Working in Japan -Japanese Culture in the Eyes of a Taiwanese Expatriate

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Ⅰ. Introduction

The number of people of culturally different backgrounds who come into intercultural contact continues to increase whether face−to−face or online. One major force for this increasing intercultural interaction is economics, as Martin and Nakayama (2012) discussed. Whether from a global scale or the workplace perspective, interacting with people from various cultures has become very common. Diversity within the workplace has been increasing, and businesses are continually expanding into overseas markets in the process of globalization (pp. 3-4).

The outburst of COVID-19 has reminded us that the world is never as closely and strongly interdependent as before. From daily necessities such as toilet paper to more expensive automobiles, the world's interdependent nature reveals itself in many aspects of people's lives. During the pandemic, in many parts of the world, with Japan no exception, people rushed to buy and stock toilet paper as much as they could due to the panic and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 virus (BBC News Japan, 2020). In the manufacturing industry, the delivery of new cars in Japan, such as Toyota, has also been delayed from 2 or 3 months to more than half a year because of the worldwide shortage of semiconductor parts (Toyota Homepage, 2022). Phenomena like these make us rethink our world, and reconsider the importance of world interdependence and mutual understanding of cultures.

According to the Foreign Affiliates Survey by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Japan (2020), by the end of 2020, among 2,808 foreign affiliates, the top 3 prefectures are Tokyo with 1,829 (65.1%) companies; followed by Kanagawa prefecture, 297 (10.6%) companies; and Osaka, 143 (5.1) companies. Compared to the manufacturing industry, nonmanufacturing industries such as wholesale and service are the majority. For most foreign companies, it is very common that the management team are usually foreign expatriates, who have to learn to

manage their Japanese employees. For the expatriates, not only can language be an issue, but there are also many other challenges such as different value systems, and communication styles that they must face and learn to manage effectively.

HSBC has been conducting a global survey of expatriates for 14 years. The 2020 global survey reflected expats' responses from 40 locations around the world. Out of the 40 locations, Japan, living overall ranked 22nd, among which, school 10th, ease of settling in 15th, and quality of life 18th. However, making friends was 39th, followed by learning, 35th, and fulfillment 29th. Regarding aspiring, overall it was 34th, incomes 10th on the top, reaching potential 21st, disposable income 24th. The lowest was work/life balance, 40th, followed by career progression, 28th, and economic stability, 27th. Mindset was overall 21st, with culture values 14th, personal achievements 35th, and personal development 27th. Lower rankings that deserve attention were work/life balance, as the lowest 40th, making friends 39th, both learning and personal achievements 35th, and fulfillment 29th. In the 2021 global survey, Japan ranked 35th in total among 45 countries, with living 32nd, aspiring 38th, and future outlook 32th. These statistics reveal that despite relatively higher ranks in education, income, and quality of life, expatriates reported a much higher extent of difficulties in keeping a work/life balance, making friends, learning, and making personal achievements.

According to Hall (1976), Asian countries such as Japan and China are viewed as high-context cultures, people communicate in indirect and implicit ways and the meanings of communication are heavily embedded in the contexts and relationships in contrast to low-context cultures such as the U.S. where direct and explicit communication is valued and meanings are less dependent on the contexts. The precise interpretation of meanings in high-context cultures relies on subtle observations of the contexts, nonverbal cues, and the people involved. People with an indirect communication style may feel uncomfortable with others with a direct style; on the other hand, people with a direct style of communication may get confused and frustrated with the indirect style and feel that people are not sincere. People of high-context cultures make greater distinctions between insiders and outsiders than those of low-context cultures do. People raised in high-context systems expect more of others than do the participants in low-context systems (Hall, 1976, p. 113). Terms of Japanese like *honne* and *tatemae*, *enryo*, *nemawashi*, *wa*, *uchi* and *soto* all indicate

high-context communication. While *honne* refers to the sensitivity toward one's own private self, *tatemae* is the sensitivity toward others, public self (Hall, 1983, p. 102). In other words, *honne* is the true feelings privately held, and *tatemae* is the front face. *Tatemae* and *honne* are interdependent (Hall & Hall, 1987, pp. 60-61). Hall (1983, p. 104) claims that "virtually all relationships in Japanese culture can be put in one of two classes: close and not close (*honne* and *tatemae*) - us and them! and the shared behavior patterns inherent in these concepts make the Japanese sensitive to even the subtlest of changes in emotional tone" (Hall, 1987, p. 60).

