Homogeneity Among Neighbours?
A Study of Culture in Four Asian Countries

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1. Introduction

In April 2010, the first Japan-China-Korea Committee for Promoting Exchange and Cooperation among Universities was held in Tokyo (MEXT 2010). There is clearly a feeling that the way forward for Japan economically and geopolitically is to strengthen its ties with its Asian neighbours, even at the expense of its long-term alliance with the United States. The statistics that reveal this country's increasing attachment to Asia, especially China and Korea, were discussed in a previous paper (Brown & Hirata, 2011). Though the figures are only recently beginning to catch up, the sentiment is by no means new. The controversial Japanese politician and writer, Shintaro Ishihara wrote of Japan in *The Asia That Can Say No*, quoted in *Business Week* (April 10, 1995):

> This is a nation of Asian people with Asian roots. It seems natural that we recognise that we exist first for Asia.

There is an assumption that, being geographically close, these countries also bear cultural similarities, which can help to ease and strengthen these relationships. The comment below is typical:

> The nature of people in East Asian Countries, in general, has many similar features common (but not entirely the same) to Japanese in terms of group orientedness (less individualism), flexibility (less demarcation), and skill with their hands. (Abo, 1989: 7)

Similarly, Shibusawa (1984: 175) described similarities among Asians in their attitude to life, cultural and religious tolerance, and their pragmatism and flexibility.

This paper attempts to test this theory by means of the analysis of approximately ten hours of conversation among groups of mixed Asian university students (mostly Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Taiwanese), ranging over a wide variety of topics. Also, some written comments from non-Japanese participants, drawn from a follow-up activity will be considered. Similarities and differences in attitudes and values will be noted.

2. Hofstede's Five Dimensions

In a previous paper (Brown 2005) the so-called "dimensions of culture"

outlined by Hofstede (1980), with consequent elaboration by Hofstede & Hofstede (2005) were used as a framework for a discussion of cultural differences between the Japanese and people from English-speaking countries with whom they may have to work (e.g. a Japanese teacher of English with an American ALT). Not surprisingly, large differences were evident. We might be tempted to assume that, on the contrary, the scores for Japan and its Asian neighbours would be very close. Indeed, when we look at the scores in the dimension of "power distance", we find a relatively high degree of homogeneity among the four countries under scrutiny. Power distance indicates the level of inequality which is tolerated, for example, in society and the workplace. A high score implies that a great deal of deference is shown, for example by younger people towards their elders, by workers towards their bosses, by students towards their teachers, and so on. Korea, China, Taiwan and Japan all fall in the medium-high to high range, ranging from a score of 54 for Japan to 80 for China (see figure 1). This is in stark contrast to English-speaking countries, which all scored 40 or below.
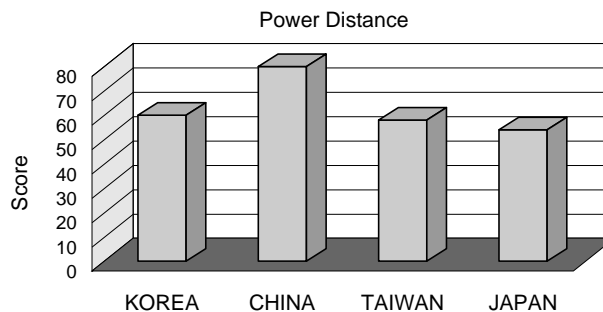

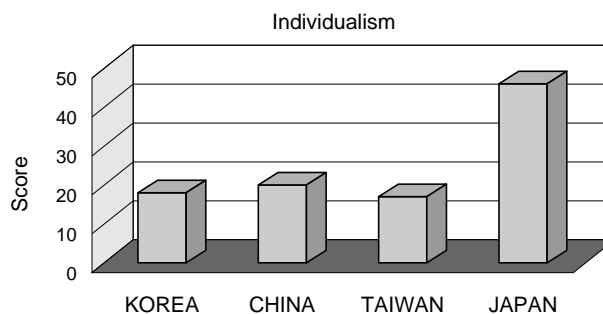*Figure 1: (Source Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005: 43-44)*

Figure 2: (Source Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005: 78-79)

It is a widely held view that Western cultures are individualist, while the so-called "oriental" cultures display a more collectivist, or group-oriented, nature.

