

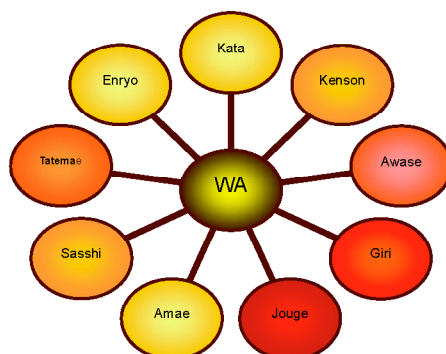
Japan

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Japanese Core Cultural Values and Communicative Behaviors

2.1 Japanese Core Cultural Values

As one of the neighbors of China, a mother country of oriental civilization, Japan has been influenced deeply by Chinese cultures like Confucianism, Buddhism and Chinese character for many centuries. Even the country's name—Japan is said to derive from the ancient Chinese word 'Zippon' which means 'the origin of the sun' (Ruch, 1984, p11). However, despite the 'close cultural connection' with China, Japan has developed its own cultural features over a long term, particularly in the Tokugawa period (Lewis, 1996, p.257). Generally, the Japanese culture could be defined as a solar culture. According to Yokochi and J'Hall, Japanese core culture centers on the 'solar system' which is related with values, beliefs and norms in orbit round a 'sun' or core concept (2001, p194). Locating in the centre of this system is the core culture called *WA*, and there are other nine cultural values: *Enryo*, *Tatemaie*, *Sasshi*, *Amae*, *Jouge Kankei*, *Giri*, *Awase*, *Kenson* and *Kata* to some extent reflect and support *WA*. The relations between *WA* and those nine 'planets' can be indicated as the spider diagram below,



In this part, a summarized explanation about the Japanese cultural ‘solar system’ will be presented. First of all, let us look at the core of this system, *WA* which can be understood as unity and harmony. Yokochi mentioned it as ‘the desire to be one with those of your group’, as well cited Wierabicka’s (1991) statement to explain that ‘*WA* as a concept that, while recognizing that people are not one thing, highlights the desire to be like one thing’ (2001, p190). In other words, although people are different individuals, for the Japanese culture, basically it is the best when they want the same thing. All in all, this deep level of sharing underpins ‘the desire for harmony in interpersonal relations and a consideration of others within the group’. The Japanese believe that *WA* is ‘both a source of power and a point of praise’. It is a great honor if people not only can recognize *WA*, but also can achieve their goals by *WA* (Yokochi/J’Hall 2001, p190). Obviously, the core concept, *WA* also supports Hofstede’s comment about Japan’s collectivism and group-oriented culture (Jandt 2001, p203).

Secondly, both *ENRYO* and *SASSHI* reveal the indirect and implicit cultural feature of Japan. They manifest and reinforce the core value of *WA*. *ENRYO* involves ‘an effort to avoid explicit opinions, assessments, or other displays of personal feelings’ in order to prevent others from thinking badly of one. *SASSHI* is more concentrated on the listener and refers to his or her ability to guess or understand the speaker’s meaning in spite of no direct verbal expression from the spokesperson. The

people who have a certain degree of *ENRYO* and *SASSHI* would be praised for showing a reverence for the value of unity encompassed in *WA* (Yokochi/ J'Hall 2001, p191-2).

Thirdly, *AMAE*, *AWASE* and *KENSON* all are associated with the cultural value of group or collectivism. *AMAE* is 'a form of mutual dependency' and links a kind of relationship in which one person belongs to a group and depends on another's love. *AWASE* refers to the ability to adjust to the changing situation or circumstances so as to solidify and maintain the benefits of the group, not the self. *KENSON* means negation of individual ability in order to maintain the nature of the social collective relationship and to avoid individual heroism which would disturb the group interests. All of them by the emphasis on a protective relationship and mutual dependency are in keeping with the importance of *WA* (Yokochi/ J'Hall 2001, p192-3).

Lastly, the remaining four values which are *TATEMAE*, *GIRI*, *JOUGE KANKEI* and *KATA* stress *WA* as well. *TATEMAE* refers to 'the outward surface of a building and is often used to indicate a concern for what can be seen by others'. *GIRI* is understood as 'a type of obligation felt toward others who have done something good for the person', and also implies 'a sense that one will be forever in the other's debt'. *JOUGE KANKEI* contacts with the meaning of respect and honor in Japanese hierarchical society. Almost everyone can find 'vertical relationships' that are viewed as good and natural in almost everyday life. *KATA* means a form of standardization. For Japanese, when people do things in the same way and one knows what to expect, it is believed much easier to develop *WA*. (Yokochi/ J'Hall 2001, p191-3)

2.2 *Communicative Behaviors of Japanese Individuals*

As we know, cultures have tremendous impact on communicative behaviors and patterns. In this following section, I will apply the Japanese cultural ‘solar system’ mentioned in the last section to explore the major characteristics of Japanese verbal and non-verbal interaction.

