

Interculturalised Japanese Logic and Values in the Aftermath of the March 2011 Crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines the notions of Western versus Eastern logic by taking a closer look at the Japanese mindset giving examples from fields ranging from superstition to hygiene. Based on this evaluation, the ten major concepts of Japanese society are explained and analysed with the help of intercultural dimensions by researchers such as Hall, Hofstede and Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner together with empirical examples from cross-cultural encounters with Japanese people. Everyday-life situations are reported on as well as historic and economic aspects, with the impact of the triple earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis of March 2011 also being taken into account.

Keywords: Western vs. Eastern logic, Japanese values, intercultural dimensions

Introduction

Amazing indeed how often, *all too often* in modern history the Japanese insular mindset has gone on automatic pilot and blindly headed towards self-destruction, heedless of the consequences. It just doesn't seem to know how to stop (D.K. 2011:s.p.).

But what is the Japanese mindset actually like?

For the West, Japan has always been a country of miracles, in the past mainly admired for its rich *samurai* and *geisha* culture and in present days for its technological achievements and lifestyle, both apparently accomplishing the perfect harmonisation of traditionalism and modernism. For ages, especially the Japanese *salarymen* have been regarded as the epitomes of discipline and hard work for whom personal failure and loss of face were so unheard of and so unthinkably dishonourable that they almost unexceptionally resulted in *harakiri*. For Westerners, this ritual has probably always seemed exaggerated and too extreme, though even they have had to admit that the Japanese definitely are justified in being proud of their cultural heritage and technological output, if not of their undisputable superiority in some fields.

Since March 2011, however, the perfectionist image Japan was having of itself, an image totally agreed with almost anywhere else in the world, has been tarnished more severely than it could ever have been by the impact of generational shift, i.e. the younger Japanese employees not any longer as committed to work as their fathers and grandfathers (N. 2008²:s.p.): The greatest change and damage ever has been caused by the events succeeding the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power-plant crisis of 11th March, 2011.

Above all, the poor crisis management of both the Japanese government and Tepco, the operator of the crippled Fukushima power plant, as well as revelations that the latter had been constructed in a strikingly un-Japanese negligent way have led to the disgraceful crumbling of traditional Japanese facades. Even the most ardent Japanese patriots have now begun to doubt the pillars of Japanese mentality such as the above-mentioned discipline and hard work.

This dilemma is further worsened by the double public loss of face because of letting such a catastrophe happen on Japanese ground in the first place and not being able to cope with it on their own in the second place. Only after harsh criticism from the rest of the world and even from within Japan itself the Japanese authorities and Tepco managers were finally willing to allow foreign nuclear experts into the country. All this seems to be 'false pride' to Western observers but as it is by far not the only example of the intricacies of Japanese logic, one can conclude that the answer is by far not that easy.

In the following, this article endeavours to find out what really makes Japanese people tick from an intercultural point of view, taking both Japanese logic, here used in the ordinary meaning of 'mindset', and values into account.

Japanese Logic

It is a common error that logic is objective and universal, i.e. to assume that what is logical for members of one culture must also be logical for members of another culture. In the Western world, logic is normally equated with rationality. However, this is not necessarily so in the Asian world. In that respect, Japanese logic, for instance, is very different from Western logic (Holliday et al. 2004:94). The concept of Japanese logic is best described by the anecdote "A strong wind helps the cooper" (Hall & Reed Hall 1985:88-89).

According to this anecdote, a strong wind raises sand and dust, thus making people feel uneasy and melancholy. In order to distract themselves, they play the *shamisen*, a stringed instrument. This custom leads to an increasing demand for *shamisen*. As the sounding board of this instrument consists of cat skin, more cats than usual are killed. The first consequence of this is the unhampered reproduction of mice, which, on their part, nibble on wheat tubs. To make this chain reaction complete, demand for such tubs rises. This is why a strong wind is beneficial to the cooper.

In terms of intercultural dimensions, the above anecdote stands for the Japanese long-term orientation (Hostede 1991:16) and peculiarity to see connections between seemingly unconnected things or events.

A few more instances highlighting the intricacies of Japanese logic can also be found in the fields of superstition and, especially, hygiene.

As far as Japanese superstition is concerned, the most famous example for it is the number 'four' which is considered unlucky since one of its Japanese pronunciations, *shi*, can also mean death. For that reason, fourth floors in hospitals or hotels are often skipped in Japan. The same is true for room numbers like 4, 44 or 444 or products not packaged in fours. To give one more example of the Japanese logic of superstition, it is thought unlucky to sleep with the head towards the north (*kitamakura*; JTB 1997:136), since this is how dead bodies

are laid out. Following Japanese logic, such beliefs as the ones cited above, however, only apply to native Japanese, not to foreign visitors whom Japanese hosts let sleep with the head to any direction whatsoever without objecting. Therefore, it can be concluded that Japanese logic seems to be rather exclusive.

