



Indonesia Development

I N S T I T U T E

EAST MEETS WEST

When Culture Collides



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Introduction

We are now living in an era where the traditional boundaries between politics, economics, culture, technology, finance, ecology, and national security among countries are diminishing. This process, referred as globalization, has entered its third decade and continues to accelerate. More than ever before, the world is now characterized by an interrelated, interdependent global community. The seamless movement of capital, goods, labor, population, and data across national borders has become commonplace.

As globalization continues to occur, the rise of China, India and the rest of Asia is now progressing at an unprecedented time. In 2030, it is predicted by World Bank that the world's major five economics will be China, United States, India, Japan, and Russia. It will not be long until an equilibrium state of dominance between the West and the East will be achieved. Therefore, interconnectedness and interdependence will continue to grow even further. People from both sides of the world are expected to work and live in the other parts of the globe.

However, as the world becomes more integrated, the way that westerners and easterners perceive their way of life is almost in direct contrast; both in personal life as well as in professional life. Understanding cultural differences is becoming increasingly important these days as we expect to meet more people from other cultural backgrounds. In this regard, this literature will describe the behavior from both Western and Eastern cultural perspectives, so hopefully can give insights to bridge the gap of differences in order to develop and maintain a sustainable relationship between the people from both culture.

Time: A Cultural Concept

Time is an abstract thing, a fabrication of mind where most people do not recognize its impact since it functions below the consciousness level. However, time is one of the key areas of cultural differences which are easily misunderstood by individuals who come from different backgrounds. Time is subconsciously followed by individuals in a society until they form habits, norms, or even a culture itself. As a result, each culture has its unique views about what is appropriate and inappropriate regarding time management. The first subject in the concept of time is *punctuality*.

1. Punctuality

In the United States, time is fixed and measurable. People see it as a commodity; time can be saved, wasted or spent wisely (Zafar, 2014). In North America, most members of the dominant culture adhere to Benjamin Franklin's advice that "*time is money*". Consequently, it creates a society that moves at a very fast speed and adheres to schedule profoundly. According to Samovar, people in Britain and North America may be five minutes late for business appointment, but not fifteen and certainly not thirty minutes late, which is perfectly normal in the Asian countries, as well as in South America, Africa and Arabian countries.

Contrary to the people in American, people in Asia perceive time as a limitless pool that can stretch or shrink and is therefore very flexible (Samovar, 2009). This is sometimes referred as "rubber time" by westerners. The majority of Asian countries mostly do not have a fixed beginning or end for a social events or appointments. As an example, rather than giving a specific time to meet, people in Asia tend to make the appointment time with the 'around' concept, such as around 5 p.m., or around 7 p.m. One of the main reasons is because of they are

already expected not to come in time. Therefore, the people in Asia are used to a late situation and perceive it as a tolerable thing, especially in an informal meeting.

2. M-Time and P-Time

The second concept of time is the classification of *monochromic* (M-Time) and *polychromic* (P-Time) by anthropologist Edward T. Hall. According to Rogers, these classifications symbolize two different approaches to utilize and perceive time (Rogers, 2002). M-Time identifies time as linear and segmented. This monochromic view of time believes that time is scarce resource that can be spent, wasted, or lost. Thus, people who use the M-approach rely heavily on using schedules and aim to do only one thing at a time. The cultures that use the M-Time view include the dominant people of the United States, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Samovar, 2009).

The second concept, P-Time perceives time as a medium to maintain a harmonious relationship as the most important objective, so they use time in a flexible manner to accommodate other people (Samovar, 2009). Most of the Asia countries see time in a polychromic view. Other countries such as Arabs, Africans, Indian and Latin America people also live within this concept. However, Japanese is known as a country that combines both M-Time and P-Time for their business and daily lives (Rogers, 2002).

Table 1 below will give a brief comparison between monochromic and polychromic cultures. As shown in Table 1, people in Asian countries, or the polychromic time people have a strong commitment to human relationships. They put emphasis on the notion of collectivism, concern more with people close to them than privacy, and their base promptness is relationships. While on the other side of the world, Western people put more emphasis on how individual can

thrive to be successful in life through freedom and independency. Then, the next segment will describe the West's individualism and the East's collectivism.

