

Chapter 5

Japanese Cultural Traditions and International Business

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ABSTRACT

Although people from several countries may share some universal values, they also have different cultural values. The differences in cultural values generally produce different ways of thinking and acting that can cause misunderstandings and disappointments in business communication. Therefore, the willingness to understand in depth others' cultures is necessary for doing international business. Japan is an important country and thus the author explains in-depth the specific cultural values that are important in the international business between Japanese and non-Japanese people. This chapter is based on a broader research conducted in Japan and focused on the unique characteristics of Japan's cultural values, social norms, and business customs. Thus, it presents the specific cultural values coming from the Japanese philosophical and cultural traditions, examines their influence in the Japanese international business, and emphasizes the importance of understanding them in depth for doing business successfully in Japan.

INTRODUCTION

Every country has specific cultural values that are part of the national culture and, thus, peoples from different countries may share some values, but they also may have different cultural values. In addition, differences in cultural values generally cause different ways of thinking and acting (Faure, 2002). Western culture has its roots in Ancient Greek thought that highlights inductive reasoning from specific observations to a general theory, individuality, and freedom to act as one choose. However, Eastern culture is based on

others philosophical thoughts that emphasize deductive reasoning from the general to the specific, belonging to a group and self-control (Luo, 2008; Nisbett, 2003). In this way, the terms West and East may mean two ways of understanding the world rather than two geographic divisions of the world.

However, differences between cultural values should not be understood in terms of a duality, such as the East-West dichotomy, but as a continuum. That is because, although Western business people may find more difficult to do international business with people from Asian countries, people from

different Asian countries also have different ways of acting in international business. Thus, even if Asian cultures share certain cultural values, they are different in others. The fact is that every culture is unique and, therefore, the willingness to understand in depth other's cultures is necessary for doing international business.

This chapter is based on a broader research that aimed to explain the Japanese way of acting in international business through their cultural values and to show that these Japanese specific cultural values come from their philosophical and religious traditions. Therefore, it focused on the unique characteristics of Japan's cultural values, social norms, and business customs.

This chapter has two aims. The first is to present the specific cultural values coming from Japanese cultural traditions, more specifically, the Japanese philosophical and cultural traditions. The second is to examine the influence of cultural values in the Japanese International Business and emphasize the importance of understanding them in depth for doing business successfully in Japan.

CULTURAL TRADITIONS

A cultural tradition can be understood as the values, norms, attitudes or ways of doing something that have existed for a long time among a particular group of people, passing on from generation to generation. The generic term of tradition refers to beliefs or customs performed in the past and maintained by societies and institutions. Thus, traditions are a matter of time and some of them that seem to be old frequently might have a recent origin. Besides, the traditions can also be invented and set up by repetition, thus giving the impression of continuity with the past (Hobsbawm, 2003). Innovated traditions are a central element of the modern national cultures since to provide a commonality of experience, such as traditional national cuisine, which expatriate may continue to practice in foreign countries. Cultural traditions

are really a matter of time because, for instance, is the traditional English tea actually so traditional? I mean, drink tea is an older tradition in Japan or in China than it is in England.

Although culture is an important concept in this work, it is not the intention of this chapter to present the multiple definitions of this term, but to describe the main characteristics that are common to all of them. Thus, from the several definitions of culture it has been possible to identify the main features they share. These common characteristics are: it is learned by observation and imitation, not genetically acquired (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2002; Hofstede, 2001; Schiffauer, Baumann, Kastoryano, & Vertorec, 2004); it is shared by the members of a group (Benedict, 2006; Haviland, Prins, Walrath & McBride, 2004; Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2007; Thompson, 2011); it is transmitted from generation to generation (Hodgetts & Luthans, 2003); it is based on symbols, such as the language, and the information they carry (Geertz, 1994, 2005; Huntington, 1996; Kluckhohn, 1951); it is dynamic (Beamer & Varner, 2001); and it is structured, organized and patterned and has an internal unity and order (Lichbach, 2003).

In this chapter, the term culture is understood as the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours learned and shared by a group of people that allow them to see the world in the same way (Goodenough, 1971). Values are the deepest level of culture (Hofstede, 2001) and the most external level is the behaviour (Salacuse, 1999). Behaviours can be seen but not the underlying values and thus cultural values may remain unchanged although are expressed in different ways of acting.

Thus, values are the core of culture and the specific cultural values allow people of a society to know what is appropriate in every situation (Schwartz, 1999). Cultural values represent the implicitly or explicitly shared ideas and beliefs about what is good, right, and desirable in a society. Hence, the accepted ways of doing things determine the norms about how people should conduct themselves, and how they should act

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