

# The deep culture of Japanese values

Some visitors to Japan are disappointed. The images on tourist posters – the graceful curves of a temple, the enigmatic smile of the geisha – are hard to find in this industrialized, high-tech, post-modern society. “Westernization” is everywhere. Geishas and Samurais do not walk among the skyscrapers of the Shinjuku district in Tokyo. For foreigners doing business in Japan this perception gap can be a challenge.

By Joseph Shaules

On the one hand, we hear that doing business in Japan is complex – the market is impenetrable and the business culture full of elaborate rituals. Yet internationalization is everywhere. Sometimes our Japanese counterparts seem to have a better knowledge of French wines and international politics than the staff at the home office. Given these contrasting images – Japan as exotic and impenetrable versus Japan as modern and westernized – those entering the Japanese market or working with Japanese companies can easily fall into one of two traps: Either they assume that Japanese are highly exotic and obsess over superficial rules of etiquette, or see Japan as a modern country and expect that what works back at home will work in Japan. Of course a knowledge of Japanese business etiquette is helpful, but shallow efforts to adapt to the Japanese culture (for example bowing deeply) can give the impression that you are naïve. The larger mistake doing business in Japan is to miss the *hidden* cultural differences underneath the surface. These are differences which may not be obvious on a short visit, but which become more apparent the more time you spend in the country. They are subtle yet pervasive and they persist despite industrialization.

## Deep culture

One of the fundamental challenges for foreigners working in Japan is the difficulty of getting “into the head” of customers and partners. One Australian executive, talking about communication with Japanese, said “The Japanese are always bringing gifts and being so polite. It really gets in the way of good communication.” Yet when asked why politeness should get in the way of good communication, he struggled to answer. “Well, I don’t know. It seems somehow phony, though I think my Japanese partners are quite sincere.”

This executive was bumping up against differences in *deep culture*. This refers to cultural difference related to automatic thought processes. When experiencing cultural difference, we may feel that something is out of sync yet are unable to explain the deeper reasons for this reaction. This executive neither understood Japanese cultural norms about politeness, nor could he explain clearly the Australian norms. This is because the deeper, intuitive functions of culture are largely unconscious.

Recent research has started to shed light on deep cultural difference. It shows, for example, that people from different cultures often process information differently. It also shows that a major stumbling block in intercultural understanding are unspoken assumptions about social reality. The Australian executive had assumptions about

informality – an emphasis on horizontal relationships – that were not shared by the Japanese. These assumptions are not rules that explain behavior, they are hidden cultural patterns of thought that influence how we make sense of the world. Learning about deep culture patterns can help us to better step into the worldview of our hosts.

## The adaptive unconscious

In many ways, Freud got it wrong. He described the unconscious mind in terms of suppressing fears and primitive emotions – many of them sexual. Recent research in cognitive science, however, paints a picture of the unconscious mind as a sort of behavioral and perceptual autopilot. As we grow up, our adaptive unconscious is trained to help us interact automatically with our environment. When we drive, for example, we don’t think about shifting our foot from the accelerator to the brake every time we stop. Much of our interaction with others is also largely automatic – that’s why you are able to talk on your cell phone even as you are paying for something at a restaurant.

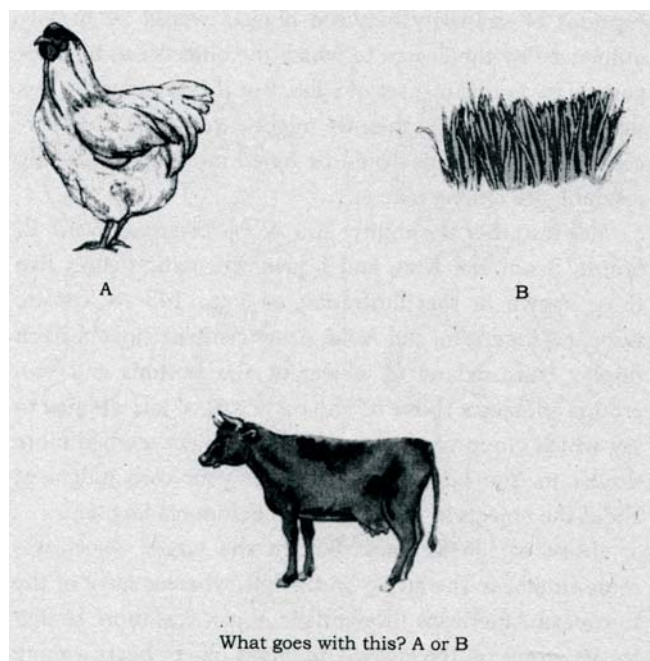
The adaptive unconscious is extremely helpful when we are in familiar environments, allowing us to plan dinner even as we attend a meeting at work. It helps us judge emotion, set goals, learn things implicitly and filter out unnecessary information. If you’ve ever heard your name spoken by someone across the room at a crowded party, you’ve experienced the behind the scenes work of the adaptive unconscious.

