

A Western View of Japanese and Chinese Communication Patterns

By Roger Mottini

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, we witness the unfolding of an economic and, in its wake also a possible political mega-trend, about which a lot has already been written: the shift of the global economy's centre of gravity away from the West towards Asia. At the forefront of this development are the two largest economies in Asia: Japan and China.

The last twenty years saw the astounding growth of China which overtook Germany as the world's largest exporter in 2009. China's development stands in sharp contrast to Japan's sluggishness over the same period. Nevertheless, for the foreseeable future the majority of businesspeople looking to Asia will have to deal with their counterparts of these two nations (and let's not forget India). For that matter, they are confronted with two very different styles of communication and human interaction.

On the following pages I will try to depict the broad features of Japanese and Chinese styles of communication in general terms, based on first hand experience as well as research and information obtained by others with similar experience. My observations and conclusions are subjective and seen from the perspective of a European in general and a Swiss in particular, but what other point of view could I possibly assume? I am fully aware of the fact that there is always a looming danger of stereotyping and oversimplification in such an undertaking. Although I do not claim any scientific accuracy for my statements, trying to make sense of the world and human behaviour is in the end nothing else but reducing complexity, especially when it comes to social sciences.

In my approach I will not judge communicative behaviour in moral terms as being "good" or "bad" but rather in terms of something I would like to call "communicative efficiency".

By "communicative efficiency" I mean the degree of smoothness in:

- a) getting correct (ie appropriate) information about one's social environment
- b) getting one's own information across as intended, that is, as meant by the sender.

Communicative efficiency is, in the end, nothing much else than the endeavour to avoid misunderstandings. The way humans of a certain group communicate always reflects the group's values which, in turn, can be interpreted as sources of social strengths (or

weaknesses) when it comes to dealing with the world outside one's own group. In that sense I will attempt to characterise certain communicative patterns and styles as being either conducive to communicative efficiency (a basic strength), and, by implication at least, as being not so conducive (a basic weakness). Again, this is a western and personal view and does not claim to be an objective truth (whatever that might be in the social sphere) nor do I want to imply a superior way of communication. True to the definition given above, the core of my argument is a discussion about Japanese as contrasted with Chinese underlying values guiding communication with the outside world. These values determine attitudes and preferences towards social phenomena in general. Social values will be explained and illustrated under a keyword expressing a topic of human interaction.

What can the reader gain from this besides agreeing or disagreeing with certain views? By describing communication patterns as reflections of social and cultural values, the reader might at least gain the following insights:

- there are cultural values shaping human communication
- they are different (from ours in the West) and from each other
- they smooth or complicate human communication in different ways.

With this in mind, the reader might even enjoy reading the following pages.

1. Position

In a Japanese social environment, hierarchy is the dominant organisational principle and is paramount when it comes to establishing relations and communicating with others. The Japanese language deploys a fearsome arsenal of expressions and patterns in order to address superiors and subordinates in the proper way. As a foreigner, standard politeness in Japanese might do in most cases. More difficult are the different ranks and titles used in social organisations such as companies or government agencies. Title does not necessarily mean power or influence in Japan. The Japanese Prime Minister might hold the position of paramount government power, but others lurk in the shadows pulling the strings. Called 'shadow shoguns' in Japan, they wield informal power that might match or even surpass the prime minister's formal power. Informal power is not necessarily conveyed by formal position – appearance and substance often do not match

in Japan. This adds considerably to communication problems for Westerners when dealing with Japanese, beyond questions of language and manners. And the Japanese side runs the risk of being considered not only as slow and impenetrable, but also as insincere from a Western point of view! Such a label can easily lead to a complete breakdown of communication as Westerners tend to be rather quick when it comes to moral judgements.

In China, hierarchy is also more emphasized than in Europe or North America. However, here position is much more closely related to actual power, as in the West, than in the case of Japan. Moreover, one feature that struck me about the Chinese notion of position is the observation that it is also more closely related to actual competence and merit when compared to the Japanese situation. For example, in Japan it is not rare to run into the head of the international department of a company or even the head of a foreign language department at a university who is unable (or unwilling) to express himself in a foreign language. I never encountered something like this in a Chinese environment where actual competence is more valued than length of service and loyalty. On this count, I think, Chinese organisations score generally higher than Japanese ones.

