

Book review

Culture and Management in Asia, M. Warner, ed., Routledge Curzon, London, 2003, 288 pp., £17.99, ISBN 0 415 29728 1

Asian business is at the cross-roads, as it forges ahead on the road to even greater economic growth and a higher standard of living, albeit under the shadow of yet another financial crisis, as occurred in the later 1990s.

This well-researched edited work offers an overview of Asia's success to date, pinpointing the close relationship between culture and management in thirteen countries/places, namely China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam.

Each chapter of the book is structured in a way to start with a solid introduction of a chosen location's historical background and economic background. From there it tells what kind of societal culture, corporate culture, managerial behaviour and managerial values have been nourished. The way of resolving labour-management conflict is then introduced. Each chapter finally ends with the corresponding implications for managers.

The editor, Professor Malcolm Warner, a well-known expert on Asian management, who teaches at Cambridge's business school, the Judge Institute of Management, argues that it is more appropriate to use the term "multi-domestic" to depict the countries/places in Asia in view of the latter's distinct managerial behaviours. Further, for each of these locations, unique historical background and the possible presence of impacts of races and religions may lead to the phenomena of "unity in diversity". While the core value system of a country earmarks the "unity" side, the co-existence of the preferences and philosophies of different groups in the community leads to the "diversity" facet. This characteristic gradually crystallises certain preferred ways of interactions and business practice in a country.

The book hints that historical exposure including political background, the degree and speed of modernisation, and the presence of sub-cultures in core-culture, contributes to define a country's platform of governance. In this vein, the authors attempt to look into the relationship between culture and management, which

is believably to lead to the seen phenomenon pertaining to business practice, values and preferences of organisations in the region.

Here we share several examples. In China (Chapter 2), Confucianism appeared to be a guiding philosophy governing the behaviours of the Chinese. This gives rise to the emergence of paternalism and collectivism-laden community, and therefore the generic notable behaviours of Chinese managers. Yet, despite their being ethnic Chinese and generically named as members of the Greater China, China (Chapter 2), Hong Kong (Chapter 3) and Taiwan (Chapter 12) differ in terms of Americanisation, and in fact pursue quite distinct espoused theories of action. In another example, though Thailand (Chapter 13) is developed into a believably collectivist society, its people usually lend themselves to nepotism and express loyalty to family or friends, but not necessarily commitment to a single company. Their strong belief in Karma also steers Thai managers to become more a benevolent 'father' than an 'autocrat'. Nevertheless, the book also argues that not all of these locations have developed clear or core management paradigms (e.g., India (Chapter 4), Indonesia (Chapter 5), Vietnam (Chapter 14), etc.).

What may be most interesting and useful to managers are possibly the implications of these values in business arena. Using Malaysia as an example (Chapter 7), the multi-racial staff mix may require managers' understanding of different work values of their staff. Besides, the co-existence of various religions in the community represents a complicated matrix of demands from different employee groups, which managers should always pay attention to issues, like holiday arrangements (e.g., Muslims' pilgrimage to Mecca) and food taboos in social functions. In "younger" nations such as Singapore (Chapter 10), governments' preferences can become another factor to fuel managerial behaviours. The care "granted" by the Singaporean government is double-edged. The easily adapted environment of Singapore is foreign investor-friendly. Yet, the author argues that the paternalistic style of the Singaporean government does unwittingly discourage entrepreneurship, and "(People) live and work in Singapore without being exposed to major differences and so may fail to learn as fast as (they) would elsewhere" (p. 185).

This reviewer believe that the book manages to deliver what the authors desire – to provide students, researchers, and managers with a fruitful overview of Asian countries in terms of culture and management. Apart from enhancing their understanding of these locations, readers of this book should be able to develop a sense about how various factors such as Confucianism, degree of *Chineseness*, collectivism, paternalism, face, religions, and Americanisation, influence managerial practice of the Asian countries.

From a researcher's point of view, it is not necessary and not preferable to claim how far the different Asian management systems are lagging behind their modern or western counterparts. Rather, one should consider how these two types of systems could be integrated, if Asia remains a competitive business platform for local entities and multinational corporations. From a western manager's vantage point, the findings of this book offer insights about what kind of transition should be applied to human resource management of these locations for further growth in the contemporary globalised business world.

Besides the aforementioned thorough overview, I suggest that the book induces us to think deeply about three areas, as set out below.

First, in the increasingly globalised world, Asian countries have to speed up their interactions with players from other parts of the world, especially in response to the inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI). This book has already highlighted the role of FDI in the economic development of these locations. The next step should be to investigate how FDI changes or modifies the management systems of these countries, and to what extent.

Second, while culture shapes management practice in these countries, following the infiltration of western

values, existing management practice also challenges the prevailing culture. We hope the next generation of this book will bring about how culture and management continuously reshape each other.

Third, as the editor, Malcolm Warner, argues, recently two perspectives prevail when dealing with organisations, namely the "culturalist" school and "institutionalist" school, where the latter stresses the historical and political structures influencing economic and organisational activity. These two schools are not necessarily in existence at the expense of the other ones.

While this book focuses on the cultural side, it should be borne in mind that political environment could be another crucial factor that moulds managerial values. For instance, the ongoing debate between mainland China and Taiwan on the unification of China always pressurises the Taiwanese government's policy toward investment into the mainland. Also, the "one country, two systems" philosophy launched by Deng Xiaoping for managing Hong Kong seems to be continuously deliberately "reinterpreted" by the incumbent Chinese leaders, albeit not explicitly.

Therefore, a country's cultural values could also be defined by political attributes. While this book succeeds to offer valuable insights about the relationship between culture and management in Asia, we hope its next generation can help us to understand both the respective and combined effects of cultural and political environments on managerial behaviours in Asia.

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