Martin and Nakayama (2013, p. 323) called for attention that high/low context differences can result in challenging business encounters given that low-context communicators prefer to speak very explicitly, whereas high-context communicators such as Japanese tend to express themselves implicitly and contextually. They discussed three main communication challenges in business contexts: work-related values, language issues, and communication styles (pp. 317-325). One aspect of work-related values involves individualism versus collectivism. "Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: Everyone is expected to look after him/herself and her/his immediate family only. Collectivism stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 225). In individualistic cultures such as the U.S. workers are expected to perform certain functions with clearly defined responsibilities and the boundaries of people's jobs are clear. On the contrary, in collectivistic cultures like Japan, Japanese organizations do not necessarily define the specific job responsibilities precisely, but rather, it is the job of a work unit, a team (Martin & Nakayama, 2013, p. 319). Another value difference is task versus relationship priority, which is whether the highest priority is placed on relationships or tasks. Unlike the tendency in the U.S. where the top priority is on task completion, Japan and China highly value relationships (p. 320). Another challenge is language issues. "International business is sometimes conducted in English even when none of the participants speak English as a first language. Problems may arise either because of the discomfort with speaking English or because of a preference for a more indirect or high-context communication style, which points to a common problem in intercultural communication - one cannot always be sure of the cause of the problem" (p. 321). Differences in

communication styles which include indirect versus direct, high versus low context, and honesty versus harmony, are also very crucial in business contexts. "Unlike many Western cultures where honesty is prioritized, many Asian cultures like China and Japan emphasize harmony - achieved through focusing on the collectivist group, value interdependence, and maintaining/saving another's face, which may mean not saying the unvarnished truth" (p. 324). Words *honne* and *tatemae* can be one example of Japanese culture for the ultimate goal of maintaining harmony.

Despite the clear distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, the subtle but important differences between collectivistic cultures require more attention. In Meyer's book *The Culture Map*, Japan is listed as the right side of the world scale with the highest degree of high-context communication compared to the neighboring countries such as China and Korea (p. 41, Figure 1.2. Communicating). Although China is also to the right of the world scale, "they are much more direct than the Japanese, who may take offense at their forthright feedback" (Meyer, 2014, p. 70).

This study aims to examine a Taiwanese expatriate's view of Japanese culture through his perception of life and work in Japan. Specifically exploring how the interviewee perceives living in Japan and working with Japanese, as well as the challenges he has to face and manage should help reveal some subtle but important similarities and differences between these two cultures, which in turn help us have a better understanding of intercultural challenges as well as improve mutual communication and achieve business success.

Ⅱ. Research Method

A. Participant

The participant is a 54-year-old male Taiwanese who has been working as General Manager in a Taiwanese company in Japan for about 5 years. Through a friend's introduction, the researcher had the opportunity to ask for his cooperation to unveil his life and work experience in Japan.

B. Method

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the interviewee at his preferred time in his office. The purpose of the study as well as the confidentiality of the interview content was briefed before the interview.

Approval of the recording was also taken before the interview started. The interview was conducted in a natural flow, with major contents such as the challenges of working with Japanese intertwined in the interview process. Unless questions were necessary to clarify the meanings of what was said, the interviewee was given great freedom to talk as he wished.

Ⅲ. Results

The interview lasted for about an hour and a half. The interviewee mostly spoke Mandarin Chinese, with occasional English words for convenience reasons. The recorded interview was then transcribed, and major incidents/events that the interviewee considered important or had an impact on his life were highlighted and compared, those that were similar in nature were put under the same category. In this way, a few categories emerged and were analyzed.

Before moving on to the interviewee's experience of living and working in Japan, it is necessary to look at his background before he came to Japan because what he perceived to be challenging cannot be understood without knowing his family background, his education, and his life experiences thus far.

1. Basic information

The interviewee is a 54-year-old Taiwanese, the general manager of a Taiwan investing company located in Japan which has more than twenty staff, mostly Japanese. It was his fifth year in Japan at the time of the interview.

When he was a child, he had many opportunities to get in touch with foreign cultures including Japanese culture because his father was in the business of Western classical musical instruments. His grandmother received Japanese education during the colonial period of Japan, thus in his words, his family "pretty much internalized some Japanese culture such as habits and value system".