2. Language

Japanese have a tendency to regard their language as being particularly difficult and therefore inaccessible to foreigners. The Japanese language is also considered to be a vital ingredient of Japanese identity, something like a national treasure to be jealously guarded. As a consequence, they feel rather uneasy when encountering foreigners who have mastered Japanese to a higher degree. Learning Japanese in a Japanese environment can be frustrating for a foreigner; hardly anybody will correct your mistakes or help you along when desperately searching for words or expressions. On the other hand, the Japanese are very quick with compliments about your Japanese skills, simply ordering a drink in Japanese can trigger the common exclamation: Nihongo ga jozu! (you are a good Japanese speaker). But beware, one is really good at Japanese when such compliments cannot be heard anymore, as a friend of mine once remarked.

The Japanese attitude towards foreign languages is equally puzzling. Despite long years of efforts, many Japanese studying a foreign language in Japan are rarely able to reach a level of English, not to mention German or French, which is sufficient for a meaningful conversation by western standards. Scant regard for grammatical structure and an overemphasis on formal patterns of expression lead to an approach of rote learning which exhausts itself in reproducing long and grammatically perfect sentences for a given situation, but fails utterly when confronted with open questions. Furthermore, some idiosyncratic Japanese concepts of communication are not very helpful in bridging the divide between western (and Chinese for that matter) ideas of human communication. 'kūki yomeru' (read the air) or 'ishin denshin' (from heart to heart) are sometimes put forward as specific Japanese ways of understanding each other without words. If applied in a Western context, however, this will not be regarded as a concept of communication and consequently will only lead to false mutual expectations.

My worst personal experience so far of Japanese unwillingness to accommodate outsiders was at Japanese universities during intercultural seminars or lectures. Rather than deigning to translate a guest's lecture, Japanese professors usually lie back and watch a foreign colleague or assistant struggling along with his Japanese in order to translate a lecture given in a foreign language for the audience. Such an attitude is not only unthinkable in Europe (and a pity for the students), but also self-defeating, especially when compared to the Chinese approach to communication and language.

The Chinese are supremely self-confident, bolstered by an awareness of the achievements and long duration of their civilization regarded by themselves as the pinnacle of human civilisation in general. Foreign invaders of China were always absorbed by the cultural power and the sheer size of the country. This Chinese self-confidence also bears on their attitude towards language – the Chinese language as well as other languages. A Chinese is basically convinced that every civilised person should understand Chinese at least as a second language. A proper command of the Chinese language in this sense is the distinguishing feature of a truly educated and cultured person – not unlike the command of Latin in Europe right up until the 19th century. Making an effort to learn the Chinese language is therefore highly appreciated and encouraged by the Chinese. And they are strict teachers, correcting every minor mistake

and helping the learner along in his efforts to acquire Chinese language skills. Chinese would love to see their language as widely used as English, at least in Asia. They do not worry about losing part of their cultural identity by giving away the 'secrets' of their language. The complicated writing system, however, will prove the main obstacle to Chinese becoming a truly global language. Unlike the Japanese, Chinese tend to express themselves in a straightforward way (as do the Europeans). Another difference is their motivation in learning new skills. Whereas the Japanese can value something merely because it appears to be difficult, the Chinese emphasize its usefulness for getting them ahead in life. The same approach applies to a foreign language; the Chinese see it in a utilitarian way, that is, as the most effective instrument of intercultural communication and they go about the task of learning in a very systematic and efficient way. The author was amazed by the command of the German language shown by Chinese students who had barely arrived at his university in Switzerland. True enough, they all hailed from leading institutions in China such as Beida or Fudan, but no graduate from a similar Japanese institution could have matched their language skills. Upon inquiry, they openly told me their 'secret'; it turned out to be quite simple: master the structure and grammar first and after that you can fill in the necessary vocabulary. The experience with most of the Japanese language students the author happened to teach was a quite different matter. Their attitude could be described like this: "teach me the appropriate expression in a certain situation used at a social event in your country". My conclusion on this matter: language education in China must be far better than in Japan and the Chinese attitude towards language in general is much more open and more in line with Western concepts of communication.

3. Harmony

The Japanese concept of harmony is called 'Wa': 和.

The character has several readings. As 'wa' it can be translated as: peace, harmony, Japan(ese).

The other readings are: *yawa(-ragu, -rageru)* which means 'to soften', 'to make/become calm'; or *nago(-yaka)* which means 'mild', 'gentle', 'congenial'.