Again an "East versus West" comparison does bear out this view. Western, especially Anglo-Saxon countries, all scored in the highest range of around 80, apparently confirming their individualist nature when compared to the countries

shown in figure 2. Nevertheless, Hofstede & Hofstede's data clearly implies that, while Korea, China and Taiwan are very strongly collectivist, Japan is nearer the centre of the list, ranking 34th out of 74.
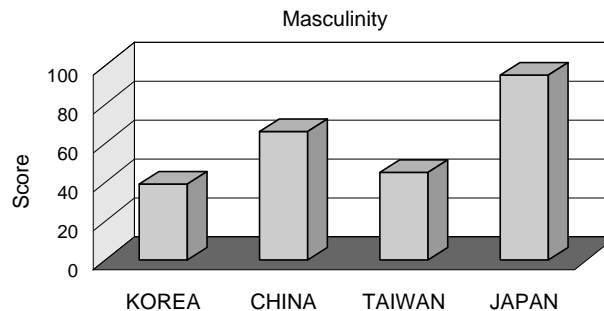

Figure 3: (Source Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005: 120-121)

Perhaps the most controversial, as well as misunderstood dimension, arising from Hofstede's (1980) original data was that of masculinity. He posited that in strongly masculine cultures, money, possessions and progress are seen as important, as opposed to relationships. Men are expected to be tough and ambitious, while women should be gentle. In a feminine culture, both men and women should be tender and relationship-oriented. Also in masculine societies, men and women tend to have different roles, to study different subjects at university, and the so-called "glass ceiling" acts as a daunting barrier to women aspiring to reach high positions in business, politics or academia. In the so-called "feminine" societies, of which the Scandinavian countries are good examples, there is a much greater degree of equality and sharing of roles. Japan stood out clearly as the most masculine country, well ahead of the English-speaking nations. Looking at our four countries, we find something of a spread. While Japan is, according to Hofstede, a highly masculine society, China (12th) is also relatively masculine, while Taiwan (44th) and Korea (59th) fall into the medium-to-lower range (see figure 3).

The dimension of uncertainty avoidance measures a society's tolerance of uncertainty. Countries with a high uncertainty-avoiding culture tend to have a large number of laws and rules by which one's actions are governed. Countries with low uncertainty avoidance have a tendency to be moderate, tolerant, and international. Interestingly, while Japan, Korea and Taiwan all show a propensity to mitigate against uncertainty, China's score of 30 puts it in the lowest 10%, implying that the Chinese, unlike their Asian neighbours, thrive on uncertainty (see figure 4).

In their book taking a socio-linguistic view of certain cross-cultural situations, Naotsuka & Sakamoto (1981) consistently found that other Asians were more inclined to respond similarly to Japanese respondents. Returning to Hofstede, however, table 1 summarises the four countries of interest to this paper, and

illustrates the important point that the so-called "oriental" countries are not as culturally homogenous as many people believe. Section 4 will look for examples of this based on recorded data.
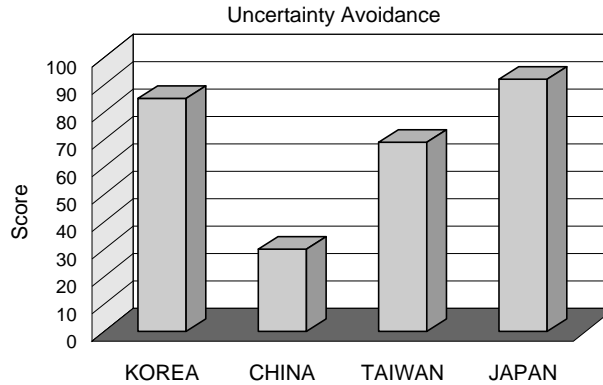
Figure 4: (Source Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005: 168-169)