TABLE 1 Comparison of Monochronic and Polychronic Cultures

MONOCHRONIC TIME PEOPLE	POLYCHRONIC TIME PEOPLE
Do one thing at a time	Do many things at once
Concentrate on the job	Are easily distracted and subject to interruption
Take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously	Consider time commitments an objective to be achieved, if possible
Are low context and need information	Are high context and already have information
Are committed to the job	Are committed to people and human relationships
Adhere to plans	Change plans often and easily
Are concerned about not disturbing others; follow rules of privacy	Are more concerned with people close to them (family, friends, close business associates) than with privacy
Show great respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend	Borrow and lend things often and easily
Emphasize promptness	Base promptness on the relationship
Are accustomed to short-term relationships	Have short tendency to rebuild lifetime relationships

Source: Adapted from Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences: Germans, French, and Americans* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1990), 15.

The Social Values: Individualism and Collectivism

The value of individualistic and collectivistic is practiced in everyday life, within the most basic social structure such as family, neighborhood, school, and a larger structures such as workplace, community, and organizational settings. Although there is no significant difference at first glance when meeting new people or environment from different cultures, however major differences will be felt if individuals from one culture are subjected to different culture environments for a lengthy periods of time. This era of globalization has created many situations where groups of students and/or workers go abroad and live in diverse lifestyle.

From an individualistic culture standpoint, American people emphasize freedom, personal rights and responsibilities, privacy, self-expression, and innovation as their basic foundation. On the other hand, Asian put more concern on collectivistic cultures that lean toward community, collaboration, harmony, shared interests, traditions, and maintaining “face”. The next part will describe factors that create a culture of both individualism and collectivism, as well as the impact in an organizational setting.

1. Individualism

One of the most distinguished and notable cultural pattern in the dominant culture of the United States is individualism. From the historical point of view, Benjamin Franklin once stated “*God helps those who help themselves*”. The individualistic notion also shown from the excerpt of George Mason’s Virginia Declaration of Rights:

All men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.

Nowadays, the concept of the individual is perceived as one of the key value orientations distinctive to American culture: That individual is an integral agent, relatively autonomous and morally responsible (Fischer, 2008). Seen from the anthropological point of view, the very concept of independence and equality comes from the first and basic layers of social interaction; the family.

For American families, after attaining a certain age, children are encouraged to leave the nest. Children work hard to establish identities. Furthermore, they are encouraged to decide for themselves, do their own things, develop their own opinion, and solve their own problems (Samovar, 2009). Those said traits will later develop an individual with a strong sense of independency.

In the organizational setting, individuals who embraces the individualistic traits have the mindset that encourages competition rather than cooperation, prioritize personal goals over group goals, tend not to be emotionally dependent on organizations and institutions, and have their right to his or her private property, thoughts, and opinions. This western culture stresses individual initiative and achievement, and they value direct explicit communication and individual decision making (Qingxue, 2003). The leadership style of individualistic approach is often depicted as a strong and firm leadership who leads in the front. However, the drawback from the individualism in the United States exercised by frequent job changes, where employees are often expected to change jobs in order to advance their career (Samovar, 2009).

2. Collectivism

As the counterparts of the West, the East or majority of Asia countries live in a collectivism setting, a culture that is characterized by a social framework that emphasis on in-groups rather than oneself. People in Asia rely heavily on their families, relatives, affiliations, and friends to look after them. As suggests by Triandis, collectivism means greater concern on social norms and duty defined by the groups rather than behavior to get pleasure, beliefs shared with the in group rather than beliefs that distinguished the self from the groups, and readiness to cooperate with the group members.