Talking of hygiene, it is widely known that the Japanese set great store by cleanliness. Here again, the Western and the Japanese interpretation of what is hygienic and what is not sometimes differs immensely. While it is understandable from a Western point of view that the toilet is considered to be a dirty place, most Westerners have difficulties in being obliged to share one and the same pair of toilet shoes with other people, not only with their hosts, but also with complete strangers, e.g. in the restrooms of Japanese restaurants and hotels.

What is even more illogical for Westerners as it goes far beyond lavatories is having to take their shoes off in the hall before entering traditional-style restaurants and hotels in particular. In a Westerner's mind, all this raises fears of the athlete's food, a fear that the Japanese seem not to have or to ignore stoically, though antifungal products are selling quite well on the Japanese market (Neumann 2006:22). On the one hand, it is of course considered to be unhygienic in the West, too, and therefore polite to take off your shoes when visiting somebody else's home; on the other hand, the usage of special balcony shoes and the unwillingness to eat outside in the 'polluted' air downtown sometimes is hard to come to terms with for Westerners.

To add one more example to the area of hygiene, surprisingly dishwashers in private homes are not yet as widespread in Japan as they are, let us say, in Europe or the US. If the Japanese housewife owns such a machine at all, it is usually so small that its usage would be inefficient and, as a consequence, she does all the washing by hand.

Moreover, one also should not forget the challenges of the bathing culture in Japan. When being a guest in Japanese homes or traditional style hotels (*ryokan*; JTB 1997:112), it is quite common to use the same bathwater as the members of one's host family or the other hotel guests. The same applies to the (non-chlorous and non-ozonic) water in the tubs of the still popular public baths (*sentō*; JTB 1997:62) and hot springs (*onsen*; JTB 1997:120). As far as the latter two are concerned, bathers are requested to sit on little plastic stool and to wash and rinse themselves carefully before getting into the tub – soap, shampoo etc. should never be used in the bath as it is reserved for soaking and relaxing. From a Japanese perspective, this might again sound perfectly natural and logical, but from a Western perspective, the thought of the fungi, bacteria and viruses on the stool and in the water prevails – especially in the age of diseases like swine influenza and SARS.

Japanese Core Values vs. Intercultural Dimensions

In order to understand the above-mentioned paradoxes better and to gain a deeper insight into Japanese mentality in general, it is useful to consider the ten major concepts of Japanese society: *uchi* vs. *soto*, *wa*, *reigi*, *mentsu*, *ba*, *honne* vs. *tatemae*, *enryo*, *amae*, *omoiyari* and *doryoku* (Moosmüller 1997:38-217).

First, the Japanese distinguish between *uchi*, i.e. members of the ingroup and *soto*, i.e. members of the outgroup. Among *uchi*, one can find the family, friends, close acquaintances,

colleagues etc., whereas *soto* stands for the outside world, thus referring to strangers one is not the least related to. When members of the same ingroup deal with each other, they are mutually dependent on each other on the one hand. Whereas the latter might also have downsides, on the other hand, *uchi* members know that they can trust each other. As Japanese people experience this kind of closeness and togetherness from an early childhood on, it is quite natural that they develop feelings like *amae*, i.e. the actual need to be looked after by other ingroup members.

Confrontations with outgroup strangers, however, are often characterised by independence, caution, indifference or even ignorance. For example, this distinction also accounts for the widespread reluctance of Japanese passengers to spontaneously help unknown fellow-passengers with their luggage or the fact why they often ignore their (strange) neighbour on a train or plane – even during a long-haul flight. Sometimes, however, even the Japanese have to refer to members of the outgroup. That is most often the case when they want to find their way around, as most streets in Japan do not have names. Therefore, if one gets lost, one does not have any choice but to ask someone – naturally a stranger – for the way (JTB 1997:22-23).