	Power distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty Avoidance
Korea	Fairly high	Low	Medium	High
China	High	Low	Medium-high	Low
Taiwan	Fairly high	Low	Medium	Medium-high
Japan	Medium	Medium	High	High

Table 1: Summary of Four Asian Countries

3. Methodology

The primary aim of this project was to identify linguistic elements which create problems among speakers of Asian languages, when communicating in English as a Lingua Franca. The results of this analysis will be published in a later paper. The purpose of this paper is to identify cultural differences by home country among the participants. Members were divided into groups of about four. Groups consisted generally of two Japanese speakers (one male, one female), one Chinese L1 speaker (mainland Chinese or Taiwanese), and one Korean. Logistical reasons meant that this format could not always be followed. For example, there were two groups of only three participants, and two groups consisting of two Japanese and two Koreans. One of the Japanese members was appointed "group leader", mostly to activate the recording devices and to report any problems. A digital recorder was placed in the centre of the table. A video camera acted as a secondary recording device, and as a means of checking for non-verbal communication. Each member had a worksheet with a range of discussion topics.

4. Results and Analysis

As the worksheets were designed primarily in order to elicit as wide a range of language forms as possible (the primary intention being to look for obstacles to communication), the cultural information that could be inferred was somewhat limited. A different set of questions probably would have elicited more explicitly cultural similarities and differences. Nevertheless, some interesting areas of difference were revealed, both by the group discussions, and by written comments added by the non-Japanese members about their experiences in Japan.

4.1 Harmony, Indirectness and Saving Face

There was a perception among many of the participants of the lack of directness in Japanese communication. Though this so-called "high context" (Hall & Hall, 1987) style of communicating is often thought to be a generally Asian attribute, it is clearly a source of confusion and frustration among the non-Japanese. A Chinese student wrote, "Japanese… hide their true feelings", a sentiment echoed by a Taiwanese student, who commented, " In some situations, Japanese is a very ambiguous language." Several less obviously critical remarks can be gleaned from the transcript.

CH2 Japanese people are very shy

JP3 Chinese people are very talkative

KO2 When I've been dating someone for a week, I can say anything.

JP12 Maybe cultural difference.

KO2 Compared to Japanese people I think (Koreans) say what they think.

This reticence is felt even by the Japanese themselves, for example:

JP3 In Japan we rarely talk with people we don't know

JP11 Japanese girls are … good…. kind… don't say what they think.

This kind of remark was expressed boldly by a Taiwanese student, who wrote that "Japanese people really like silence." More alarmingly, there was perhaps a feeling, not directly expressed in the discussion sessions, but written by a Taiwanese student, that there was something almost sinister in the Japanese fabled politeness:

> (The Japanese) are always smiling in front of other people. Of course, smiling is good, but sometimes I think it is a fake smile.

Indeed, in the discussions, several of the non-Japanese expressed themselves in a somewhat blunt way, even at the risk of causing offense, as the examples below indicate:

JP13 Do you like AKB / KO3 No!

KO2 In the International Plaza nobody spoke English. In Korea, there's always an English sign.

TW4 In the Ryugaku Centre nobody could understand what they were saying.

CH3 My professor's English is so poor.

TW8 I thought my tutor's English would be good, but in fact she could speak very little English.

KO2 Japanese Prime Minister never admitted about (comfort women). It's very sad.

Incidentally, there were differing attitudes to politics when it came up in discussion. The Japanese tended to show cynicism or apathy, the Koreans some degree of passion, while the Chinese and Taiwanese tended to avoid the subject. This perhaps forms a microcosm of the *realpolitik* of this part of the world.

4.2 Gender Roles

The section of the information exchange devoted to memories of childhood revealed some interesting comments about gender roles. In particular, several of the female participants reported that they behaved like, or were perceived as a boy, or spent most of their time in the company of boys. Some examples are cited below.