Collective behavior is rooted deeply within the history of Asia. More than 2500 years ago, Confucius (B.C. 551 – 479), the great Chinese thinker, educator, statesman and the founder of Confucianism encouraged a basic life principles that is developed through harmony and interdependence among others. He once said, “*if one wants to establish himself, he should help others to establish themselves at first*” (Qingxue, 2003). Another historical examples can be drawn from the number of proverbs that have a similar tone, such as “*no matter how stout one beam, it cannot support a house*”. Or else from Korea, there is a saying that a piece of paper weighs lighter if two people carry it, thus many hands makes light work. And in Indonesia, there is a strong historical foundation that states: United we stand, divided we fall.

The people in the East have already applied the values of collectivism since the very early stages of family life. In Asia, most children are expected to leave their nest after they get married, and before that, parents will provide all the needs of their children. Mostly the family share property, all material possession, food, and live under the same roof. Therefore, in exchange for what the children were already provided by their parents, the children “owe” a life-long obligation to serve with great loyalty to the family. Asian culture places family ahead of individual interests and even their own development. In some families, honor and prestige for the family are paramount. Other countries in the world that practices collectivism includes the majority of Latin America, Africa and Arabian countries (Samovar, 2009).

In an organizational settings, individuals have traditionally been expected to remain in the same company for a long period of time, even for their entire career. However, they are mostly bound to the burden of obligations to others. To change between jobs in a short period of time will be perceived as disloyal to company, bosses, and other employees. The leadership style

of collectivistic approach usually portrayed as a leaders who leads from behind. Table 2 will give a brief example of difference between the West and East family business model.

TABLE 2 Asian and Western Family Controlled Firm

ASIAN FAMILY FIRM	WESTERN FAMILY FIRM
To hold the family together and family infighting exists	Family loyalties are not very strong
To give family members a job	Communications are bureaucratized
For the family's prestige and honor	Outside directors or close associates of the controlling family
To honor the ancestral founders of the firm	Succession challenges
Loyalty is valued over professional status	Unemotional - determined by impersonal and economic criteria

Source: Subramaniam, A. (2009). *Cross Culture - East and West: how to bridge the gap and use cultural diversity to your advantage*

Social Relationship: Power Distance

The third and the last dimension of culture in this literature is the social relationship. When people relate and present themselves to others in daily basis, there are norms that bind within their interactions. In the East, there is a high-power distance between one person to others, not only in working or formal situation, but can also be found in daily situations.

1. High-Power Distance

Power distance in a culture defines the extent of less powerful person in society accept the inequality in power, and considers it as normal (Samovar, 2009). Asia countries known to have a high-powered distant in their society, whether in the family or working environment.

Traditionally, people in a high-power distance culture accept power as part of society, where a person's status in society is based importantly on inherited characteristics such as age, gender, and family.

The concept of high-powered distance, or can be referred as inequality in society comes from the historical aspect in Asia. In China, the basic structure of superior/subordinate relationship derived from Confucian principles that the younger son deferred to the elder son, the son to the father, the wife to the husband, and the subject to the Emperor (Kreicker, 2012). While in India, the culture develops from the caste system from the Hindu religion that divides the native people into four main types as follows: Brahmins (priests) Kshatriyas (royal families), Vaishya (merchants) and Shudras (common people or workers) (Sinha, 2006). The strong historical background of inequality develops both conscious and unconscious mind to be more accustomed to the high-power distribution of power in the society.

In the organizational environment, the attributes of the high-power distance are manifested in a hierarchical model. Hierarchy continues to influence many aspects of business practices today, but mostly in the more traditional work setting environment, such as governmental sector. Decision-making is top-down, which brings notoriously long delays from bureaucratic institutions. A person in a subordinate position will not speak for the group or take initiative without following the proper protocol (Kreicker, 2012). It is also considered to be very disrespectful if the subordinates frankly questions the superior. Consequently, in many cases a subordinates will fully obey the order from subordinates, even though they may have a different views and beliefs. The key person in East is usually the elder, or someone who holds the highest status or rank in the organization.

