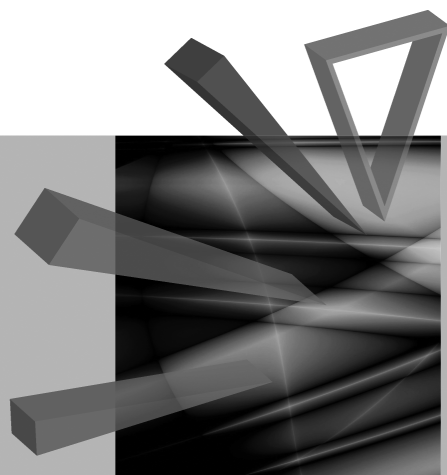


Faces of Competitiveness in Asia Pacific



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Sylwia Przytuła

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HUMAN CAPITAL AS A SOURCE OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF EAST ASIAN CORPORATIONS (CHINESE AND JAPANESE)

Summary: The main purpose of this article is to present human capital as one of the main competitive advantage in international corporations. In particular, this study is devoted to Asian managers and their values, patterns of behaviours that might be key factors determining success of Asian companies. Because of the specific cultural, social, and personal features, Chinese and Japanese way of management is still an enormous challenge for American and European managers working on that market.

Keywords: human capital, competitive advantage, Chinese and Japanese managers.

1. Introduction

There may be various sources of competitive advantage of a company. As far as international environment is concerned, such sources may include, e.g., new markets ensuring cheap raw materials or labour, high level of innovativeness of products as well as human capital.

In relation to East Asian markets¹ it is worth paying attention to managers originating from this cultural area and look at determinants of their competitive advantage and, in a wider perspective, advantage of Asian corporations and the entire economy.² This article will focus upon features of Asian managers which determine indirectly the success of Japanese or Chinese companies on the global market.

¹ For the purposes of this article, the author refers to such Asian countries as China and Japan.

² From December 1978 to December 2008, the increase of GDP was 9.5% on average and even in 2009, when the entire world experienced stagnation and crisis and numerous countries experienced recession, the growth of GDP in China exceeded 8% and China broke the record of Japan, where, in years 1960-1995, the growth was “as little as” 8% as well as it broke the record of other Far East “tigers”: Hong Kong (7.8% at the same time), South Korea (8.3%), and Singapore (8.9%). Moreover, the list of *Fortune Global 500* from 2010 includes 46 Chinese enterprises, which gives China the third position in the ranking with respect to the country of origin of largest companies in the world. See B. Góralczyk, *Chiny a nowy ład gospodarczy* [conference presentation], Presented at: Integracja Azji Wschodniej. Mit czy rzeczywistość?, Wrocław University of Economics, 16 November 2009.

2. The competitive advantage gained owing to the quality of the human capital in Asian companies

Human capital is defined as an added value which is brought to organisations by their employees. It is human capital that constitutes a factor determining differences between organisations and a real basis for competitive advantage. Human capital involves knowledge, skills, and potential for development and implementation of innovations as shown by people working in a given company.³

Competitiveness derives from the word “to compete”, i.e. “search for together⁴”. This “searching for together” has become an inherent part of the Asian culture with one of its key social and cultural values being collectivism and trust, upon which interpersonal relations are built.

According to A. Baron, one of the distinct benefits resulting from the achievement of competitive advantage based upon effective management of human capital is the fact that this advantage is extremely difficult for competitors to follow.⁵ In the present article, the author presents a study of **qualifications** typical for Asian managers and, at the same time, difficult to achieve and follow by their western colleagues.

The author’s experience in her educational work with international students, including those of Asian origin (Japanese and Korean), makes it possible to describe them as persons characterised by high motivation of achievements, discipline of work, openness to experience, knowledge absorption, and respect for their own and others’ work. Therefore, considering such human potential, one cannot be astonished by the successes of China or South Korea in so many fields.