Yet because it is so automatic – so much a natural part of how we look at the world – the adaptive unconscious can trip us up when we deal with people who’ve been “programmed” differently. The intuitions and emotional reactions it generates, such as the frustration felt by the Australian executive about Japanese politeness, can be hard to explain or change.

## Deep culture “programming”

Our mind is not programmed by culture in the way a robot is. Rather, our adaptive unconscious autopilot is like the operating system of a computer, programmed to let us carry out the tasks of everyday life. Culture affects this programming in fundamental ways.

From: *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why*, Richard Nisbett, 2003, The Free Press, New York



Look at diagram 1:

Does the cow go more naturally together with the chicken or the grass? Choosing "A" shows a preference for thinking in terms of categories, while choosing "B" shows a preference for thinking in terms of relationships. These fundamental thinking processes are influenced by culture. Asians tend to choose "B" more often and Westerners tend to choose "A".

In a wide range of experiments, cognitive psychologist Richard Nisbett shows fundamental differences in how East Asians process information compared to Westerners (Western Europe and North America). Asians tend towards more holistic, analog, context-oriented thinking, while Westerners tend towards discrete, linear, digital thinking. Westerners are especially good at categorizing objects and applying rules to solve problems. To Asians, on the other hand, the world seems more complex and problem solving involves considering a wide range of factors that don't necessarily operate in some simple deterministic way. These differences in thought processes go hand in glove with social and cultural differences found in Japan and other parts of Asia.

**Contracts:** In the West, a contract is a detailed set of rules with explicit consequences when broken, whereas in Japan it outlines the parameters of the relationship. Westerners sometimes see the briefer, more general contracts in Japan as leaving too much "wiggle room".

**Conflict:** Japanese prefer indirect, mediated conflict resolution. Westerners are used to more direct rule-based solutions.

**Debate:** Japanese tend to value the wisdom of the group to find solutions rather than using adversarial debate in order to find truth.

**Rhetoric:** Western rhetoric tends towards linear thinking with a focus on hypothesis, evidence, arguments, conclusions and recommendations. This style of thinking is less common in Japan.

**Medicine:** Western medicine is focused on fixing the "broken parts" while traditional medicine in Asia focuses on a holistic view of health.

These differences have roots that go back as far as the ancient Greeks on the one hand, and the ancient Chinese on the other. While the Greeks sought the "laws" of nature and debated in open forums, Chinese thinkers such as Confucius and Lao Tzu emphasized the interrelation of all things. These systems of thought have created societies which perpetuate particular ways of looking at the world and processing information. For workaday interactions, these differences can create a communication or thinking gap which is vague yet pervasive. One German manager working in Japan reports that it took him six months to understand the problem-solving style of the Japanese engineers he was working with. He reports "It drove me crazy. They seemed to be endlessly gathering data with no plan. Later I understood that their approach was very "bottom

up" – looking at the concrete details first. They assumed that the more they learned about the problem, the more obvious the solution would become. After a time, I saw a lot of value in this and found it to be complementary to the kind of abstract top-down thinking that I was used to."

## Deep culture assumptions

Another hidden barrier to doing business across cultures are differing deep cultural assumptions. These hidden assumptions give us the unconscious feeling that something "makes sense". For example, it "makes sense" that wedding dresses are white because of unconscious associations: white is associated with purity; purity is a traditional value for brides; purity means no sex before marriage; sex outside of marriage is wrong. Of course not everyone agrees that premarital sex is wrong, but white wedding dresses make sense because one's cultural background includes these ideas.

Some of the most important deep cultural assumptions are related to culture value dilemmas. Communities have differing approaches to dealing with fundamental dilemmas of social organization. For example, which of these two statements makes more sense to you?

A) For maximum well-being, everybody needs to take care of and be responsible for each other.

B) For maximum well-being, each individual needs to have the freedom to develop independently.

While most people agree with both of these statements to some degree, in societies that emphasize collective values, answer A may somehow "make sense" more than answer B. In Japan, collectivist deep culture assumptions are stronger than in Western Europe or North America.

Knowing these deep cultural logics can help make better sense of cultural difference found in everyday interaction. One American felt frustrated that Japanese collaborators seemed to hesitate in giving opinions. He understood, however, that a collectivist deep-culture logic stresses the importance of taking others' needs and desires into account. Thus, the act of giving an opinion carries a lot of responsibility in Japan. So he found it more natural that his Japanese colleagues didn't simply exchange opinions as a way to brainstorm. They were, in effect, being good listeners whereas he had been focused on being a good talker.