Before going to study art and design in Austria he served in the military for two years. Since he came back to Taiwan from Austria after 9 years of studying there, he had worked in a few different industries ranging from product designing, and IT to sales. He has been the general manager in the current company for about five years.

Being a fourth-generation Taiwanese, he calls himself an "authentic

Taiwanese" compared to his wife whose parents moved to Taiwan only a few decades ago. His feeling of familiarity with Japan and Japanese culture helped him settle down quickly in Japan when he first moved in alone during the first half year. In his words, "Taiwan was colonized by Japan, and I also mentioned that my grandmother had received Japanese education, so deep in my mind as a Chinese, I felt very close to Japan. All the *anime* and cartoon toys, visiting guests, etc., everything makes me feel a sense of familiarity with Japan. So when I first came to Japan it was quite easy for me to get accustomed to life here thanks to this background."

From the interviewee's background, especially the fact that he has had frequent and close contact with many foreign cultures including Japanese culture, it is easy and natural to assume that there may not be too many challenges for him working in Japan with Japanese apart from the language barrier. Considering that both Chinese and Japanese cultures use *Kanji* (the Chinese character); Taiwan had been Japan's colony for about fifty years; his grandmother had Japanese education, and his family has also internalized the Japanese customs and value system; it should be easy for him to live in Japan and work with Japanese.

The interviewee has mentioned some similarities that he perceives to be shared by Taiwanese and Japanese. For example, *Kanji* helps him communicate with his Japanese colleagues; while reading reports he can understand the gist and guess the meanings by the context. Another similarity he talked about is regarding face, especially among older generations of Taiwanese, it is very common that when there is a problem, particularly when the problem is personal, the older generation of Taiwanese will not point it out directly and will leave space for the other's face. This is very similar to the Japanese whether at work or in daily life.

Regarding his reasons for coming to Japan, although his expertise is in design, he has rich experience in other industries and has been involved in the founding of the current company all along; as a matter of fact, he has visited Japan very frequently when the company was in its early stages. All of these made him the best candidate for the leadership role in the new company in Japan.

2. Challenges

Despite the similarities as above mentioned, more differences have been specified as major challenges that the interviewee has to learn to understand and manage. In his own words, "I have been to more than

twenty countries, but I have never lived in Japan although I visited very often for business purposes. Business trips and living here are certainly different, when I came to live here I experienced culture shock."

The main categories of challenges the interviewee has experienced are language barriers, communication styles, friendships, and work-related values.

2. 1 Language barrier

The interviewee didn't know much Japanese. He said, "my Japanese is really bad. In the beginning, I forced myself to learn numbers because I have to manage the company every day, numbers must be learned. So numbers were the first Japanese words I learned by myself". When he was having meetings, he described his feelings as "going crazy". According to him, before the company started to make a profit and could afford to hire an interpreter, he was trying his best to communicate by himself. During meetings he actually used three languages, he would speak English, but meanwhile write *Kanji* on the whiteboard, together with graphs which formed very strong visual stimuli. At the same time, he tried to use some Japanese. Given his background as Chinese and Taiwanese, he called *Kanji* one advantage. When he needed to approve some reports or proposals, he would try to understand the *Kanji* in the context and guess the meanings. This challenging situation lasted for two to three years before he finally found a personal assistant.

In between, "there was a female colleague in marketing who spoke some English because of her experience of studying in Australia, so when necessary I would ask her to interpret and help me communicate with the team." Although this colleague could help with the communication, there came another problem: She is too young. "But she is young, only 25 years old then. You know Japanese have *sempai*, so she couldn't interpret some words probably because she didn't dare to, or worried about damaging their feelings and harmony. There was nothing she could do. I knew all of these but couldn't blame her." Here although the language barrier seemed to be reduced, the subtle cultural difference in hierarchy hindered the efficiency of communication.

Then in 2018, he recruited an Irish who had stayed in Japan for 6 years. The Irish spoke very good Japanese because that was his mother tongue, so there was no problem with language proficiency, and he relied on him. But then another problem arose. Same as the female colleague, this

Irish staff member was also very young, and a foreigner, so "the colleagues, especially older male ones would sometimes show him their faces. He was also pretty straightforward, sometimes when he interpreted, he would speak very directly in my tone, then the others would not feel comfortable. So he would ask me if it was okay to say that, actually it was hard for him too". Although the Irish staff had no problem with language proficiency and were able to interpret everything, the way he interpreted as the general manager had caused other Japanese colleagues negative feelings given that he was young and not the general manager although he was really trying to get the meanings through. Therefore, given these experiences, conveying the meanings may not be a problem, but how the meanings are conveyed - the subtle nonverbal cues become very important in communication.