The concept is understood as peculiar to Japan; in other words, it is not universal, but uniquely Japanese in scope and meaning. It sets everything considered to be Japanese

apart from the Non-Japanese world. The Japanese concept of harmony is basically a person's ability to blend smoothly into a Japanese environment. In its worst interpretation it has been used with a racial bias; at its best it makes a person's actions and communication very predictable thus giving the other side the possibility to avoid confrontation and disruptive behaviour. This leads to a smooth functioning of daily routine interactions between Japanese people, even under stressful conditions. The degree of discipline and stoicism one can observe during train rush hours or traffic jams is the most obvious expression of this concept of harmony in a Japanese sense (the ideas of 'gaman' and 'ganbare', explained later, are also helpful to understanding this behaviour). The most impressive manifestation of this harmony in my view is the joy- and peacefulness of Japanese cherry blossom-viewing (hanami). Just try to imagine: tens of thousands of people crowded together in parks, lots of alcohol, but no violent behaviour and only a symbolic police presence on the spot.

The downside of this harmony is a danger of blind conformity with nobody daring to speak out against or point towards obvious problems for fear of rocking the boat. This inclination to pretend that everything is just fine can lead to self-deception and cover-ups instead of tackling a potentially damaging situation early on. For a foreigner this exclusive concept has two consequences. On the one hand he can be kept outside, even as a member of a Japanese organisation, which means he will never belong to the core group of the 'family'. On the other hand, however, this exclusive character of 'wa' gives the foreigner also a certain degree of freedom, a freedom usually not allowed to Japanese members of the group in the same position. This freedom of manoeuvre enables the foreigner to lay the finger on weak spots without risking a loss of status. In fact, foreigners are often instrumental in playing the role of 'whistleblower' (or court jester, depending on the circumstances).

Mr. Ghosn, the boss of Renault-Nissan has played his role as an outside-insider to the benefit of the organisation as a whole.

The Chinese concept of 'harmony' is as intuitive as the Japanese one, but it is not exclusive but universal, even cosmological, encompassing all and everything. The Chinese universe is an interplay between good forces or energies, and bad ones.

Harmony in the Chinese sense is highly abstract as a concept but with very practical applications. Harmony on a personal level is basically achieved when good energies prevail in one's environment. 'Feng Shui' (meaning wind and water), also well known in the west is probably the most popular practical expression of this notion of harmony. Its goal is to establish a working and/or living environment where positive energy is abundant.

In the realm of human interaction it takes the form of Confucian ethics defining five basic (hierarchical) relationships among people in their different roles as rulers/subjects, husbands, parents, brothers and friends. Confucianism then formulates fundamental moral values guiding the proper conduct in each of these relationships in order to keep them free of conflict.

Crucial in Confucian ethics is the notion of 'virtue'. If everyone strives to achieve virtue then society as a whole will function smoothly and peacefully – a constant obsession and ideal of the Chinese people throughout their long history. Interestingly enough, this yearning for virtue was also a fundamental issue in classical Greek philosophy.

Unfortunately, virtue and harmony as overriding ideals in Confucianism remain just that: ideals. Nowadays' Chinese communicative behaviour under the extremely competitive conditions of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' is straightforward, utilitarian in the extreme and never shy of confrontation. In the world of business, the Chinese are savvy, tough and more often than not successful in getting the better end of a deal.

For Chinese – unlike the Japanese – the result is appreciated and not the effort one makes to achieve it. Like Westerners, Chinese put content before form – another feature that sets them apart from the Japanese style of communication. This, however, can result in them being perceived by the other side as being overly rude or even aggressive.

In Western eyes, the Japanese appear as too formal in their approach to communication while the Chinese come across as too outspoken.

4. Morals and Ethics

Closely related to the concept of social harmony are the underlying questions of fundamental moral and ethical values. In Japan with its long feudal tradition the aristocracy, composed of the court nobility (kuge) and the warrior class (buke), the latter's values proved to be most influential in shaping Japan's value system. The

Japanese word for warrior – ‘samurai’ – is derived from the verb ‘saburau’: to serve. A samurai’s key task was to serve his lord and loyalty was the paramount quality of a Japanese warrior and thus the cornerstone of his value system. Another characteristic ingredient of the ‘way of the warrior’ (bushido) was his indifference towards material wealth in general and money in particular; the warriors’ stipends were usually paid in rice (what a difference to another famous warrior, the Swiss mercenary). A samurai’s main concern was his lord’s and, by inference, his own honour.

In order to be a good warrior he had also to develop the relevant qualities: fighting spirit and techniques, swordsmanship, endurance and fearlessness in the face of death.

The warrior ideal was embodied by Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645) who went even further. He was not only a master of the sword and several other close combat weapons, but also, in an endeavour to become a truly virtuous and rounded warrior he acquired artistic skills, leaving behind impressive works as a writer, painter and wood sculptor. Interestingly, however, he did not serve a lord but was a lifelong ‘rōnin’ (a masterless samurai in his own right).