CH2 All my friends were boys. In my childhood I was a boy.

TW1 When I was a child I always played with boys… I fight with boys

JP9 I always played with my older brother, so I was very boyish. I called (myself) "ore"

TW1 I didn't like dolls

JP15 I have a twin, so I was always with her. I was so thin and she was fat. We were always fighting, and I was always defeated by my sister.

KO8 I used to just hang out with my brother. I was very quiet.

TW7 When I was in kindergarten everyone thought I was a boy. I was happy with that.

This kind of role reversal seems common to all four countries. Perhaps it is in part due to the one-child policy in China, and the recent reduction in family size in the other countries.

In section two, it was pointed out that, according to the Hofstede study, Japan is by far the most masculine of the four countries (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005: 120). Nevertheless, in the discussion, we find evidence of masculine attitudes from the other countries, such as:

CH1 Almost all primary school is woman teacher… because maybe in Chinese idea, men should do other things

CH1 Going to the river to catch a fish is a game for boy

TW4/KO2 Japanese boys are very shy

CH1 In China the boy gives the girl chocolate

It would be misleading to suggest, that contrary to Hofstede's findings, Japan is more feminine than the other three countries, but the picture does appear quite mixed. For example:

KO2 Korean guys are sweeter than Japanese guys.

CH1 I think the boy in Japan is very happy, they needn't do many things, and then they can get a girlfriend. In China it's not very easy.

JP18 I graduated from a boy's school, so I didn't get along with girls, but my first friend (at Chodai) was (a female class member).

Of course, it is in the workplace that gender roles play an important part. This will be dealt with in section 4.3. However, the following statement by a Korean statement is indicative of her perception that Japan is still a very masculine country: "(A Japanese woman) has to sacrifice herself to be a mother, losing herself as an individual."

4.3 Attitudes to Work

As regards the so-called "bamboo ceiling" their was a general feeling among many of the participants that the non-Japanese countries are more flexible when it comes to women's careers. This is revealed, not only by the statement at the end of the previous section, but also from comments such as the following:

JP2 In China, women after married can continue to work.

CH1 Yeah, even after having a child they can go back to work soon.

KO1 In Korea women have a child later. They put more importance on work.

Furthermore there was a feeling of greater ambition and determination regarding careers from the non-Japanese participants. Perhaps this is partly because they represent a wide variety of academic disciplines, unlike their Japanese counterparts. In the following section we will see that many of the female Japanese seemed satisfied with the idea of working only until their first child. Furthermore, many of the non-Japanese appear more career-oriented, as seen in the following comments:

TW9 By 35, I hope to have my own house and a stable job. I'd like to work abroad, maybe as an engineer or university teacher.

TW3 After graduating I will still study more

TH1 After graduating I will study to be an auditor

CH3 By thirty I want to be a successful businessperson

TH1 I want to open an international restaurant

KO8 It's very hard to find a job for university graduates in Korea.

KO2 In Korea elementary school students take TOEFL and TOEIC.

TW4 Koreans can get high scores in TOEIC

KO2 You need over 950 to get a job.

KO6 I want to be a career woman.

Also there seemed some unspoken impression that some of the Japanese participants were "wasting" their elite education on becoming a primary school teacher.

CH1 Almost all primary school is woman teacher... because maybe in Chinese idea,

men should do other things

CH3 In China, primary school teacher is not a good job, but it is in Japan.

Again this reveals somewhat more masculine attitudes from the Chinese speakers.

4.4 Attitudes to Relationships and Marriage

There was some barely veiled criticism of the passive nature of Japanese males, when it came to courtship. For example:

CH1 I think the boy in Japan is very happy, they needn't do many things, and then they can get a girlfriend. In China it's not very easy.

CH1 In China the boy gives the girl chocolate

JP2 It's opposite to Japan.... I want to go to China

More importantly, and related to the previous section, there was a near-universal desire on the part of the Koreans and Chinese speakers to marry later.