According to Spreizer, a success of international managers depends on the ability of **learning by experience**. Learning model according to Kolb involves four modes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.⁶ In relation to the aforementioned students all modes are presented at the highest level.

Moreover, learning process is determined by the **cultural context**. In the opinion of Y. Yamazaki despite the large measurable differences in culture between Japan and other Western cultures, such as the US, Japanese companies have achieved relative success in overcoming these differences and thanks to enormous **ability to learn by experience**.⁷

³ A. Baron, M. Armstrong, *Zarządzanie kapitałem ludzkim*, Oficyna Wolters Kluwer, Kraków 2008, pp. 17, 18.

⁴ This term was defined in *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1969, [in:] *Granice konkurencji*, Grupa Lizbońska, Poltext, Warszawa 1996, p. 13.

⁵ A. Baron, M. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁶ Y. Yamazaki, C. Kares, Expatriate learning: Exploring how Japanese managers adapt in the United States, *International Journal of HRM* 2007, Vol. 18, No. 8, p. 1375.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 1377.

Moreover, for the Japanese business it is typical to follow examples, methods, products, etc., which is considered as a positive feature in Japan. For instance, **imitation** of western products and management methods was deemed unethical by as little as 33.5 % of respondents, which proves that most of Japanese businessmen do not see anything wrong in such practices”.⁸ Such conduct constitutes a practical realisation of the paraphrased proverb: “one has to learn from mistakes, however, it is better to learn from others’ mistakes than one’s own mistakes”. This type of *benchmarking* is not a mere imitation, but it involves detection of factors which make the analysed process effective and, subsequently, indication of similar opportunities in one’s own enterprise as well as referring to causes of phenomena and adopting the best practices.⁹

3. Cultural, social and personality sources of competitive advantage of Asian managers

Attitudes and conduct of Chinese managers derive from social and cultural values of the geographical region. Societies based upon **Confucianism** are characterised by close networks of interpersonal relations between people in the business. The principles of Confucianism are manifested in membership in a group, awareness of personal esteem (*mien-tsu*), indirect communication and building of a network of social relations. Thus, the values derived from **Confucianism and Buddhism** (the greatest religious trends in East Asian countries) favour establishment and maintenance of long-term, and not occasional, business relations by Asian managers, which, in the light of dynamic changes of environment of global activities, is undoubtedly a positive feature.

Lien and *mien-tsu* means saving one’s face identified with feeling of respect, prestige and personal reputation. *Lien* may be ascribed to anyone representing virtues in social life. It may be lost due to an inappropriate behaviour (e.g. a theft), in which case, suicide is the last resort.¹⁰ However, *mien-tsu* may be perceived from the point of view of personal features and extended *guanxi*, wealth, power, intelligence, and even attractive appearance. The loss of *mien-tsu*, with its emotional consequence being a shame, means a decrease of influence, refusal to accept an invitation, gift, etc.¹¹ The loss of *mien-tsu* is the loss of respect of the community and this costs

⁸ J. Miroński, *Zarys teorii przedsiębiorstwa opartej na władzy*, Oficyna Wydawnicza SGH, Warszawa 2004, p. 98.

⁹ B. Bembenek, T. Piecuch, Wpływ japońskich doświadczeń na teorie i praktykę zarządzania zachodnich przedsiębiorstw, [in:] B. Skulska (ed.), *Integracja Azji Wschodniej. Mit czy rzeczywistość?*, Wydawnictwo UE we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 2009, p. 365.

¹⁰ B. Skulska (ed.), *Biznes międzynarodowy w regionie Azji i Pacyfiku*, Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2009, p. 200.

¹¹ H. Chee, Ch. West, *Myths about Doing Business in China*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2004, p. 44.

much more than damage or material loss. It is worth remembering that contracts concluded by Asian managers not only have a measureable value, but are also sealed with one's own reputation or *mien-tsu*, and these values are much more valuable than money. Thus, this idea is distant from the conscience of western managers, for whom "money makes the world goes round" or "money matters".

