

“Uniquely Singapore”: Asian Culture and KM

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Presenter’s Background

- University of Zurich / sociology
- Swiss Institute of Business / economics
- Nanyang Business School, NTU / organizational behavior, social psychology and research methods
- Founder of *Practical Significance*, a consultancy in applied business and social science research

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Why the Interest in the Topic?

- Experience with teaching Singaporean business undergraduates
- iKMS evening talk on “culture and knowledge management”
- Work in progress; feedback from “informed insiders” most appreciated

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Main Propositions

- Culture matters - ignoring national and organizational culture has potentially detrimental effects on the degree and quality of knowledge creation and sharing and hence on the pace and quality of organizational learning.
- There are cultural features that are more conducive to knowledge sharing and creation than others, depending on the context in which these processes take place.

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Overview

- What is Knowledge Management?
- What is Culture?
- Defining Features of “Asian Culture”
- Singaporean Idiosyncrasies
- Summary and Conclusions
- Discussion

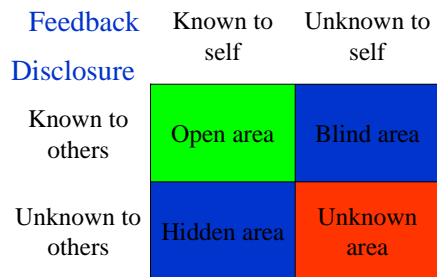
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Caveats

- The benefits and dangers of being an “informed outsider”
- “You have to be Asian to ask the question ‘Can Asians think’.” (Kishore Mabhubani 1998)
- Danger of overgeneralization and stereotyping
- To say that there are crosscultural differences does not imply that there are no similarities between cultures or no differences within the same culture.

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Johari Window: How to Increase Mutual Understanding?



(Source: McShane and Von Glinow, 2000)

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What Is Knowledge Management?

- Knowledge **management** as a **technical** process
- Knowledge **sharing** as a **social** process and as part of dynamic organizational learning
- Knowledge **creation** as a new **focus / stage** in Singapore's socioeconomic development

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Knowledge Sharing

Direction of sharing

- *horizontally* (i.e., among peers)
- *vertically* (i.e., top-down and bottom-up)
- *cross-culturally* (i.e., across local ethnic communities; across local and expatriate communities; across subcultures, e.g. young-old, women-men, functional departments etc.)

Type of knowledge

- explicit/tacit, individual/collective
- positive lessons or negative lessons

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Knowledge Sharing: An "Unnatural Act"?

- Knowledge is as source of power
- Strategic behavior, free rider problem

For the unlikely to happen one needs:

- Mutual trust and understanding
- Recurrent interaction and reciprocity
- Organizational culture of professionalism and reputation building

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Knowledge Creation

- Beyond imitation and efficiency: Innovation

- From follower to trendsetter

For this to happen one needs:

- Risk-taking and failure tolerance
- Opportunities for serendipity
- Appreciation for individual and (sub)cultural differences

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What Is Culture?

- Culture as **national culture** and "software of the mind"
 - the different ways of doing similar things; the different solutions for similar challenges; "different folks, different strokes"
 - Singapore as multi-cultural nation
- Culture as **corporate culture**
 - vision, mission and values
- Culture as **work climate**
 - Adverse or nurturing; trusting or distrustful; cooperative or competitive

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Formal Definition of “Culture”

“A set of basic assumptions – shared solutions to universal problems of **external adaptation** (how to survive) and **internal integration** (how to stay together) – which have evolved over time and are handed down from one generation to the next.”
(Edgar Schein, 1985)

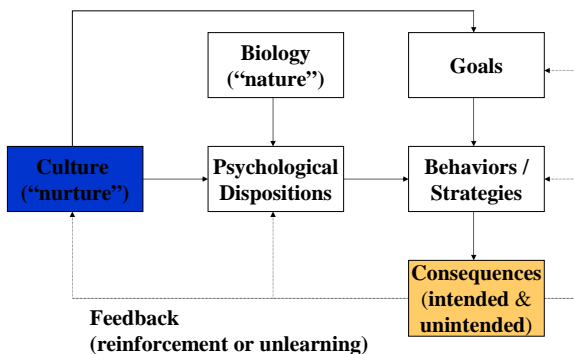
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Informal Definition of Culture

Culture is “how we do things around here”.

