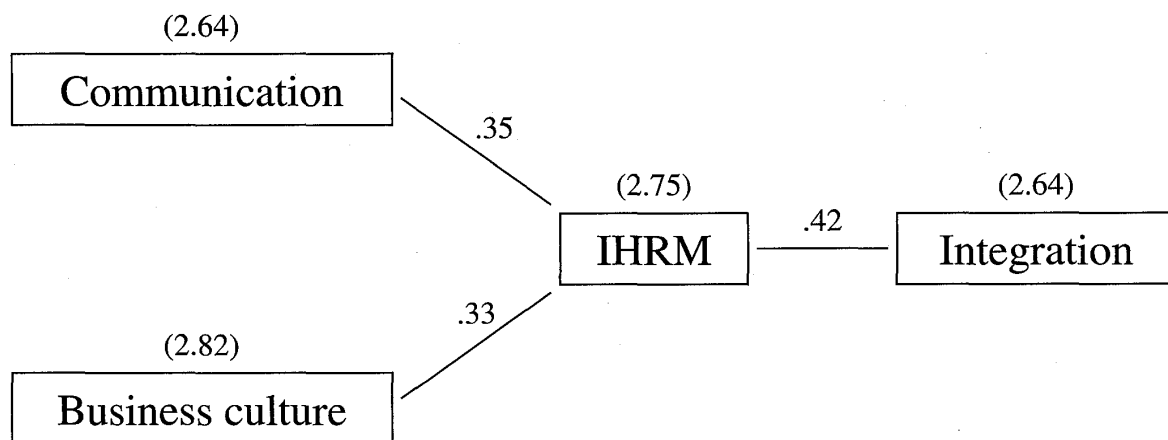
Japanese MNCs face the greatest difficulties at the managerial-level of their foreign subsidiaries. The large-scale expansion of overseas operations by Japanese firms since the mid-80s has brought about a shortage of qualified Japanese PCN managers to fill management positions at foreign subsidiaries. In addition, failure to successfully integrate HCNs managers may have substantial negative outcomes for the parent company including: high turnover, low morale, internal strife, and poor productivity; resulting in decreased competitiveness. IHRM literature clearly indicates that Japanese firms tend to be much more ethnocentric in the staffing of the managerial ranks of foreign subsidiaries compared to their American and European counterparts. (Keeley, 1996; Shiraki, 1995; Kopp, 1994). The majority of Japanese foreign subsidiaries are headed by Japanese nationals, and Japanese even tend to occupy very low-level management positions in the organizational hierarchy.

In light of these findings I sought to determine the salient factors accounting for the lack of HCN integration in Japanese MNCs. The model described in the next section indicates that difficulties experienced in communication and dealing with cultural differences are the most salient factors accounting for a general lack of IHRM policies and practices that promote HCN integration. The main focus of this paper is the cultural factors.

2. Model of Factors Affecting HCN Integration in Japanese Foreign Subsidiaries

I developed a model using data I obtained from 34 Japanese companies in Malaysia, Singapore and Australia in 1994, as well as from 83 companies in the same 2 countries plus Thailand in 1996. The model is presented below in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Model of Factors Affecting HCN Integration in Japanese Foreign Subsidiaries (standardised coefficients)



* The means for the scales for each element in the model are given in parentheses. A five point Likert scale was employed for the questions in the scales, where one is a very negative result (problematic) and 5 a very positive result.

The model consists of five elements. The dependent variable is HCN integration (Integration), which is determined directly by IHRM policies and practices (IHRM) and indirectly by communication (Communication) and cultural related issues as well as business practices (Business Culture). The following is a summary of the scales for each of the elements. All the questions in the scales are given in the appendix.

HCN Integration was measured using a 16-item scale. Respondents were asked who mainly made certain decisions, local or Japanese managers, in relation to a list of issues. A five-point Likert scale was used, anchored at one 'completely Japanese' and five 'completely local.' The scale includes questions related to decisions concerning such issues as: hiring of new employees, employee benefits, production schedules, purchase of production inputs, local advertising, new facilities, and sales goals. The scale had very good reliability (Cronbach alpha=0.93). The resulting mean of 2.64 indicates a low level of HCN integration in terms of their participation in decision-making.

IHRM was measured using a five-item scale. The items were anchored using a five-point Likert scale where one is 'strongly disagree' and five is 'strongly agree.' The scale had moderate reliability (Cronbach alpha=0.69). The resulting mean of 2.75 indicates a general lack of IHRM policies and practices that promote HCN integration. Communication was measured using a 14-item scale focusing on communication, information sharing, and language barriers (between HCNs and PCNs) within the subsidiary and between the subsidiary and the head office. The scale had good reliability (Cronbach alpha=0.80). The questions were coded (some reverse-coded) so that 1=problems with communication and 5=no problems with communication. The mean was 2.64 indicating a trend of existing problems.