On the one side, the existence of this kind of in- and outgroup paradox can be explained by the intercultural dimension of collectivism – Japan is a highly collectivistic culture (Hofstede 1991:53) where a group mentality comes naturally. On the other side, the wariness or even fear of ‘outsiders’ can also be attributed to Japan’s high score on the intercultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 1991:113). In economic terms, a distrust of anything from the outside, in that case non-Japanese, can be illustrated by the so-called criss-crossed capitalism so popular in Japan: Cross-shareholdings (when two Japanese firms hold each other’s shares) and stable-shareholdings (friendly Japanese firms holding shares they almost never sell) are the blood-brotherhood of corporate Japan. Such holdings are regarded as a way to cement business relationships and to insulate Japanese companies from nettlesome outsiders, rather than as investments (N. 2008¹:s.p.).

Naturally, living in groups brings various challenges with it. To begin with, such a group-oriented lifestyle can only function if certain principles are observed by every single member of the group. The major principle or core value in this context is the Japanese idea of *wa* which means harmony. According to *wa*, preserving the harmony and avoiding conflicts is crucial. Every Westerner who has ever worked in a team will readily agree that these aspects are essential for successful teamwork. Nevertheless, the question arises how an atmosphere of *wa* can actually be achieved.

In Japanese society, harmony is established resp. secured by the concept of *reigi*, meaning politeness. *Reigi* implies paying respect to one’s counterparts and behaving sincerely as well as in accordance with social etiquette. Once again, however, this leaves the Western observer puzzled, as it is hard to understand why different politeness rules should apply to ingroup and outgroup people. From a Western viewpoint, ignoring others etc. (i.e. *soto* members), for instance, could easily be interpreted as rather rude behaviour.

The answer to the adequate attitude towards other people lies in the complex hierarchical organisation of Japanese society (Hall & Hall 1985:126-128). If in doubt, an individual is treated according to their social rank. In intercultural terms, this status-thinking is confirmed

by the dimension of power distance which is rather pronounced in the case of Japanese culture (Hofstede: 1991:26). Simultaneously, the importance of status can also be traced back to the fact that Japan is an extremely masculine culture (Hofstede: 1991:84). With ambition being one of the dominant values in male-dominated cultures, it is not surprising that another Japanese concept epitomises exactly this idea, namely *doryoku*. According to *doryoku*, one should always try hard and make an effort. Certainly, *doryoku* can be made responsible for the *salaryman*'s success story with all its advantages, but also disadvantages like *karoshi*, the so-called Japanese disease (Mole: 1992:210).

Reverting once again to *reigi*, the Japanese maxim of politeness, it should be added that there is more to that maxim than just being polite. In fact, *reigi* is the perfect example for the popular fallacy that there is a standard, even cross-cultural interpretation of politeness. In Japanese eyes, acting respectfully and sincerely in accordance with social norms goes far beyond *reigi*. This is mainly because the Japanese communication style can be characterised as indirect (Hall & Hall 1985:84-87) and high-context (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997:89). In other words, communication is often vague with many nonverbal elements so that reading and 'listening' between the lines can be crucial. However, how can one actually decipher implicit nonverbal codes? Of course, the answer can again be summed up in a Japanese concept, but also the Western world has coined a corresponding term, namely empathy. Nevertheless, despite this seeming similarity, the Western notion of empathy only came up with the concept of emotional intelligence in the 20th century and thus is relatively young compared to its Japanese equivalent *omoiyari*. Besides, the latter is also far more comprehensive and absolute than the term of empathy: *Omoiyari* requests one to anticipate the needs, feelings etc. of others and fulfil their expectations without asking what those are.

During the communicating and socialising process, one should also be aware of *mentsu*, the concept of face. According to this concept, saving and giving face is of utmost importance, i.e. one must not only try to save one's own face, but also that of one's counterpart. There are several ways of achieving this.

What is probably most demanding for Westerners is the fact that one must always remain patient in accordance with *ba*, meaning that one ought to wait for the perfect time and especially the perfect place before getting active. Even though there is a saying based on the same idea in some parts of the Western world, it can be very hard if not impossible for foreigners to find out when the perfect moment has come or the perfect location has been found. Generally speaking, acting too rashly is not advisable because of the permanent risk of *mentsu*, the loss of face. That means one should assume a rather hesitant and discreet manner preventing uncertain, i.e. possibly awkward or embarrassing situations that might lead to anybody's face being threatened; this kind of behaviour is called *enryo* in Japanese and – like the above-mentioned *soto* – can no doubt again be related to Japan's high score for the cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 1991:113). As *enryo* also comprises modesty, it should be highlighted that not only modesty, but also shyness are considered to be very desirable traits in Japanese society (JTB 1997:171, Lutterjohann 1994:26). For instance, *enryo* also implies rejecting or at least downplaying compliments; also, boastfulness is a taboo. In short, modesty is often demonstrated by deprecating oneself and flattering others (JTB 1997:83).