2.2.1 *Verbal Communicative Behaviors*

2.2.1.1 *‘Hear one and understand ten’—Indirectness*

Under the effect of the cultural value *ENRYO* and *SASSHI*, the Japanese tend to converse indirectly. As John mentioned, Japanese *ENRYO* places high value on the person who can ‘hear one and understand ten’ (John in Tanaka/ Spencer-Oatey/ Cray 2000, p119). In order to understand Japanese speech’s indirectness, I will illustrate several examples in different contexts.

● In School

A Japanese student wants to borrow the class notes from her classmate because of her absence last week. For the western student, particularly American, he or she would like to express his or her intension explicitly and try to get the reply immediately. However, Japanese students would adopt the absolute opposite way to deal with this kind of interaction.

Japanese student (J): Hi hhh
Classmate (C): Hi
J: How are you?
C: I am all right.
J: Is your class going OK?
C: Yeah. It is a lot of work. (Confusedly)
J: I agree this class.
C: You think so, too?

J: It is a little demanding, isn't it?

C: Yeah.

J: But for me, I was absent (hhh) last week and it became even tougher I feel.

C: Yeah. Is that so?

J: Yes. And I would like to borrow your notes. Is that possible?

(Source: Yokochi/ J'Hall 2001, p202)

The above dialogue is a rather typical example about Japanese conversational style. They do believe that indirect way in communication can help maintaining the harmonious relationship with other people.

- At home

In Japan, if the host invites guests to have dinner, the host should be quite perceptive and able to anticipate the guests' needs. Even if there is no direct request, only an unconscious gaze or slight facial expression from the guest; the host will guess the guest's possible demands and then meet them immediately, otherwise the host would feel embarrassed for the guest's to have to ask for something explicitly. On the other hand, the guests should generally not ask for anything as it is considered rude to directly state your wishes. For example, if a guest is holding something heavy, it is better to insist on carrying it by himself than to ask him "Would you like me to carry it?" Moreover, it is better to say, "I will call a taxi for you" than "Would you like me to call a taxi for you?" This kind of behavior is regarded widely as a good manner in Japanese society manifesting the cultural value *WA*, *ENRYO* and *SASSHI*. (Anon, 7)

In Hendry's book 'Wrapping Culture', she mentions some Japanese customs of 'gift-wrapping', such as gifts are always wrapped in paper, or at least in a fashionable box or container; gifts are not opened at the time they are received, which would be criticized as thinking of 'interest in the material content' rather than 'in the sentiment

it expresses' (Hendry 1993, p14). When giving the gift, usually the Japanese donor says, "This is just a small thing" or "This is just a box of cookies.". Even the gift is fairly valuable, the donor would not like to express directly. As Yokochi/ J'Hall state, the Japanese desire for gifts, foods and other products is an aesthetical pleasure, regardless of functionality. Lewis also evaluates that 'in Japan, form and symbols are more important than content' (1996, p61). From the custom of unfolding the gift, we can find out the influence of *ENRYO* and *TATEMAE* to the Japanese communicative modes. (2001, p202)

- In Business

In a business context, the indirect and silent negotiation style of the Japanese businessperson is still quite typical and well-known. Japanese are unwilling to say 'no', in particular when they say 'yes', they mean 'no'. As Lewis describes,

If you say to a Japanese 'I want you to lend me a hundred dollars,' they will say 'yes', without actually offering the money. What they mean is, 'Yes, you want me to lend you a hundred dollars.' If they do not wish to enter into a deal with a foreign partner, they will not come out with a negative reply. However, you will not be able to get in touch with your contact in that company thereafter. He or she will always be ill, on holiday or attending a funeral. (1996, pp.267-268)

The Japanese like doing business in a harmonious environment. They don't like to offend their business partner by displaying open and direct disagreement or refusal. The Japanese seldom criticize each other or even third parties and never say 'no' directly. 'Excessive frankness is therefore usually out of place' when negotiating with the Japanese merchants (Lewis, 1996, p110). Comparing with British directly critical approach to maintaining harmony in their team, the Japanese would rather sacrifice time, clarity, even truth to preserve harmony. As Lewis depicts, 'Japanese managers

do not issue orders: they only hint at what has to be done. The language is custom designed for this' (1996, p110). It is easy to find out in the above example that Japanese indirect communication patterns adhere to the values of *WA*, *ENRYO*, *SASSHI* and *TATEMAE*.

2.2.1.2 'I start my sentence and you finish it'—Collectivism

The Japanese believe that *WA*-unity and harmony among all members of a group is more significant than an individual's desire to put his or her interests above all others. Each individual is important, however, as a member of a team, a company, a family, a community and the country, he or she is not a separated being. Whatever they do or say, they must keep in mind the interests of others. Unity and harmony in a group takes priority over individual responsibility, authority, or initiative. (Anon, 8)

Regarding to this point, Lewis supplies lots of examples in a business context as below to prove the Japanese collectivism. He mentions that 'if there is one key to Japanese success it is their ability to conduct a company's internal affairs in a spirit of harmony and cooperation' (1996, p.259).