An eight-item scale was used to measure issues related to business practices and culture (Business Culture). This concept focused on HCN understanding of Japanese business practices and culture as well as PCN understanding of local business practices and culture. There are also questions concerning the extent to which the company endeavored to familiarize PCN and HCN managers with these cultural issues. Furthermore, there are questions that deal with cultural conflicts and the concept of *nihonjinron*, which is discussed later in the paper. The scale had moderate reliability (Cronbach alpha=0.73). The questions were coded (some reverse-coded) so that 1=problems with business culture and 5=no problems with business culture. The mean was 2.82 indicating a trend of existing problems with differences in national and organizational culture.

3. Cultural Factors Impeding HCN Integration

The discussion here focuses on cultural factors that appear to impede the integration of HCNs in Japanese organizations. I divide these factors into two groups; national cultural factors and organizational cultural factors. The choice of the factors discussed is based more on qualitative evidence rather than empirically demonstrated relationships between these factors and HCN integration. However, the model does serve to empirically demonstrate the relationship between perceived cultural differences and IHRM practices in Japanese firms, ultimately affecting HCN integration.

3.1 National Cultural Factors

I propose three salient national cultural factors: *nihonjinron*, a tight collectivist culture, and ethnocentric as well as xenophobic behavior.

3.1.1 Nihonjinron

Many Japanese are continuously stressing how they are culturally, socially, and racially unique. This set of prevailing discourses in Japan is collectively referred to as *nihonjinron* (discussions of the Japanese). *Nihonjinron* appears to have a strong negative effect on the ability of Japanese to effectively integrate non-Japanese into their organizations. The writers of *nihonjinron* in Japan include academics, journalists, critics and even business elites. The explanatory mode of *nihonjinron* is cultural determinism or cultural reductionism. Culture is seen as infrastructural, therefore, social, economic and political phenomena are often seen as manifestations of immanent culture. The discussions of Japanese uniqueness in *nihonjinron* are understood in relation to other cultures and societies, or Japanese versus foreign. Japanese formulate an understanding of the foreign culture to affirm the differences between themselves and foreigners. This approach to cross-cultural comparison focuses on the differences rather than the similarities. The ideas concerning Japan and the West emphasized in *nihonjinron* may not necessarily represent empirical reality, however, the perspective of *nihonjinron* is the shared reality of the majority of Japanese since they are a powerful set of prevailing discourses that function to reinforce Japanese identity.

The beliefs expressed in *nihonjinron* appear to greatly influence organizational behavior in Japanese firms. Examining *nihonjinron* enhances our understanding of the culturalist school of thought (as opposed to the structuralist school) concerning the development of Japanese HRM practices and their transferability. Both *nihonjinron* and the culturalist school point to a strong link between traditional Japanese culture and modern day Japanese management. On the other hand, the structuralist school views the development of Japanese organizational behavior as a response to the prevailing social and economic conditions. There is a strong interest among Japanese businessmen in *nihonjinron*. The company is regarded in *nihonjinron* as a typical social context in which the Japanese cultural ethos or underlying culture is externalized in the form of typical Japanese organizational behavior.

Nihonjinron is also an important intellectual pillar of cultural nationalism in contemporary

Japan. The growth of cultural nationalism fed by the ever-increasing volume of *nihonjinron* theories and literary works has produced both positive and negative outcomes. Cultural nationalism preserves and strengthens a people's cultural identity, however, differences are stressed and similarities are ignored. Such a form of cultural nationalism promotes a strong and problematic feeling of a 'unique us' versus a 'non-Japanese them.' As a result, many Japanese assume that Japanese thinking and behavior are so unique that they cannot be fully understood by non-Japanese. This attitude hinders communication and mutual understanding. For example, Bartu (1993) discussed how Japanese seem to not like being understood too easily. He quoted an episode of a Japanese explaining Japan to a Westerner:

The Japanese takes great trouble and time to describe in detail the most important aspects of Japanese way of life, work and decision-making. In the end, he asks the Westerner politely: 'Do you understand?' When the foreigner replies: 'Yes, I do,' the Japanese exclaims in disappointment: 'Well, in that case I must have explained it wrongly!'