These problems were not solved until he hired a 68-year-old Japanese man who retired from a world-famous company with rich experience. He spoke of him as "a very important assistant" because "he is rich in life experience, and he tells me how to deal with those subtle things, sometimes he can handle those instead of me." The interviewee calls him the "lubricant" between him and his team, saying that "I would ask him to communicate with the staff privately on behalf of me with many things that are inconvenient for me". With a personal assistant who not only has language proficiency but is also old enough to know how to convey meanings in the "right" ways that are acceptable to his employees, the language issue is solved.

2.2 Communication styles
2.2.1 Direct vs. indirect

Although the older generation of Taiwanese tends to save others' faces by not expressing themselves directly, as mentioned previously, the interviewee often spoke rather directly which caused a strong reaction. He gave one example of his Japanese colleague who was an accountant in the company. Without getting his approval she withdrew money and gave it to another colleague per his request. So when he found out, he was very angry. He said, "I was so angry and criticized both of them, including the accountant. Then the next day the accountant didn't come to work. Although she submitted the leave saying she was sick, I knew she was not feeling happy about it." When the researcher asked what language he used to criticize these two staff, he explained that he conveyed his meanings in

English and his assistant interpreted, admitting that they completely understood what he said; however, "I was too direct. Now I understand, but at that time I was a bit emotional which made them feel, well life..." Despite this incident, the accountant came to work after one day of sick leave. "She came as if nothing had happened. There have been many conflicts, but I feel that as time went by they started to get to know what kind of person I am, and my style, my personality. Of course, as a person, I try to be a role model and they respect me for my integrity, so gradually these problems disappeared." Although there have been quite several conflicts between his staff and him, by working hard with integrity as a role model to them he started to win their respect. Once his employees came to know more and deeper about his personality and his working style, they also learned to accommodate better at work.

This direct style can also be found in the way the employees address the interviewee. All the employees call him by his English name which he feels is not a problem. "I guess this is one big difference between the previous manager and me. Because the previous manager received his higher education in Japan, everybody called him by adding *san* after his family name. My style is rather Western, so they just call me by my English name." Consistently, the employees talk to him in a more equal and direct manner too instead of using honorific and implicit Japanese which is common and important in Japanese organizations due to the hierarchical and high-contextual nature. When the reason for this was asked, he concluded, "This is related to my style", indicating his low-context communication style in comparison to his Japanese employees.

2.2.2 *Honne*&*Tatemae*

There is one phenomenon that the interviewee considered "interesting". Because he is in charge of the company which requires him to build a good relationship with the bank, he has acquainted with one staff member there who was kind to him. He said in a humorous tone that one day after a meeting, the bank staff said to him, "you know in Japan there are *honne* and *tatemae*, if you feel confused and can't tell you can ask me, I can help you." He laughed because to him everyone is polite. To some extent, he has learned some characteristics of Japanese culture by reading some books and he knows that *honne* and *tatemae* are part of the culture, and by being polite Japanese keep their social distance and maintain harmony. But then he mentioned his limited social life that after work he goes back to his family even on holidays because actually he doesn't have

any friends in Japan.

2.3 Friendship

　Regarding friends, the interviewee talked about one friend who was a supplier of his company, whose English was very good. They had met privately for dinner, but to him, it was more of a social relationship, not really friendship. In his definition, friends would contact each other from time to time and stay in touch. His life is mainly focused on work and family, and he doesn't really have many friends. A main reason for the lack of friends, as he explained, is "no time to nurture" friendship. "There is no way to talk much with people in business relationships because of the sensitive nature of business, so there are not many opportunities to come across with others to become friends."