- The Japanese would like to introduce themselves like 'Mitsubishi's General Affairs Section, Assistant Manager, Yamamoto I am.' Put the name of company before person.
- When asked why something is done thus and so, the Japanese answer will often begin with 'we Japan' or 'The Japanese way is to...'
- Japanese normally negotiate in teams, each member of which has a different specialist who will ask questions within the field of his or her competence.
- The members of the team may change, as the Japanese wish as many members of their company as possible to get to know you.
- There will be a senior staff member present who will dictate tactics, but he is rarely the one who does the talking.
- The decisions will eventually be made by consensus; therefore no person will display any individuality.
- Japanese negotiators are invariably polite, understanding of others' problems and good

listeners.

- Japanese negotiators go to great lengths to preserve harmony throughout the negotiations. They strive to bring the two 'respectable' companies closer together.
 - Japanese negotiators leave them room for renegotiation some time in the future if circumstances change.
 - Negotiation style will be non-individualistic, impersonal and unemotional, but emotion is important. Logic and intellectual argument alone cannot sway Japanese.
- (1996, pp.261-263, pp.267-268)

2.2.2 Non-verbal Communicative Behaviors

Although body movement, as a whole, is more reserved and fewer in Japan, I still list the major and typical non-verbal communicative behaviors in the following part in order to have a brief insight into how the Japanese cultural values are manifested in body languages, gestures, and postures.

2.2.2.1 For WA

- Bowing is the most important and wide-used postures in Japan. Bowing represents humility. One can elevate, honor, and respect the other person by humbling yourself or lowering yourself.
- Bow as much as you can in such occasions as welcoming, acknowledgment of another's presence, gaining attention, offering assistance, food or presents, showing gratitude congratulating, sympathy, requests, apology, respect and represents humility.
- Bow to the respectful person or the senior man as low as or lower than he bows to you. The lower you bow, the more you are honoring or respecting the other party.
- Sit up straight all the time and don't seem to relax in meetings as it is useful to avoid laze.

- Often smile to make other people feel comfortable.
- Present you visiting card immediately at the first meeting.
- Keep the hands, feet, elbows, and knees closer to their frame and avoid pushy and argumentative behavior in public.
- Open the wrapping gifts carefully and respectfully, and fold the paper nicely.
- Make some slurping noises while eating foods such as noodles in soup. It is a sign of appreciation to your host or the cook.
- O.K. gesture in Japan means money, not zero or victory.

2.2.2.2 *Against WA*

- Direct eye contact. It is rude to stare.
- Shake hands more than necessary as they regard this practice as unhygienic.
- Wave your arms
- Touch people unnecessarily
- Put you arm around their shoulders as you pass through doorways.
- Report conversations you have had with Japanese to third parties unless it is clear that you may do so.
- Crumple up the wrapping paper of gifts.
- Pour soy sauce on your rice. It means an offence to chef.
- Blow the nose at the table when having a dinner.

(Robert L. S), (Traci Olson)

Part 3 Pitfalls of Cross-Cultural Communication

Compared with those cultural melting pots such as the USA or the UK, the nation of Japan still preserves its typically cultural traditions because of the relatively pure race—90% Japanese. That is one of the reasons one can find out the Japanese cultural value system of society easily. From Hofstede's research in 1983, Japan is constantly stereotyped as a group-oriented culture. However, the hazard of this popular and immutable view is it would increase the possibility of misunderstanding, and then block effective communication with the Japanese. According to a new research by Hofstede's approach in 1995, it is found that Japanese students scored higher on individualism and lower on power distance (Jandt 2001, p203). Due to the enormous influence of the economic and cultural globalization in the last two decades, the new generations in Japan are thought to follow less traditional cultures and reserve few ancient customs than the people's anticipation. Moreover, as Ramsey mentioned, 'interpersonal competence should not be understood as a static concept or list of characteristics but rather as a quality which arises in the process of interaction' (1998, p114). It can be understood that the communicative behavior of the individual is transformable depending on the effectiveness of interaction. Undoubtedly, if we ignore the changes in Japanese society and individuals and fall in a stereotyping trap, we can not realize the accuracy and efficiency of communication.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the Japanese are involved in the indirect and group-oriented communicative behaviors which are deeply affected by its specific cultural value system. In the Japanese cultural 'solar system', *WA* which represents unity and harmony like the sun locates the center as the core value, and the nine planets: *Enryo*, *Tatemae*, *Sasshi*, *Amae*, *Jouge Kankei*, *Giri*, *Awase*, *Kenson* and *Kata* which stand for collectivism, indirectness, humility and respect are running around *WA*. All of them play essential roles in shaping the Japanese individual behaviors and interpersonal communicative patterns. While we are concerned with the influence of the traditional culture in interaction with the Japanese, the problem of stereotype should be paid more attention as it could be a barrier to effective communication and cause misunderstanding even if the Japanese culture is quite well known. Therefore, when we communicate with the Japanese, we had better not only take account of their cultural customs, but also consider the changes by the historical and dynamic view.

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