Proponents of the uniqueness of Japanese stress the importance of such concepts as: *kokoro* (heart), *seishin* (spirit), and *tamashi* (soul). That is to say that there is a Japanese heart, a Japanese spirit and a Japanese soul (referred to as Yamato *damashi*). These are considered attributes that a foreigner cannot acquire, as if they were transmitted genetically and not through the process of socialization. This line of reasoning also infers that non-Japanese cannot understand Japanese aesthetics, which are largely based on the concepts of *wabi* (taste for the simple and quiet), *sabi* (elegant simplicity), and *mono no aware* (sensitiveness to beauty). Mannari and Befu (1991) point out that through the sharing of these and other essential and unique characteristics, the Japanese claim to possess certain uncanny nonverbal abilities to communicate with one another, often expressed as *ishin denshin* (from mind to mind) or *haragei* (belly-art or reading one's mind). The implication is that foreigners, lacking these abilities, are hindered in communicating with the Japanese.

In May 2002, I witnessed an interesting manifestation of *nihonjinron* logic on television. The program discussed the relatively poor performance of Japanese people in English compared to Chinese and Koreans. A so-called expert commented that the Japanese face has a different structural composition than those of Koreans and Chinese and that this "fact" makes it harder for Japanese to speak English. The first interesting point is that this commentator believes in the existence of a Japanese face, which implies racial homogeneity distinct and separate from

Koreans and Chinese. The other comments that could be made concern the obvious evidence that refutes this “theory,” such as the existence of second generation Japanese in the U.S. and other Anglo-cultures who speak English as their mother tongue.

3. 1. 2 Japan’s Tight Collectivist Culture

Japan is considered to have a tight collectivist culture. Triandis (1989) describes tight collectivist cultures as homogeneous cultures that are often rigid in requiring that in-group members behave according to the in-group norms. In such cultures, little deviation from normative behavior is tolerated and severe sanctions are administered to those who deviate. There is greater conformity and less acceptance of different thought and behavior in Japanese organizations than in organizations created in loose cultures. HCN managers face greater cultural barriers to integration in the management system of Japanese MNCs than those created in relatively loose cultures. Japanese. The behavior of non-Japanese in the organization is unknown and therefore considered suspect.

3. 1. 3 Ethnocentric and Xenophobic Behavior

As discussed in the section on *nihonjinron*, Japanese tend to stress differences rather than similarities between their culture and non-Japanese cultures. Japanese speech reveals sharp distinctions between things considered Japanese and non-Japanese. For example, the prefix ‘*wa*’ indicating things Japanese such as *wa-shoku* (Japanese food), and ‘*yo*’ for things of Western origin such as *yo-fuku* (Western-style clothing). *Gaijin* refers to non-Japanese and is a shortened form or *gaikokujin* or outside country person. Most revealing is the use of *henna gaijin* (strange foreigner), which is used for non-Asians who are fluent in Japanese and display Japanese behavioral traits. As foreigners make efforts to lower the boundaries separating them from the Japanese by learning the language and adopting Japanese customs the Japanese people draw an even sharper psychological dividing line. Most long-term foreign residents usually have stories to relate that reveal ethnocentric and xenophobic behavior in Japan. One common complaint is that many landlords do not want to rent to foreigners.

3. 2 Organizational Cultural Factors

The organizational cultural factors that appear to impede the integration of HCNs in

Japanese organizations are: greater reliance on cultural-oriented control systems than on output-oriented control systems; role versus person dichotomy with greater emphasis on the person than the role; the development of generalists versus specialists; the importance of human networks and centralized decision-making; as well as limited organizational learning and transformation through cross-cultural interaction.

3. 2. 1 Cultural-oriented Control Systems Versus Output-oriented Control Systems

Output-oriented control system focuses on objective, measurable data such as financial results and profitability indices. The managers' actions are controlled by the fact that they must act in such a way that their output matches the performance goals expected of them. In contrast, a culture-oriented control systems less clear-cut, being based on socialization of employees so that they understand the company's culture and goals. Japanese organizations tend to rely more on national and organizational cultural controls factors than output-oriented control factors. The Japanese human resource system is based on conformity to explicit and implicit tacitly understood values and accepted modes of behavior. In addition to the values instilled by Japanese national culture, organizational-based values are instilled through practices such as long-term employment, group-centered activities, frequent job-rotation, and consensus-style decision-making involving extensive informal consultation. Non-Japanese in foreign subsidiaries usually do not have the same national and organizational cultural controls instilled in them, thus they are considered to be unpredictable and less trust-worthy.