In addition, *mentsu*, *enryo* and particularly *ba* also have something to do with the aforementioned differentiation between *uchi*, i.e. ingroup and *soto*, i.e. outgroup as well as the typically indirect Japanese way of communicating. Depending on the place (*ba*), it is acceptable to utter differing opinions on one and the same subject. In this context, ‘place’ must be interpreted more widely as ‘situation’. When you know somebody well and are on good terms with them (normally within your ingroup), it is common to speak your mind freely; this is called *honno*. By contrast, when interacting with new acquaintances or people you do not trust (i.e. outgroup members), it is usual to communicate in a very tactful and diplomatic way (*tatema*). This is why it can be of decisive importance to establish a personal relationship to Japanese business partners before getting down to business and to take part in more informal evening outings, i.e. to karaoke bars. Only then will the normally more low-context Western partner have a slight chance of finding out what is really on the mind of his or her usually more high-context Japanese counterpart. Or, to put it differently, only in situations like that will the generally more emotionally neutral Japanese (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997:69-70) open up in a more affective way.

The impact of the events of March 2011

Due to the high level of superstition mentioned earlier, in Japan

it is regarded as immoral for a company responsible for the safety of a facility to assume that the worst could happen. People tend to criticize such companies by questioning why they would contemplate such possibilities (Clark 2011:s.p.),

quoting a Japanese official. In addition,

Tepco was, like quite a few other firms and industry groups in Japan, proud to think of itself and its industry as a *mura* (village) – self-contained, self-sufficient and able to fight off any intrusion by outsiders. The result was the dangerous complacency (Clark 2011:s.p.).

And, as we all know now, it has been the Japanese people who have had to cope with the consequences of this very complacency...

Like most countries with a high power-distance, Japan is fairly centralised with communities being dependent on Tokyo. At least, this was widely believed before the unprecedented series of incidents of March 2011. However,

the crisis revealed Japan’s blind spot about what goes on beyond the centre of power (N. 2011:s.p.).

In other words,

the quality and commitment of local leaders have been a revelation, so refreshing compared with the bickering politicians in the national Diet (parliament) (N. 2011:s.p.).

In fact, not only mayors, but also citizens in the disaster-stricken areas have proven ‘Wild Western true grit’ (N. 2011:s.p.) when trying to cope with the catastrophe on their own record before the seemingly paralyzed government got active. So it can be concluded that, presumably due to Japanese collectivism, the laws of community spirit can sometimes go

beyond hierarchical obedience to far-away authorities (what would be normal in a high-power distance country). What is even more, in order to help others in accordance with *amae*, a number of ordinary citizens in the tsunami regions were demonstrating an amazing selflessness placing the well-being of their community above personal or individual interests: For instance, one fisherman tells of the four days he spent clearing the wreckage of his village, with no knowledge of the whereabouts of his eldest son (N. 2011:s.p.). However, the most striking examples of true selflessness can be found in the case of the Japanese workers, engineers and technicians risking their lives in an attempt to get Fukushima under control again. Why have quite a few been volunteering to do so? Are they victims or heroes? Is it all about duty or honour? The answer mainly is a combination of two factors: First, the strong Japanese belief in being able to control technique and, second and above all, Japanese discipline, i.e. *doryoku*. As mentioned earlier, not fulfilling one's duty is considered a public disgrace, i.e. a loss of face (Kastner 2011:s.p.). Behaviour like the one of the volunteer workers often is also referred to as '*kamikaze* mentality' (according to the Japanese pilots who were risking their own lives when bombarding hostile targets during World War II).

However, the main reason for the regional resilience mentioned earlier and particularly for bypassing and/or not waiting for orders from the central government probably can be attributed to the (even in Japanese eyes)

almost unacceptable loss of face for the Japanese leadership (C.J.T.O. 2011:s.p.).

The concept of *mentsu* can most likely also be held responsible for the fact that the Japanese government was hesitating for so long before asking for outside, i.e. foreign/outgroup help with the Fukushima crisis. A plea of that kind

would amount to a tacit admission of total failure; something which is anathema to the entire Japanese way of life (C.J.T.O. 2011:s.p.).

Meanwhile, international and even national spectators have been wondering if the apparent cover up of the Fukushima disaster has been a case of loss of face being more important than protecting the public and telling the truth. Protecting the interests of the public, i.e. the group, however, would have been the most Japanese thing to do. Has Japan now also fallen to the ever more popular degradation of good old-fashioned customs and rules of civility? Indeed, when strictly applying traditional Japanese values, taken to extremes, it has been suggested that some politicians and members of the board of Tepco should have considered *seppuku* (also known as *harakiri*), ceremonial disembowelment originally performed by disgraced *samurai*, because of their un-Japanese behaviour.