　Besides the lack of time and opportunity to make friends, another characteristic of the Japanese was mentioned, which is: The Japanese don't like to bother and trouble others. "Taiwanese like to interfere with others' businesses and private matters, but this seems to be a taboo with my Japanese colleagues or one area that people don't really touch." There was one Japanese friend whom the interviewee had a deep impression of. They became friends when he first came to Japan. It was right after the March 11th earthquake, considering the radiation problem, he sent a message to this Japanese friend in Tokyo, telling him that "if you want to get away from Tokyo you can move to Taiwan, and you can stay in my home. No problem, you can stay here as long as you like." Since then the friendship seemed to deepen a little, the friend responded "you are my family" in the message and said that "Taiwan is my second home" when they met. Regarding this friendship, he commented, "but as I said before, when there is a conflict of benefit, the friendship will become more complicated". His impression of the older generation of Japanese was shaped by his father's business with the Japanese when he was a child, he describes the older Japanese as cherishing the relationships and being nostalgic. In his words, "over a long time of relationship mutual trust was built and they would support each other because of the relationship which can last for a few decades. But now this kind of relationship, whether you call it mutual feelings or something else, seems to fade in Japanese society, that kind of feeling nostalgic, that old friend feeling has become less and less."

2.4 Work-related values

Most of the challenges, apart from language issues and friendships, are related to work. Based on the interview, major work-related values involve conformity, manual orientation, risk-taking and leadership, and hierarchy.

2.4.1 Conformity

The first challenge the interviewee mentioned, as he called "culture shock", was situations such as meetings. In his words, he said:

> *For example, while having meetings, I am the only Taiwanese among all my colleagues. I can't stand the fact that none of my colleagues has any opinion. I would like to hear their feedback or thoughts, but no one would voluntarily raise his/her hand and say anything or give any advice. Actually, I am not a very typical Taiwanese person, rather I am quite westernized, so even now I am still working on it.*

The interviewee found it very challenging or even shocking that during meetings no one would express his/her opinion which is related to Japanese conformity. Given that he perceives himself as more of a westernized person, he expects his employees to be more expressive and give feedback. It was shocking and very challenging to him that it was the opposite. To handle this kind of situation, he asked his staff to come up with solutions.

> *I would tell them that you don't just come to me with problems but also with solutions. Whether they are supervisors or colleagues, when they tell me something happened, my first reaction would be what solutions we have, how do you plan to solve it? I would usually ask them these questions. Being asked many times they have learned that they need to think through before coming to me. But of course, when the problem is complicated and highly important, I would analyze it for them, let them know what the possible consequences could be, and what the cost would be to the company. I would analyze everything for them and always tell them that "you got to have plans A and B, that's the minimum.*

2.4.2 Manual-orientation

The biggest difference is, as specified, "Japanese follow guidelines. They hope to plan well, and there should be very specific steps/procedures for them to take action." The interviewee viewed it as "an interesting learning" of the differences between Taiwanese and Japanese based on his experience and observation as follows.

In Taiwanese culture, when the boss gives an order, the subordinates will try to guess and find solutions to bring back the results. So it is highly possible that five people have six ways of achieving the same result. But here in Japan, people seem to expect very specific instructions such as ABCD from the superior, then they go for it. The merit is in the end there won't be much difference in the result because everyone did what was instructed, but this will restrict the flexibility and people's ability to deal with emergencies. But Taiwanese are too flexible, too flexible that sometimes they may not stick to the principle. This is a very interesting learning experience for me.

2. 4. 3 Risk-taking and leadership

Corresponding to the previous difference, the interviewee further specified his view of the correlation between having manuals and risk-taking.

Eastern cultures emphasize more actions than speaking. But when people are taking action, they may not know why, just like the Japanese. Actually many Japanese often don't know why they have to do something just because they have SOP (standard operation process), it's a guideline, a manual. So Japanese have less of a risk-taking spirit and don't dare to take risks.

Because of his childhood environment and life experience, the interviewee finds it easier to take risks. As long as he evaluates the risk and finds it affordable, he would take action and then report the result to his superior. Unlike him, he has observed that very often the staff are waiting for the superior to give instructions. When there is a need to make judgments by themselves, and they are not capable of evaluating the risk, they would just stay there taking no action. So the result is that very often many things are hard to push forward and progress. There is a lack of autonomy because if no one tells them what to do they will not dare to try due to the incapability of predicting the result.

The interviewee continued to express his opinion of the leadership of the Japanese based on his observation. His original plan was that he would be in Japan for six years meaning two terms as he told his superior. During this period, one of his major responsibilities was to find another leader to take over when he has completed his term, it would be ideal to find a Japanese leader to manage the Japanese staff. But then he realized that looking for leadership was very challenging in Japanese culture. The

reason he explained has to do with Japanese culture.