3. 2. 2 Role Versus Person Dichotomy

US MNCs may be viewed more as a set of roles than a set of people, while Japanese MNCs are more a set of people than roles. Japanese MNCs put less emphasis on the role. Instead, Japanese organizations seek to develop people who can work together to accomplish the tasks that are not very clearly assigned to any particular roles. In addition, individual measurements are not so clearly defined. This concept along with the greater reliance on culture-oriented controls in Japanese MNCs inhibits the entrusting of employees with managerial authority. PCN employees at Japanese MNCs absorb the company culture over many years and it is not possible to achieve the same level of cultural inculcation with HCN managers in foreign subsidiaries.

3. 2. 3 Generalists Versus Specialists

Japanese MNCs seek to develop generalists who are strongly indoctrinated in the company culture. Managers are frequently rotated to offer them experience in various departments and divisions as well as in order to promote coordination and teamwork in the firm. These generalists are the ones who are promoted through the ranks and gain power to influence decisions. HCNs are usually treated more as specialists and usually do not have the opportunity to rotate to jobs outside the subsidiary, which limits their career opportunities and decision-making power.

3. 2. 4 The Importance of Human Networks and Centralized Decision-making

During the rotation process managers have the opportunity to develop the all-important *jin-myaku* 人脈 or human networks throughout the corporation in order to facilitate decision-making. Important decisions (even minor ones) tend to be controlled by key groups and individuals at the head office in Japan. The lack of well-developed *jin-myaku* greatly inhibits HCN managers' ability to influence decisions. The data I gathered clearly indicates that the majority of HCN managers does not have contacts at the head office in Japan and are often left out of the communication loop between the Japanese managers at the head office and the PCN managers at the foreign subsidiary (Keeley, 2001).

3. 2. 5 Limited Organizational Learning and Transformation through

Cross-cultural Interaction

Maruyama (1984) has researched cultural synergy in organizational settings and proposes four metatypes of causality: nonreciprocal causal models, independent event models, homeostatic causal-loop models, and morphogenetic causal-loop models. The four correspond respectively to the organizational approaches of intentional, multidomestic, multinational, and global firms. The categories are quite similar to Perlmutter's (1969) categories (ethnocentric, polycentric, regiocentric, and geocentric) with the exception that Maruyama's focus is more on organizational learning through cross-cultural interaction.

Considering the elements of each of Maruyama's models, most Japanese MNCs appear to fit the description of the nonreciprocal causal model corresponding to the international firm. In such a firm homogeneity is considered natural, desirable and good while heterogeneity is viewed as an abnormality and a cause of friction and conflict. The culture of the head office in the parent firm

is assumed to apply universally and management believes that there exists one best way to manage the corporation regardless of location and cultural differences.

In most Japanese firms homogeneity is definitely considered natural, desirable and good, while heterogeneity is usually avoided. Furthermore, the heterogeneous environment of the foreign subsidiary seems to have little effect on the homogeneous environment of the parent company in Japan. That is to say, even though Japanese firms may internationalize in terms of establishing foreign subsidiaries, few firms actually internationalize the outlook of the managers working at the parent company in Japan (Yoshihara, 1989). Actually, most Japanese firms seek to protect the “Japanese-style” organizational culture of the parent company from “foreign contamination.” PCNs returning to the parent company are often “quarantined” until it can be confirmed that they still behave and think in a Japanese manner.

4. Seeking Solutions to the Challenge

The main cultural stumbling block, both in terms of national and organizational cultural influences, is the limited degree of openness to accepting non-Japanese ways of thought and perception. It is true that all cultures evolve, particularly through influence from different cultures. However, on a national level, Japan has always claimed to take in foreign influences and modify them until they have what is perceived as a distinct “Japanese flavor.” Then as time passes these foreign influences are understood to be an integral part of what is “Japanese” and distinct from pre-existing and existing forms of the original cultural trait or artifact. In this context, the nonreciprocal causal model can be understood to describe Japanese national culture as well as organizational culture. In the following subsection I extend this view to the individual level, or perhaps it could be said from a sociological level to a psychological level.

4.1 Flexibility of Self-identity and Openness to Other Languages and Cultures

From a phenomenological point of observation, I have developed the belief (or theory if I may) that there must be a direct correlation between an individual’s flexibility of self-identity and the individual’s openness to learning other languages (including dialects as well as variations in pronunciation, speech patterns and other attributes of the spoken word) as well as adapting different cultural patterns of behavior. The origin of this observation was observing my own

experience followed by observations of others.

In the process of learning foreign languages I noted that the more I identified with a new culture and language, the easier it became to imitate the speech patterns, accent, body language and other ways which individuals express themselves in the framework of a given culture and language. That is to say it appeared to become part of my self-identity; one of the possible ways in which I could represent or express myself in the systematic way that a culture and language provide. In this context, self-identity is understood as the set of perceptions individuals develop of themselves from the feedback they receive from interactions with other individuals and groups.