Although one should not take an ideal at face value, there is no denying that personalities like him continue to wield an influence on people’s imagination as a role model. In today’s Japanese society similar values therefore still apply and can be observed in daily life as well. From a personal point of view the most endearing feature of life in Japan is the level of honesty in general – theft and deliberate cheating are very rare, the author could even retrieve his forgotten copy card besides the copy machine when returning after an hour – just unthinkable at my university back in Switzerland.

Loyalty is reflected in the desire of most Japanese, even nowadays, to seek long-term employment with the same company. Job-hopping and setting out on one’s own is still not popular in Japan. The downside of this is a high degree of inflexibility and an overly single-minded approach when going after a task. This works fine for standardised processes requiring keen attention to detail, but when it comes to dealing with situations one has not been trained for, usually in a drill-like fashion, the result is loss of efficiency or even confusion. The appearance of a foreigner with his particular problems always constitutes a challenge in a Japanese environment as the standard procedures usually cannot be applied easily in such a case.

Another warrior-like virtue is expressed by the widely used Japanese verbs 'ganbare' or 'gaman suru'. Both concepts express endurance, the effort to do one's utmost to succeed against all odds (ganbare), or to endure adverse conditions right up to the breaking point (gaman suru) rather than giving up too early. This leads to another peculiar trait of Japanese behaviour which is to refrain from expressing or showing strong emotions in public. The public face (tatemae) one shows in public is usually one of composure – even stoicism – while the true feelings (honne) have to remain hidden deep inside.

The downside of this admirable virtue, however, I would like to formulate in this way: the Japanese also tend to put up with too much for too long. The worst example of what this means is in my view the long rule of the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan. Change in the realm of Japanese politics has come late and it is uncertain how long it will last.

Running and holding the vast Empire of China together was a constant and formidable challenge for Chinese emperors. For that task an elaborate administration was set up. Rightly or not, the Chinese are also considered to be the inventors of bureaucracy. At its core was a tiny elite of scholar-bureaucrats in the best British sense of public servants. Formidable exams ensured that only candidates of high intellectual calibre and thorough learning of traditional Chinese knowledge gained access to this body. The competitive nature of this elite of career bureaucrats engendered a scientific and technological creativity yet unseen in human history resulting in a host of basic innovations and elaborate machines long before Renaissance Europe could emulate this feat.

The building block of the imperial Chinese administration was something of a cross-breed between scholar, artist and even religious saint. Serving the public interest embodied by the Emperor was considered to be a deeply moral as well as a difficult task. The Chinese official can be compared with Plato's philosopher king – endowed with enormous power but also with a moral strength and virtue ensuring that this power was put to good use that is, the common interest. Confucius' teachings were all about overcoming human weaknesses in order to evolve into a personality of higher virtue; he directed his teachings primarily towards the powerful; leading by example not by force is the basis of Confucianist ethics. The human way in this sense is the way of improving on the present status – lifelong learning, not only to cope with new challenges, but ultimately to achieve wisdom, that is, to become a virtuous person. The influence of this powerful ideal is still

influential in Chinese society nowadays although China has gone through many ordeals since the time of Confucius. The most devastating event in modern Chinese history was certainly the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 which could also have been dubbed anti-cultural Revolution as it tried, in vain, to do away with 'bourgeois-feudal' traditions. Unleashed as a struggle for political power and deeply nihilistic in its nature, the Cultural Revolution wreaked havoc with China's cultural heritage. Although the material damage done by Western imperialists around 1900 was huge as well, it paled besides the horrors of Mao's erratic rule which also targeted the moral base of Chinese society, particularly during the above-mentioned period. As a result, the Chinese lost their moral compass in a way and are only recently beginning to rediscover their old values. The downside of Chinese efficiency, straightforwardness and communicative skills are by now too obvious to ignore. Power is exercised without any restraint and life in general is seen as a zero sum game that knows only winners and losers. In the eyes of outside observers, the Chinese often appear overbearing with a cynical disregard for the interests of others and a growing hubris towards the rest of the world. What the Japanese are lacking, the Chinese seem to have in abundance: flexibility up to the point of bending or breaking every rule standing in the way of making a profit. Ruthless competition and the high speed of economic and social changes in Chinese society force the individual to adapt quickly or lose out. All this poses a threat to social and political stability. Confucius and Mao both knew human nature very well, but whereas the former sought to bring out and cultivate the best sides of human nature, the latter thrived on appealing to humans' worst instincts.