Other social and cultural value typical of the Asian business is *guanxi*, i.e., building interpersonal relations that involve mutual services/pleasures based upon the principle of reciprocity. It involves personal connections, where family relations are connected with business relations and constitute the best security of business. This principle of mutual obligations is not based upon one's knowledge, but upon a favour owed to others. *Quanxi* is a life investment and no one will risk destroying it in exchange for temporary profits.

Asian managers perceive themselves from the point of view of their **relations with business partners**, families and friends. The principles of long-term business co-operation are based upon respect, social status, and hierarchy, which may arouse indignation and discourage representatives of the Western Europe and the United States of America. This is because such social phenomena, attitudes and behaviours, which are standard for a given culture, may be interpreted as pathological phenomena and be socially stigmatised as such (e.g. corruption, nepotism) in other culture. The practice of management in international companies shows that numerous problems and conflicts arise from culture and, therefore, it is so important to be aware of different behaviour of managers deriving from different cultures.

Another social value on which the personal relationships are based is **trust** (*xinren*) defined as "heart and mind" confidence and relief that the other person will perform in a positive manner, which is expected of him or her, irrespective of whether that expectation is stated or implied.¹²

It is accepted to trust other people's intentions and acts relating to us in risky situations. One may distinguish trust based upon calculation – fulfilment of obligations for fear of sanctions. Trust based upon knowledge results from communications and previous experience. Parties are convinced about their reliability. Trust based upon identification is built upon mutual understanding and emotional bonds.¹³

The tag *xinren* is really reserved for a few selected relationships, whereas *guanxi* is built around more extended connections and a larger network.¹⁴ In other words, it may be said that operating in China, one should be conscious that *guanxi* is good for opening door but it is *xinren* that determines the level of emotional commitment that you receive once you are inside.

¹² M. Warner, Chinese management at the crossroads: Setting the scene, *Asia Pacific Business Review* 2010, Vol. 16, No. 3, p. 277.

¹³ J. Miroński, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹⁴ M. Warner, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

It may be said that the East Asian business is based upon a **relational psychological contract**,¹⁵ a type of gentlemen's agreement, for which the unwritten, unspoken and to be found "between the lines" is extremely important. This unusual art is unavailable to numerous European and American managers, who prefer everything that is "fast": food, credit cards, contract, life, etc.; and the knowledge about secrets of business in Asian countries determines **competitive advantage** of those, who have possessed it.

Therefore, numerous researches on *joint ventures* show problems with common conducting of business activities by Chinese and American managers. China is still a cultural challenge for western human resources. One may say that the East Asian standards of social and cultural values and style of management constitute a sort of an **access barrier** for western managers.

The research study conducted by Walsh, Wang, and Xin¹⁶ among American and Chinese managers in ten joint-venture companies in China shows a negative picture of American managers as perceived by the Chinese. The Chinese respondents admitted that Americans are "quick-tempered" and "lost in the Chinese reality from the very moment of arrival".

Below the author presents values determining behaviour of American and Japanese managers, which show considerable differences between the standards, which imply methods of conducting of business activities (see Table 1).

It is worth adding here that Japanese managers have a **mentoring system** that not only provides inexperienced employees with on the job trainers but also establishes a strong interpersonal bond and good communication between the two. The objective of this system is to build rapport and trust and persuade an individual to remain with a firm for his or her entire career. While the American managers also work on building trust and rapport, they do not go as far as their Japanese counterparts. One reason is because in the US many up-and-coming managers believe that their best hopes for a rapid promotion will come through job hopping to other firms. Thus, there is not the same degree of company loyalty as in Japan.