If a person has a rigid view of who they are in cultural and linguistic terms, which does not evolve freely in response to interaction with different cultural and language patterns, then the individual will tend to limit the effect that these interactions have on his/her form of self-expression. In this mode the individual continues to perceive foreign language/culture as distinct and external even in the case of prolonged exposure. As a result, there is minimal learning and adaptation. This phenomenon is typified by people who, even though they live for a long time in a foreign language/cultural environment, never acquire the language or make major adaptations to cultural differences. In order to evolve linguistically and culturally, the individual must have an open attitude towards transformational learning that comes with having a flexible self-identity.

In the same way, on a macro-scale Japanese organizations must evolve in response to interaction with different cultural environments. It is necessary in order to cope with the increase in global activities and the corresponding need to be sensitive to the local environment of the foreign subsidiary. So the solution begins with the individuals in the organization. The organization evolves through encouraging the individuals to provide new insights into other cultural patterns. This is the starting point for transformational learning. The process continues as the organization modifies its attitudes and behavior towards a culturally heterogeneous environment.

Appendix:

Integration Scale

- 1) Decisions concerning the hiring of new employees
- 2) Decisions concerning promotion of employees and wage/salary increases.
- 3) Decisions concerning employee benefits such as vacation time, etc.
- 4) Decisions concerning borrowing funds from local banks or financial institutions.

- 5) Decisions concerning production schedules.
- 6) Decisions concerning purchase of production inputs.
- 7) Decisions concerning local advertising.
- 8) Decisions concerning future products or services offered by the local subsidiary.
- 9) Decisions concerning investment in new facilities.
- 10) Decisions concerning pricing of products and services.
- 11) Decisions concerning production goals.
- 12) Decisions concerning sales goals.
- 13) Decisions concerning personnel training for local managers at the subsidiary.
- 14) Decisions concerning layoffs (dismissal) of employees at the subsidiary.
- 15) Decisions concerning most minor decisions such as those concerning day-to-day operational issues.
- 16) Decisions concerning most major decisions such as those concerning strategic of long-term issues.

IHRM Scale

- 1) This company offers local managers the opportunity to work at the parent company in Japan or at a subsidiary in another company.
- 2) There are good management development programs for locally hired employees.
- 3) There are clear career paths for locally hired employees.
- 4) This subsidiary does not discriminate against non-Japanese in favor of Japanese in selecting managers for high-level positions.
- 5) I (local managers) have sufficient opportunities to visit the parent company in Japan to learn more about the company and make contacts with the people working there.

Communication Scale

- 1) There are no communication difficulties between the local managers here and the Japanese managers at the home office in Japan.
- 2) There are no communication difficulties between the local managers here and the Japanese managers here at this subsidiary.
- 3) Language barriers make it difficult for local managers to communicate with the Japanese managers at the head office in Japan. (reverse-coded)
- 4) Language barriers make it difficult for local managers to communicate with the Japanese managers here at this subsidiary. (reverse-coded)
- 5) Local managers are often left out of the communication loop between the head office in Japan and the Japanese managers here at the subsidiary. (reverse-coded)
- 6) Local managers have sufficient access to communication channels with the home office in Japan.
- 7) The flow of information from the home office in Japan to the local managers here is sufficient.
- 8) I am satisfied with the communication and flow of information between the local managers and the Japanese managers here at this subsidiary.
- 9) Information is widely dispersed (openly shared) among all managers at the subsidiary.
- 10) The home office and the local Japanese managers sometimes withhold important information from the local managers.
- 11) Socializing after work between Japanese and local managers occurs often.
- 12) There is sufficient trust between the Japanese managers and the local managers to allow for smooth

communication.

- 13) The home office and the local Japanese managers sometimes withhold important information from the local managers. (reverse-coded)
- 14) Sometimes meetings are held with only Japanese managers participating. (reverse-coded)

Business Culture Scale

- 1) There is an 'Us versus Them' mentality between the local managers and the Japanese managers. (reverse-coded)
- 2) The Japanese managers have a sufficient understanding of local business practices.
- 3) The Japanese managers have a sufficient understanding of the local culture.
- 4) Differences between local values and culture and those of Japan often lead to conflicts. (reverse-coded)
- 5) Japanese culture is so unique that it is impossible for non-Japanese to fully understand it. (reverse-coded)
- 6) It seems individualism is stronger in this country than in Japan. (reverse-coded)
- 7) Our company has made a sufficient effort to teach local managers about Japanese culture and business practices.
- 8) Our company has made a sufficient effort to teach Japanese managers about local culture and business practices.

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