Another deep culture dilemma is related to rules and exceptions. Which of these two statements makes more sense to you?

A) In order to ensure fairness, it's important that everybody follows the same rules exactly.  
 B) In order to ensure fairness, it's important that rules are flexible and allow for exceptions.  
 Answer A represents an orientation towards universalism, a trust in systems and explicit rules, while B represents particularism, an emphasis on the special needs and conditions of the situation. In Switzerland, for example, pedestrians often wait at an empty intersection until the walk light turns green – a universalistic approach. In neighboring France, on the other hand, people are more likely to ignore the light and cross. A universalistic logic assumes that any time you break a rule, the whole system is threatened. A particularist logic assumes that flexibility is essential to fairness and efficiency. Particularist logic is strong in Japan. We find it in Japanese contracts (often less detailed and rule-oriented than Western contracts), and the Japanese value of adapting behavior to particular circumstances sometimes known as T.P.O. (time, place, occasion). To reduce speeding, reminders on the roadways do not refer to the possible fines for breaking the law (rule-based thinking) but rather remind drivers that the number of accidents has been increasing (context reminders). On the trains in Tokyo, passengers are admonished not to use cell phones while riding. Yet there's no mention of rules or punishment. Rather in a combination of particularist and collectivist logics, they are reminded of the importance of avoiding bothering passengers around them.

## Deference and customer service

Japanese companies are known for an emphasis on customer service. And though every company – in theory at least – values its customers, the assumptions about what constitutes good customer service can vary depending on the cultural community. One German engineer working at his company's Japanese manufacturing plant complained "My Japanese colleagues don't know how to say 'no' even when customer requests are unreasonable. I don't want to make promises I can't keep!"  
 We often hear the words "showing respect" or "politeness" to describe Japanese communication. The German engineer wondered "But is it respectful to make promises you can't keep?" and "Certainly politeness doesn't mean being dishonest!"

One source of his confusion relates to the word choice. In fact, rather than "politeness" or "respect", it may be more accurate to think of Japanese communication in terms of "deference". To understand a bit more about how this is conceptualized in Japan, choose the answer that makes more sense to you:

A) For good human relations, it's better if people of higher status are treated the same as others.

B) For good human relations, it's better if people of higher status are honored publicly.

In Japan, there is a deep cultural assumption that hierarchical relationships are both normal and potentially nurturing. For many Japanese, the second statement makes sense – to get along well one defers to others. There's even a word – *amae* – to refer to a nurturing dependence. In the West, hierarchy is often associated with power – those on top can tell those on the bottom what to do. In Japan, deferring to someone shows that you value them. It is, in a word, friendly.

In Japanese business culture customers receive deference – their needs are treated as primary (of course this ideal is not always lived up to). In the case of the German engineer, he may not have understood that while his colleagues may not say "no" directly, Japanese are perfectly capable of communicating the difficulty of a request from a customer. But because deference is assumed, it is done more indirectly.

## Deep culture learning

Understanding the deep roots of cultural difference allows us to see why doing business across borders can be such a challenge, even as the visible signs of industrialization and globalization spread throughout the globe. Unfortunately, those working internationally often aren't posted in the same place long enough to fully come to grips with the deep cultural patterns of the host country. This tendency is made worse, ironically, by globalization itself, since we can often find the comforts of home when abroad and may not be forced to "learn the ropes" of our new home.

Research of long-term expatriates finds that there's one final risk associated with deep culture difference. Since it is most often felt at the intuitive or unconscious level, expatriates may end up making ethnocentric or critical judgments about their host community without even recognizing that cultural difference was the source of their negative reactions. These negative

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attitudes can harden with time, creating a "cynical expat" phenomena.

Conversely, however, people who gain an appreciation of the depth of cultural difference take this attitude everywhere they go. They ask more questions, spend time learning local conditions and work better with local partners. They understand that what we see when we arrive abroad – whether traditional temples or modern skyscrapers – is just the surface. There's a whole world of meaning waiting to be discovered deeper down, provided we have the patience to look.

## Test yourself

To see how your deep culture intuitions compare to those of Japanese (and people from other countries), take the Deep Culture Survey online at: [www.pico-global.com](http://www.pico-global.com). It's free!

Books – Learn more about:

The adaptive unconscious: *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*, Timothy D. Wilson.

Culture difference and cognition: *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why*, Richard Nisbett

Cultural value dilemmas: *Riding the Waves of Culture*, Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner

Deep culture learning: *Deep Culture: The Hidden Challenges to Global Living*, Joseph Shaules