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How Does Culture Come In?



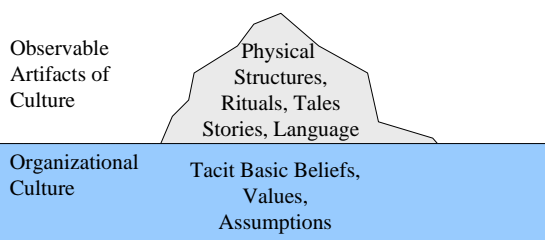
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Dimensions of Culture

- **Physical nature** (control/domination vs. fatalism/adaptation)
- **Human nature** (inherently good vs. bad)
- **Human relationships** (egalitarian vs. hierarchic; achievement vs. ascription)
- **Language** (explicit vs. implicit)
- **Space** (private vs. public)
- **Time** (monochronic vs. polychronic)

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Dimensions of Culture



(Source: Sackmann 1991; McShane and Von Glinow 2000)

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Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions

- **Individualism (IDV)** focuses on the degree the society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships.
- **Power Distance Index (PDI)** focuses on the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in the country's society.

(Source: www.geert-hofstede.com)

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Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

- **Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)** focuses on the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within the society - i.e. unstructured situations.
- **Masculinity (MAS)** focuses on the degree the society reinforces, or does not reinforce, the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control, and power.

(Source: www.geert-hofstede.com)

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Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

	Indivi- dualism	Power distance	Uncertainty avoidance	Masculinity / Femininity
Singapore	20 (39 rank)	74 (13 rank)	8 (53 rank)	48 (28 rank)
Japan	46	54	92	95
S. Korea	18	60	85	39
HK	25	68	29	57
Taiwan	17	58	69	45
USA	91	40	46	62
Germany	67	35	65	66
Switzerland	68	34	58	70

Indices range roughly between 0 and 100. 50 countries and 3 regions ranked.
Time frame of original data collection: 1967-1973. (Source: Hofstede 1991)

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More on Uncertainty Avoidance

“A High Uncertainty Avoidance ranking indicates the country has a low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. This creates a rule-oriented society that institutes laws, rules, regulations, and controls in order to reduce the amount of uncertainty. A Low Uncertainty Avoidance ranking indicates the country has less concern about ambiguity and uncertainty and has more tolerance for a variety of opinions. This is reflected in a society that is less rule-oriented, more readily accepts change, and takes more and greater risks.”

(Source: www.geert-hofstede.com)

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“Asian Culture” in a Nutshell

- Collectivism high
- Power distance high
- Uncertainty avoidance / Masculinity ?
- Long-term orientation high
- Importance of saving face (*mian zi*) in cultivating relationships (*guan xi*)
- Harmony, conformism, loyalty
- Conflict avoidance

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Singaporean Idiosyncrasies: Liabilities and Assets

- From Third World to First World (in 4 decades!)
→ catching up syndrome: scarcities made focus on on **efficiency** imperative
- Collective action problem and accelerated socioeconomic change
→ highly **regulated** and **controlled** society;
Theory X (top-down control) vs. Theory Y (self-directed) mentality

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Singaporean Idiosyncrasies: Liabilities and Assets

- Crowding out phenomenon due to a ubiquitous state/government
- Lack of “slack”
- Primarily **extrinsic** motivation and rewards in virtually all social spheres
- A pronounced *kiasu* and *kiasi* mentality
- Multicultural society: “Living together apart”?

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Summary

The impact of specific cultural features can be ambiguous and depends on the context:

- Knowledge sharing or creation
- Type of exchange partners
- Type of knowledge

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Conclusions

- Macro level
→ encourage cultural change by creating more open spaces; hands-off approach
- Organizational level
→ Actively address the cultural predispositions of employees; increase cultural awareness and sensitivity; scrutinize HRM practices; importance of coherent leadership by example

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Espoused vs. Enacted Values: The Importance of Leadership in Setting the Right Tone



(Source: www.non-sequitur.com)

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Discussion

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