> *Looking for leadership is very difficult because the Japanese are educated to listen and be obedient from a very young age. If someone sticks out, he⁄she will be hammered down. So this will result in collective leadership (consensus) in business management. What I am used to is I am the one who makes the final decision and takes responsibility, so they just need to take actions according to my decision and instructions, and I will be taking full responsibility for the results. But then they would say, "can you let all of us discuss it, and after we all reach a consensus we will start working on it?"*

Here, the interviewee pointed out a characteristic of Japanese decision-making: the consensus style. He feels that as the leader of the company, it is his job to make the final decision and take full responsibility. But his Japanese staff feel a need to discuss and get a consensus before they move on to take actions. The interviewee shared his thoughts on the flip sides of this consensus decision-making as the following:

> *This [consensus style] of course has its merit, we can consider all aspects and won't miss anything, but the point is we may miss the best time and the opportunity. Moreover, the decision will be made within a safe index because nobody can take responsibility. This is what I mentioned about Japanese: there are very few risk－takers. They don't dare to take responsibility, then through this kind of consensus leadership, since it was made by all, when some problem occurred, it would be everyone's decision and no individual could be blamed. If someone has to take responsibility, his reaction would either be trying to run away or would say it was his fault therefore he would resign. So I have been telling my staff, especially my supervisors, that everyone makes mistakes, but the first thing you need to do is to consider what you can do to fix the mistake, what are the solutions, and how to make amendments, or reflect and consider how to avoid this kind of mistakes next time, but not resign and leave. Your resignation won't actually do any good to the company; instead, will cause more damage.*

Given this decision-making difference, the interviewee has tried his best to communicate with his staff in order to avoid the disadvantages caused by consensus decision-making.

Another sharp distinction lies in the apology phenomenon. He sometimes jokes with his friends in Taiwan that the Japanese like to say

"I'm sorry", they have always been apologizing, but the same mistake repeats. He viewed the reason for this problem as "because this consensus type of leadership results in everyone having power and responsibility, but in the same way nobody takes responsibilities or consequences." He emphasized that so far he has been trying to lead the company to avoid this style because even though with this style a company won't make any severe mistakes, it won't have significant growth either, which means "if you don't move forward, you are moving backward". From his point of view, not making any big mistakes is actually the biggest mistake a leader can make.

To manage this, his strategy was taking every opportunity to educate his staff with the help of his assistant. "I take every opportunity to converse with my colleagues, it is often an opportunistic education. When we have any opinions incompatible or different, it is actually the best opportunity for communication. I would take the opportunity to express myself, be it my value system, my goals, or the principles of the company. In this way, I was able to communicate well with them, and of course, I listen to them too." When asked if his staff would open up their minds and speak what they really think, he said that there were staff who would speak their true thoughts, but it was one on one and conducted by his assistant, whom he trusts and empowers to do so.

2.4.4 Hierarchy

From the case of his interpreters to the consensus decision-making, the interviewee concluded that these phenomena are related to the hierarchy in Japanese society.

> *I think they are correlated. Their hierarchy is very obvious, so apparent that you shouldn't do anything that's beyond your position and responsibility. This is an accumulative process over time, and you can see this through many of their word usage. For example, we learn the word "husband" in Japanese: "shujin", literally meaning master. It is already the 21st century, yet it is still being used, indicating no gender equality.*

Since he has rich experiences of visiting and living in different countries, he has his perceptions of people in different cultures. He talked about some Japanese, especially Japanese women he met in the West as "you will notice that Japanese seem to be back to life once they leave Japan and live in Western countries, women in particular, because they feel very suppressed in the Japanese culture and society."

Overall, to manage the differences effectively and efficiently, he has read many books ranging from business management to cultural conflicts. To him, knowledge from books represents people's experiences which can be used as a good reference. A second reason is that he can also use this as evidence when he communicates with his colleagues because, from his point of view, quoting some successful entrepreneurs' words or experiences can sometimes be more convincing than statistics.

Ⅳ. Discussion

The results of the study have revealed some subtle but major differences between Japanese and Chinese (Taiwanese) cultures even though both are commonly viewed as collectivistic and high-contextual cultures and share some similarities.