KO1 In Korea, the men are 33 or 35, and women are about 30. How about Taiwan?

TW2 The same

KO1 In Korea women have a child later. They put more importance on work.

KO1 I want (a baby) but not so young

TW2 There are many young couples in Japan.

CH2 When I see young girls with new babies, it's very strange... very different from China

JP8 My friend, same age, already has one baby.

JP7 A lot of people do so in Japan.

CH2 If I get married I will keep on working. I won't be financially dependent. How much money [my husband] makes is none of my business.

CH2 (If I have a baby) I'll quit my job for 3 years.

The following comments are from Korean students (remember participants were all in their early twenties when the recording was made):

KO1 I want (a baby) but not so young

KO2 I want to get married in my thirties

KO5 I want to marry when I'm 33 years old. (Before that) I want to work or study.

KO8 I want one child or two, because the cost of education in Korea is very high

There was one exception:

KO8 I want to give birth before thirty

Similarly, the Chinese-speaking participants expressed a desire to postpone marriage, and especially childbirth:

CH2 I'll be married with some guy (in ten years' time) and I'll have a job, but no child.

CH3 By thirty I want to be a successful businessperson, and maybe have a boyfriend.

TW1 When I'm thirty I'm still searching my Mr Right

TW2 I don't want to get married early, just finding love is OK.

TW7 I plan to get married after thirty

CH2 If I get divorced it's OK.

In contrast, and also contrasting with recent marriage figures in Japan, the Japanese participants opted largely for early marriage, early childbirth, and large families:

JP2 I want to be married in my twenties.

JP6 I want to have 2 or 3 children by 30. /TW1 You have two wife???

JP7 When I'm 30 I'll have 3 or 4 children

JP8 When I'm 30 I'll have 2 children, and one [inside]

JP9 In ten years I'll be married and have four children

JP10 Maybe by 31 years old I'll have a husband and two children

JP12 I want to give birth to two or three children before I reach thirty.

JP13 By 29, I hope I'll be married.

JP14 By 30 I maybe won't get married yet.

JP15 I want to marry at 32. I like soccer, so I want to play soccer with my son.

J18 I hope to be married by 30 years old.

J17 By 30 I may be married and have a child. I want to marry before 30, and have three children

JP20 I want to be married by the time I'm 29

JP20 I want to have two or three children

JP19 In the future I want four children

JP23 I'm going to marry at about 27...and at 29 I'm going to have twins

Again, there was one exception:

JP22 I'll marry when I'm 35 or 36.... I want to play.

JP22 I like other person's kids, but not my kids.

To some extent, the attitudes towards work and marriage expressed by the Japanese participants confirm the high uncertainty avoidance score in the Hofstede data.

5. Conclusions and Further Study

As mentioned previously this data is to be used as part of a discourse analysis project, aimed at identifying obstacles to communication, when English is used as a *lingua franca* among Asians. Clearly, language and culture go hand in hand, and it is hoped that this analysis serves to point out some differences in attitude between young adult Japanese and their near-neighbours in Asia.

The highlights from this study can be summarised thus:

Young Korean and Chinese-speaking adults, while appreciating the politeness of the Japanese, often find their indirectness frustrating ("too

polite", according to one Chinese student).

Respondents from all four countries are very sensitive to gender roles, even though they often treat this topic in a humorous manner.

Many of the non-Japanese seem more ambitious than their Japanese counterparts, in many cases expecting to continue their education after graduation. The Japanese in the main perceive their four years at university as the end of their education. Perhaps the somewhat homogeneous nature of the Japanese participants affected this finding, but it does seem that the concept of lifelong or postgraduate education is less popular here than among Japan's Asian neighbours.

Young Japanese adults expect to marry at a younger age than their Asian counterparts, start a family sooner, and have more children. Perhaps this was an expression more of hope than reality, but it nevertheless bodes well as part of the solution to Japan's greying population.

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