In conclusion, with regard to moral education and standards the Japanese win hands down in the eyes of the author (and this also in comparison with Europe).

5. World-view

According to Napoleon, "geography is destiny". When speaking of a Japanese world view, our perspective is from a couple of islands off the coasts of the largest land mass on this planet. Japan's position is not only off the Eurasian continent but also aloof so to speak. For modern Japan the crucial question 140 years ago was: Asia, primarily China,

or the West. After centuries of Chinese cultural influence, the appearance in the 19th century of another civilisation in the form of heavily armed gunboats at her shores marked a major turning point in Japanese history.

Faced with a fundamental choice, it was probably only logical that the politically dominant warrior class opted for strength abandoning well-worn tradition. “Datsu-A!” (leave Asia) wrote Yukichi Fukuzawa (1835-1901), a leading reformer expressing in extremis Meiji-Japan’s modernisation drive along Western lines. The single-mindedness with which Japan set out to emulate Western civilisation turned out to be highly successful in a technical sense, but it was also highly disruptive of the social order. The backlash against Western influence came with the military who set the country on a collision course not only with the Western powers, but also with China, (not to mention numerous other countries which fell victim to Japanese militarism).

Today one can still observe the single most important streak of Japanese character at work, which is their admiration of strength (and disdain of weakness). American culture, at least on the surface, is omnipresent: baseball, music, food and a huge business catering to learners of (American) English.

However, the counter-reaction is equally obvious in the form of an insistence on uniqueness in every aspect. “Japanese culture” is used as the killer phrase to fend off anything that even remotely smacks of criticism. Japanese are very fickle when it comes to sensitive topics and a foreigner has to be aware that there are a great many of sensitive topics around (the issue of whaling is just one example). This insular mentality stands in the way of a deeper involvement with the world perceived more as a threat to one’s identity than a chance for improvement on the present. Nowadays the Japanese feel insecure, the world around them is again changing rapidly and new answers are needed. From a Japanese perspective the world today looks like this: an emerging China, an overbearing America, an indifferent Europe.

China’s rise has been followed closely and warily in Japan; Chinese imports have not only helped to bring down the domestic price levels but also contributed to deflationary pressures on the whole economy. Japan’s strategic concern, however, is of a political nature. It is the re-emergence of a hierarchical sinocentric order in East Asia as was prevalent for centuries during the past. Such an order would place Japan clearly into an

inferior position forcing her even closer into America's arms in order to balance China's growing might. An alternative to this is not in sight.

The written character depicting and symbolising China is a rectangle with a vertical line going through it meaning "centre". It is also characteristic of the traditional Chinese world-view: the Middle Kingdom as the pinnacle and centre of the civilised world surrounded by regions of different stages of barbarity.

This world-view can best be compared to the way the ancient Greeks saw their civilisation against the rest of the then known world, dubbed by them as 'barbaroi' - those who don't understand the Greek language. When the Europeans showed up on Chinese shores, a high imperial official dared to remark to his Emperor that these 'barbarians' were different from those who came to China's doorstep before, because they too could claim to have an age-old civilisation at their back. His remarks were considered so outrageous that he was banned to a distant province. The traditional world order as seen by ancient China was a strictly hierarchical affair based on cultural achievements with imperial China as its natural centre of gravity. Areas and peoples within reach of Chinese imperial power had to pay respect and tribute to the throne of heaven. Gifts from rulers beyond China's reach, and this included Japan, were registered as tributes by the imperial treasury as well.

Recent behaviour by modern China's rulers at international gatherings such as the climate summit in Copenhagen suggests that Chinese self-confidence is likely to grow along traditional lines bordering on hubris. Chinese nationalism is also likely to replace whatever is left of communist ideology, and recent polls taken among ordinary citizens show the highest degree of pride in their own nation, higher even than the highly patriotic Americans and way above Japanese sentiments of this kind, not to mention those of European countries. This might spell trouble for hopes of international cooperation when it comes to sensitive issues such as nuclear proliferation, climate change and the like. Closer to Japan are problems of geographical boundaries delineating mutual spheres of economic and political interests.

However, China has to tread carefully, otherwise she risks being boxed into the same corner as the former Soviet Union by the Western dominated media, serving as the

bogeyman of Western, and especially American, fears of an 'evil empire' to be contained in every possible way.

Although cultural values are not changed easily, they are malleable as history and experience demonstrate. One hundred years ago, many European observers lauded Chinese traders and bankers above all other Asians with whom they did business, including the Japanese.