2. Low-Power Distance

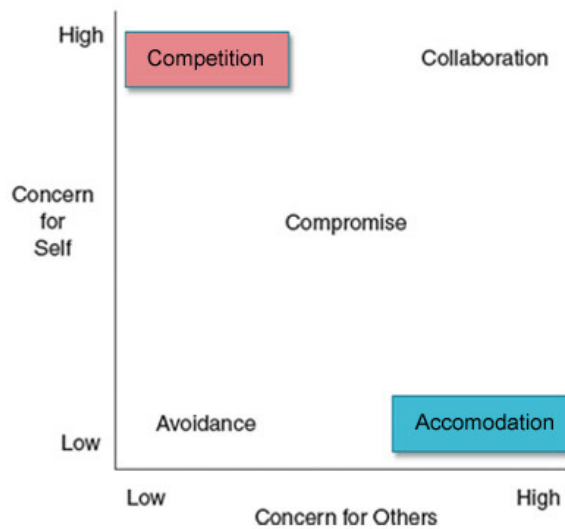
In contrast to the Eastern countries, the majority of Western countries hold the low-power distance as their basic principal. They believe that inequality in society should be minimized, therefore, they are guided by law, norms, and everyday behaviors that make power distinction as minimal as possible. The notion of low-power distance in the West is based upon equal opportunity. According to Samovar, the idea of equal opportunity is that all people should have the same opportunity to succeed in life, and the state, through laws and educational opportunities, are expected to ensure that right.

The American value of equal opportunity translates into equality and informality in social relationships. For instance, most of the primary social relationships within a family tend to promote equality rather than hierarchy. Formality is not important, and children are often treated as adults (Samovar, 2009). From a historical point of view, the very foundation of the United States is equality, where the founders of the United States ensured that the social class like in the old model of aristocracy in Europe would not flourish in America's soil. It is even reflected in the United States Declaration of Independence: "*All men are created equal*".

In organizational setting, most coworkers are also treated as equals, usually interacting on a first-name basis. They are encouraged and taught to be open, frank, and direct. According to Alberti and Emmons, the low-power distance reflected in assertiveness is a behavior which enables individuals to act in their best interest, or stand up for themselves without undue anxiety, or to express their rights without denying the rights of others, even to their superior. Recently, assertiveness has been viewed as a measure or indicator of both social and interpersonal communication competence (Singhal and Nagao, 1993).

The power distance from both cultures can also impact how individual managing conflicts in an organizational setting. As most Asian people holding high value on harmony toward others, American people valuing non-conformity, freedom of expression, individualism and competition. The conflict grid and resulting styles are presented in the Appendix below.

APPENDIX Conflict Management Styles



Source: Thomas, W. (1976). Conflict and conflict management. In M. Dunnette (Ed.). *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*

As seen from the Appendix, the West tends to put high emphasis on competition towards a goal (high concern for self), while the East tends to maintain harmony by giving a lot of accommodation (high concern for others). In the end, the best approach is to combine both styles, and incorporate concern both for self and for others; which ultimately creates collaboration.

Conclusion

Diversity is the basic characteristic of human society, and within this global community, both the West and the East have their own uniqueness in perceiving their way of life. Thus, it is important to determine that no particular culture is better than other cultures. Both the Western and Eastern ways of valuing life are reflected through their cultures, which are practiced within the basic social structure to larger structures.

Since people naturally expects others to know their culture and customs, then cultural fractions are highly expected to happen, especially in this fast paced global setting. However, it is not about how we avoid conflicts, but it is about how we embrace them. To be able to adapt and change within different cultural situations does not mean that we need to become a different person, but how we respect, engage, and appreciate other cultures.

Finally, the key to thrive in this era of globalization is how we perceive others that are also created equal and different in many ways. Tolerance, understanding, and open mindedness are the key characteristic that enable us to thrive successfully and maintain harmony with others. Because in the end, we all need to cooperate, collaborate, and walk side-by-side with others to create a better and more peaceful world for all of us.

"Diversity is the magic. It is the first manifestation, the first beginning of the differentiation of a thing and of simple identity. The greater the diversity, the greater the perfection." –Thomas

Berry

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