Major similarities, according to the interviewee, involve the use of *Kanji*, and the maintenance of the face. Because *Kanji* is used in both Japan and Taiwan, particularly that *Kanji* used in Taiwan is very similar to the ones in Japan in comparison to the simplified *Kanji* commonly used in mainland China, it is convenient for the interviewee to communicate with his staff and share his meanings with more precision, and also helps eliminate the language barrier. On the other hand, given the historical background that Taiwan was once colonized by Japan, Taiwanese culture has been influenced by Japanese culture. Both cultures, being collectivistic and high-contextual, highly value harmony (*wa*) and saving others' faces and mutual faces is critical in interpersonal relationships. The interviewee reported that the older generation of Taiwanese is similar to the Japanese, who would consider others' faces and not point out the problem directly.

Hall and Hall (1987) emphasized the importance of understanding the term "*wa*" (harmony) in Japanese culture. "It refers to the quality of human relationships and involves cooperation, trust, sharing, and warmth, based on a caring attitude toward others. It is the ingredient that results in efficient teamwork and high morale. The success of any enterprise, small or large, depends on harmony…The successful leader does his best to contribute to and enhance *wa*" (p. 78). Similarly, saving face is also viewed as very important to the Japanese, which is "a key to preserving harmony, not only business relations but in personal relations as well" (pp. 124-127).

Despite the similarities, differences in communication styles, friendships, and work-related values were reported to be some major

challenges by the interviewee. The first challenge the interviewee had to consider was how language is used and conveyed. From his experience of seeking assistance from three different staff, he has learned some subtle distinctions between Japanese culture and Taiwanese (Chinese) culture. The first female staff member was able to understand and interpret his words, but due to her young age and the hidden culture rule, she felt reluctant and awkward to interpret her superior's words. The second foreign employee who had no problem with comprehension and interpretation was too straightforward without a deeper understanding of Japanese culture on top of his young age. Hall and Hall (1987) reminded readers that "the Japanese respect age and experience", and "each culture has a hidden code of behavior that can rarely be understood without a code breaker" (pp. xvii-xvi). As the Japanese language is highly contextual and relational, using appropriate language in the right context depending on the relationships is extremely important. Having a deep and full understanding of how language should be used contextually and relationally can be regarded as critical in doing business with the Japanese.

Although the interviewee has lived and worked in the company in Japan for more than five years, he mentioned that he doesn't really have any friends. One reason, as he explained, was that he didn't have time to build and nurture friendships. Despite his busy schedule and focus on his family, it is also true that building personal relationships and friendships takes a long time in Japan. Hall and Hall (1987) described this personal relationship and friendship with Japanese as "extremely difficult", and pointed out its relation to Japan's hierarchy. To borrow their words, "in Japan, personal relationships and friendships tend to take a long time to solidify. This is largely a function of the hierarchical system in Japan, which integrates many Japanese into close-knit networks of schoolmates and relatives. It is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, for a foreigner to break into these networks" (p. 6). In contrast, Chinese tend to build and maintain personal relationships with others regardless of the contexts, be it business or personal. Chinese "*guanxi*"-personal relationships are vital to business success (Martin & Nakayama, p. 320). It can be said that friendship is a part of business relationships and has a significant influence on business. To the Chinese, establishing and maintaining good relationships and friendships with others lead to mutual trust and business success.

For work-related values, the differences in the following key concepts

were considered the hidden causes of the challenges that the interviewee had to face and manage: conformity, manual orientation, risk-taking and leadership, consensus decision-making, and hierarchy.   As specified earlier, harmony (*wa*) is one important variable of business success in Japan. To maintain harmony, it is necessary for the Japanese to follow the hierarchical system, consensus decision-making, conform and follow the manual, instead of taking risks and sticking out. Hall and Hall (1987) discussed the importance of harmony and consensus as "[they] are keystones of Japanese society…Final decisions entail many, many meetings, where all points of view are presented and discussed until consensus is achieved. They call Japanese board meetings 'a ritual'- a formal ceremony acknowledging what has been decided" due to the consensus decision-making (pp. 81-83).