¹⁵ One of the types of psychological contract is **transactional contract** [see P. Makin, G. Cooper, *Organizacje a kontrakt psychologiczny. Zarządzanie ludźmi w pracy*, PWN, Warszawa 2000, p. 10] – perceived by the parties as short-term exchange of experiences and economical benefits. The area involved by the contract includes work in exchange for remuneration. **Relational** psychological contract concerns long-term co-operation of economic, social and emotional character [see J. Miroński, *op. cit.*, p. 115]. The Chinese are more relational-oriented and prefer contracts based on long-lasting confidence and *guanxi* rule in the place of work. However, transactional contract is characteristic for Americans who adopt the attitude of "player" working for a company until the situation is advantageous for him or her.

¹⁶ J.P. Walsh, E. Wang, K.R. Xin, Same bed, different dreams: Working relationships in Sino-American joint ventures – The litmus test for success in China, *Journal of World Business* 1999, Vol. 34, No. 1.

Table 1. Contrasting Japanese and American values and behaviour patterns

	American	Japanese	
Action	Man controlling nature, risk-taking, improvisation, outspokenness, critical thinking, confronting, spontaneity	Man with nature, caution, incremental improvement, deliberation, silence, emotional sensitivity, indirectness, avoiding	Patience
Freedom	Individuality, personal principle, legal safeguards, individual independence, being heard, chaotic anarchy, proving oneself	Conformity, group convention, trusted relationship, collective strength, maintain the group, saving face, humble co-operation	harmony
Equality	Autonomy, level playing Fidel, industrial competition, racial equality, tender equality	Dependency, industrial groups, strict ranking, racial differentiation, tender differentiation	Hierarchy

Source: R.G. Linowes, *The Japanese manager's traumatic entry into the US: Understanding the American-Japanese cultural divide*, [in:] D. Thomas (ed.), *Readings and Cases in International Management a Cross-cultural Perspective*, Sage Publication, 2003, p. 277.

Another difference is that Japanese managers use a more **paternalistic approach** than their American counterparts. For example, many Japanese firms offer subsidized housing and food to their people, and it is common to find leaders expressing an interest in the work-and-family related matters of their subordinates. In the US there is much less paternalism because leaders realize the importance of individualism and know that many employees view such paternalism as excessive snooping.¹⁷

We are also aware of most common problems of western managers in Asian countries (see Table 2).

Table 2. The most often mentioned problems of western managers working in China and Japan

China	Japan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different standard and quality of life; • Cultural and language differences; • Security and safety; • Climate; • Potentially high political risk; • Polluted natural environment; • Costs of living in Shanghai; • Lack of support from co-workers and subordinates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tokio is very difficult place to adapt • Specific "Tokyo business culture"; • Cultural and language differences

Source: <http://gmacglobalrelocationtrends.com>.

That is why western managers must deal among others with psychological pressure, frustration, resistance, confusion, unexpected emergencies, anxiety, and

¹⁷ R. Hodgetts, *Modern Human Relations at Work*, 6th edition, Dryden Press, Fort Worth, TX, 1996, p. 281.

powerlessness, all of which influence the success of foreign assignment onto the Asian market,¹⁸ and all Asian countries belong to the group of specific challenge for American and European managers.

Let us have a look now at **personal values** and features of Chinese managers that might be treated as a source of competitive advantage in the frame of qualifications. In a psychological test **MBTI** (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator)¹⁹ conducted on 200 senior managers from China Non Ferrous Metals Corp. a profile was developed of a traditional Chinese manager. It was found that nearly all Chinese managers are strongly attuned to reality, tending to be practical and observant. The predominant type of **Chinese manager** is punctual, logical, objective, organized, good with facts and details, impatient of opposing views, wary of feelings and intuitions, abrupt, blunt, logical, dependable, a good family man and very resistant to changes. Such psychological features are the element of the human capital and constitute the strength of a company. Although this survey does not describe all the Chinese managers or workers in China, a basic understanding of such a profile may help prepare other managers to succeed in China.²⁰

Another important psychological feature is **core self-evaluation** defined as fundamental evaluations of individual self-appraisals. Core self-evaluations are assumed to describe broad personality concepts manifested in four specific traits: self-esteem, self-efficacy, locus of control, emotional stability.²¹

Another psychological trait that really matters while operating onto the global market, is extraversion vs. introversion. **Extraversion** is defined as individual preferences for social activities. Individuals with high level of extraversion contact with people and social activities, whereas those with low level of extraversion are relatively less confident, expressive, sociable, and less able to take initiative.