But again, this Japanese attitude of telling everyone it is fine when it is not is not so surprising after all. Avoidance of bad or negative news to preserve *wa*, i.e. the peace and/or social harmony is frequent. Japanese politicians and Tepco managers probably honestly thought they were doing the right thing by saying "No no, everything's fine, no meltdown" in an effort not to panic people, even though the public was completely aware of the fact they were being lied to. This phenomenon can be traced back to the basic Japanese behaviour of showing a 'public' face to everyone (*tatemaie*) whilst keeping your true feelings to yourself (*honne*).

In the end, it all again leads up to *mentsu*: Looking at Tepco once more, none of its executives wanted to make a decision in case it failed, and, as a consequence, the decision-maker being regarded as a complete failure, too.

Struggling with *mentsu*, only on Tuesday, 7th June 2011, almost three months after the earthquake, Japan eventually admitted it was unprepared for a severe nuclear accident like the tsunami-caused Fukushima disaster and said damage to the reactors and radiation leakage were worse than it previously thought (Yamaguchi 2011:s.p.). Taking all this into consideration,

today's Japan looks more like Japan Disincorporated. Or as they put it in Japanese, *shoeki* (ministry interest) has become more important than the *kokueki* (national interest). Attitudes have become more tribal, and not just in nuclear energy (Clark 2011:s.p.).

But still, to the surprise of most foreigners, the majority of the Japanese have not panicked or left the country. Why is this? On the one hand, it must be due to the so-called 'taifun mentality' of the Japanese, a term originally coined by US-ambassador Erwin Reischauer. From an early childhood on, the Japanese grow up with the permanent threat of earthquakes, tsunamis or volcanic eruptions; there even is an annual catastrophe prevention day. In the past, only few have resigned after catastrophes like that, but the majority have emerged with an optimism to resurrect (Büttner 2011:s.p.). On the other hand, it would be totally un-Japanese to let down one's family, friends, and, above all, one's company and colleague in times of crisis. Pride, loyalty and sense of duty towards the latter and the nation itself together with the lurking loss of face when disappointing the others have made many Japanese people stay (G.X. 2011:s.p.).

Conclusion

Instead of looking at the mysterious dangers of nuclear power, we should be looking at the mysterious, and now it seems dangerous, workings of the Japanese mentality and bureaucracy (Clark 2011:s.p.).

Above all, now evidently potentially dangerous concepts such as *tatemaie* and *mentsu* should be done away with slowly in everyday and business life, particularly when the health and the lives of millions are at stake:

Anybody should be able to stand up and say whatever they think (K.N.C. 2011:s.p.).

Though the above analysis makes it easier to understand why this is not (yet) the case and to decipher the mystery of the Japanese mindset to some degree, one cannot help but to silently agree to and finally begin to grasp the deeply rooted Japanese conviction that a *gaijin*, a 'foreigner' will always remain a foreigner in Japan, no matter what they do, how good they master the Japanese language etc. and will never be able to truly understand the software of the Japanese mentality, no matter how hard they try (Moosmüller 1997:110).

Nevertheless, the fact that the mystery of Japanese society is such a hard nut to crack is probably why Japan has always fascinated both travellers and scientists likewise. For the moment, it only can be hoped that Japan will somehow manage to recover from disgrace, radiation and devastation in the aftermath of the triple catastrophe of March 2011 without overdoing *jishuku*, Japanese self-restraint and stoicism, in a too pessimistic way (T.

2011:s.p.), but making the best possible use of its traditional values and what the nation has learnt from the nuclear accident and its handling. Japan should focus on its rediscovered strengths and work on its now all too obvious weaknesses:

Japan's strengths lie in its attention to precise production and logistics, its perfectionism, group orientation, complete manufacturing system and long-term planning system. Its weaknesses on the other hand rest on its weak political system and leadership, its weak decision making processes and mentality, deflation, demographic decline, loss of vision and growing frustration (Daiwa 2011:s.p.).

For example, if the country were now to become less bureaucratic and more decentralized, different areas could not only take a different view of what forms of energy are best for them (N.2011:s.p.) but generally become more autonomous and develop their economic potential which would finally benefit the entire nation. Thus, the following gloomy prediction will hopefully not come true:

Today's global pity for Japan's nuclear and tsunami woes could easily turn into global contempt (Clark 2011:s.p.).

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