Meyer (2014) also discussed the decision-making styles (p. 150, Figure 5.3. Deciding). Even though China and Japan are both Asian countries and viewed as being collectivistic and high-contextual, the figures on deciding clearly indicate that Japan is to the very left of being consensual whereas China is to the right of the scale as top-down. What draws more attention is that consensus starts earlier before the meetings, "consensus building starts with informal, face-to-face discussions…called *nemawashi*, literally meaning 'rootbinding'…[which] protects a Japanese organization from damage caused by disagreement or lack of commitment and follow-through" (Meyer, 2014, p. 157). In other words, in Japan decisions are made in groups through unanimous agreement, which even starts before the group meetings; however, in China individuals, usually the superiors, make the final decisions. "To the Japanese, leadership means an individual's ability to listen carefully to others and to work to achieve group consensus and harmony" (Hall & Hall, 1987, p. 78). Hall and Hall emphasized that the success of enterprises depends on the leader's ability to maintain harmony which explains the interviewee's challenge he had to face while communicating with his employees during meetings. Even though he saw himself as the one who should make final decisions and take responsibility, his employees felt there was a need for everyone to be involved and reach a consensus with the final decision before actions were taken. In Japan, the consensus style of decision-making is time-consuming; however, once the decision has been made and consensus reached, conformity by following the specific guidelines and a high level of efficiency will be observed. Koide et al. (2019) examined conformity by investigating inner dilemmas

experienced by parents of multicultural families in Japan, and found many parents in the study "felt torn between the need for their children to 'fit in' and the desire to pass on their heritage culture and language to them" as the Japanese society "places great value on 'sameness' and conformity", and "the importance of conformity is taught from a young age in Japan". Therefore, as Hall and Hall (1987, p. 89) described, "extreme conformity numbs creativity", the interviewee viewed this consensus decision-making as taking too much time which may result in not only losing the best opportunity in business but also failing in sparking employees' creativity.

Japan is viewed as a culture with a large degree of power distance and a strong tendency of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001, p. 152). As a culture with a large power distance, the Japanese prefer a clear boundary of powers and are more likely to accept hierarchical systems. Because of the strong uncertainty avoidance, there is more conservatism and a stronger desire for law and order in comparison to the low-uncertainty avoidance cultures. Regarding taking risks, both high- and low-uncertainty cultures take risks, but people of high-uncertainty cultures are more likely to take known risks than low-uncertainty cultures. Meanwhile, there is more tolerance of diversity in low uncertainty avoidance cultures and more fear of things foreign in high uncertainty cultures (p. 160).

Another major challenge that the interviewee experienced has to do with negative feedback and confrontations. For example, he talked about his accountant taking sick leave because he criticized her for not asking for his approval. Giving negative feedback, or criticizing can be a very sensitive subject in Japan. Hall and Hall (1978) emphasized that saving face is very important to the Japanese. It is the key to preserving harmony, not only in business relations but in personal relations as well (pp. 124-126). Meyer (2014) suggests that while giving negative feedback to the Japanese, it is "generally soft, subtle, and implicit". Even though "in American culture, you might give negative feedback in public by veiling it in a joking or friendly manner, [in Japanese culture] this would be unacceptable; any negative feedback should be given in private, regardless of how much humor or good-natured ribbing you wrap around it" (p. 82). Meyer also found that, even though both Japan and China are characterized as being emotionally inexpressive and having the tendency to avoid confrontation, the degree of Japan is higher than China (p. 204). This explains the interviewee's trying to express himself whenever he has opportunities to seek his colleagues' understanding as well as their opinions. It also explains

the accountant's action of taking a sick leave after being criticized and feeling a loss of face instead of expressing herself directly.

Although Japanese and Chinese cultures are commonly viewed as collectivistic, high-contextual, and hierarchical, this study has revealed some subtle but important differences reflected in the interviewee's experience of living and working in Japan. Hall and Hall (1987) portrayed Japan as "unique" which is "totally different from other Far Eastern cultures such as China, Korea, and Malaysia" in the advice for Americans while doing business with the Japanese (pp. 150-151). Meyer (2014) summarized the similarities and differences with more clarity in Figure E. 1. (p. 246) in her book *The Culture Map* that Japan and China are very similar in being hierarchical and high-contextual; however, there are more differences, some are significant. Although both cultures prefer indirect negative feedback, the degree of Japan is higher. Compared to China which is relationship-based, Japan is more to the side of task-based. The biggest difference lies in the decision-making, with the Chinese having a tendency of employing a top-down style compared to the Japanese consensual style. The results of this study correspond with these characteristics and indicate that Japanese employees are more high-contextual and consensual, tend to avoid confrontation, and prefer indirect negative feedback in comparison to the interviewee who shares *Kanji* and the concept of face, and understands some cultural characteristics of Japan. Despite the interviewee's multicultural background, what he found challenging unveiled his perception of Japanese culture compared to his own. This study has uncovered some similarities and specific challenges of the expatriate perceived through his eyes, and has provided concrete references of cultural clashes and solutions for intercultural business contexts in Japan.

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