Observations of negotiations with participation of Asian managers may allow us to state that they are rather “**chary of expressing their feelings and emotions**”, and thus they are **introverts**. One could not be more wrong! Psychological features such as extroversion are inherent in humans (thus, the number of extroverts in the Japanese and Italian societies may be comparable); however, the expression of the features is conditioned externally. Cultural conditions of Asian countries impose a sort of a “straitjacket” upon people restricting the expression of their personal

¹⁸ Y. Chiu, Influence on expatriate social networks in China, *The International Journal of HRM* 2009, Vol. 20, No. 4, p. 792.

¹⁹ MBTI indicators: sensing, intuition, thinking, feeling, introversion, extraversion, judging, perceiving. See S. Przytuła, *Psychologia zarządzania. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Wydawnictwo UE we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 2008, p. 90.

²⁰ V.P. Goby, Z.U. Ahmed, M. Annavarjula, D.N. Ibrahim, A. Osman-Gani, Determinants of expatriate success: An empirical study of Singaporean expatriates in the Peoples Republic of China, *Journal of Transnational Management Development* 2002, Vol. 7, Issue 4, p. 81.

²¹ Costa and McCrae (Big Five) define **emotional stability** as the degree of negative emotion one can endure. See more in S. Przytuła, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

features, including also extroversion. It is all about hiding one's emotions, restraining from expressing one's mood, feeling, which often favours success in the field of negotiations.²²

4. Conclusions

Human capital determines **competitive advantage** of international companies. Social and cultural values of a given geographical region constitute a challenge for numerous managers. Those geographical regions include, in particular, East Asian countries with their distance and different civilisation. Work in such regions creates numerous problems for western managers. The expression of inherent personal features of Asian managers derives from their specific national culture, which is difficult to understand for managers of European or American origin and may determine the success of Asian companies.

When comparing attitudes of managers deriving from Asian countries, it is worth seeing that in corporations in which one may find both Japanese, Chinese and western teams of managers mutual diffusion of their attitudes and behaviours may be observed, which is the result of learning and sharing of experience.

However, it should be emphasized that despite those examples of mutual diffusion of management practices, there are a lot of differences between the countries, which cause that numerous management practices, which prove for example in Japanese companies, will never be adopted in American and European companies and *vice versa*.

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²² The personal feature of extroversion is much desired in the process of recruiting managers by international companies, although, as Selmer states, personality tests constitute a rare tool of selection of expats. See J. Selmer, Coping strategies applied by western vs overseas Chinese business expatriates in China, *International Journal of HRM* 2002, Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 30.

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KAPITAŁ LUDZKI JAKO ŹRÓDŁO PRZEWAGI KONKURENCYJNEJ PRZEDSIĘBIORSTW WSCHODNIOAZJATYCKICH (CHIŃSKICH, JAPOŃSKICH)

Streszczenie: Kapitał ludzki stanowi o przewadze konkurencyjnej firm o zasięgu międzynarodowym. Wartości społeczne i kulturowe danego obszaru geograficznego stanowią wyzwanie dla wielu menedżerów, w szczególności są to kraje Azji Wschodniej o jakże odległej i odmiennej cywilizacji. Praca na tym obszarze stwarza liczne problemy menedżerom zachodnim. Ekspresja wrodzonych cech osobowości menedżerów azjatyckich nosi znamiona ich specyficznej kultury narodowej, trudnej do zrozumienia menedżerom o proweniencji europejskiej czy amerykańskiej, co stanowić może o sukcesie firm azjatyckich, działających w określonych warunkach gospodarki światowej.