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Emergency Management Governance: Examining Leadership Styles across Cultures

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Abstract

While Taiwan is a modern culture, it is also a deeply traditional one, and Taiwan's public administrators often struggle to implement new and innovative disaster response programs in the nation that accommodate these two disparate influences. This research examines leadership styles that are employed in Taiwan with those used in Japan, as well as in the West. Much of the research on leadership styles across cultures is being conducted in the field of business administration, which has value for public administrators as well. In order to understand the qualities required of effective emergency managers in East Asia, particularly Taiwan, and how these qualities differ from those of emergency managers in the West, it is essential to take a culturalist perspective on the issue.

Keywords: *culture, leadership, Taiwan, Asia-Pacific, emergency management, corporate culture, teamwork, management*

1. Introduction

In September 2013, then Minister of the Interior Lee Hong-yuan (李鴻源) raised the idea that the Republic of China (ROC) government should follow the example of many nations in the developed world and establish a mechanism to provide disaster insurance at the governmental level. The idea was a hard sell. Lee, who had just returned from a fact-finding tour in Europe, bolstered his argument by citing reconstruction costs of over US$1.4 billion over the previous fourteen years in Taiwan. Moreover, such schemes have been instituted in countries such as the United States and Japan, which have often served as inspiration for public institutions and mechanisms in Taiwan. Nevertheless, despite Lee's best efforts, reception to his idea was lukewarm, and little has been accomplished in the intervening period.

There are several cultural barriers in Taiwan to the widespread embrace of such disaster insurance programs. For one thing, it is a society that values relationships, especially in business, and as a result there are very few business or personal lawsuits filed, in contrast to the much more litigious West. Thus, liability insurance has long been regarded as largely unnecessary – a fact to which the nation's relatively undeveloped tort system can stand as evidence. Until the present generation, Taiwan has also been a culture in which saving is lauded, and thus insurance payments used to be seen as a drain on income, as well as a redundancy. Moreover, Taiwan remains a superstitious culture, and the purchasing of insurance – especially disaster insurance – may be regarded as bad luck, and courting misfortune (Chu, 2001).

Nevertheless, Taiwan today is also a modern culture, and one in which leaders must contend with the often opposing forces of modern needs and traditional preferences. The struggle of Taiwan's public administrators to adopt new and innovative disaster response programs in the nation presents itself as a unique opportunity to examine how

leaders in such situations walk the razors edge between doing what is necessary to ensure that the population have access to the advantages of the modern world while respecting the cultural sensitivities that can often stand in the way of administrative progress.

Some of the most cutting-edge researches on leadership styles across nations are being done in the field of business administration, and while public administration differs in many important respects, this research nevertheless has value in the present context. In seeking to identify the qualities required in effective emergency managers in East Asia, and especially how these attributes might differ from their American counterparts, an essential aspect is a consideration of culture, and the role that the cultural context in which it is exercised plays in effective leadership.

By using a comparative approach, the differences between organizational needs and hence leadership styles are more easily highlighted, and therefore a comparison of leadership in Taiwan with Japanese leadership becomes instructive, especially when juxtaposed against an American leadership ideal that is perhaps more widely understood, and which has certainly received more attention from researchers. How do public administrators in Taiwan and Japan see their leadership roles, and what are the salient differences in these perceptions?

It should be acknowledged in advance of undertaking such a comparison that nations do not equate to cultures, and therefore it would be disingenuous to assert that “all managers in Taiwan do this” or “all Japanese leaders behave that way”. Not only are there different personal styles among leaders within a particular culture, and different organizational values defining the context of the leader’s role, but there are different cultures within a nation, and so any observations contained herein with regard to Taiwan, Japanese or American leadership styles run

the risk of being accused of dealing in generalizations. While Japan is a culturally homogeneous nation, Taiwan is somewhat less so. It is therefore important to read these results not as a guide for understanding all managers or managerial decision-making within that particular country, but as an attempt to distil the importance of the culture in which leaders must operate. As amply demonstrated by the work of Hofstede (1980; 1994), such cross-cultural comparisons not only have value to the researcher but are extremely instructive in more practical applications as well. Moreover, the predominant cultural attributes within which a leader operates are arguably one of the least ephemeral influences with which he has to contend, and thus are worthy of greater study.

2. A Confucian Influence

Some of the earliest formal studies of leadership in Taiwan identified a tendency toward the "morally superior individual" approach to leading large groups or enterprises. Robert H. Silin, using interviews with upper management and employees in various Taiwan corporations, found that Taiwan, like Japan, was greatly influenced by Confucianism (Silin, 1976). Unlike Japan, there has traditionally been a low general expectation in Taiwan of the ability of individuals to work together effectively in large groups, or to maintain solidarity for long periods of time. Thus, in large-scale Taiwan enterprises, it falls to the leader to undertake the role of the morally superior individual. In part because of this imputation, the leader in a Taiwan context is truly alone at the top, at least in how he is regarded by group members, with even his closest executives being symbolically separate and apart from him, especially in the eyes of subordinates.

In order to preserve group stability, there can be only one leader in the Taiwan organization, and thus individuals who demonstrate

leadership potential, outstanding productivity or excessive competence are often deemed a threat, not just to the leader's position, but by extension to the stability of the group. Therefore, for the good of the group, these individuals must be prevented from overtly demonstrating this competence or developing their potential. As a result, there is a disinclination to share authority or delegate important tasks in the Taiwanese organization.

In Japan, there is a predisposition toward seeking input from all group members prior to choosing a course of action, and this is considered an essential trait of a competent leader. It may stem, according to Ouchi and Jaeger (1978), from the Japanese concept of *wa* (和), which encompasses harmony, peace, and balance. Chinese culture, which is a major influence on Taiwanese culture, also has the concept of harmony, but this is expressed in a disinclination on the part of subordinates to disagree with the leader. Thus, there is a tendency for Taiwan leaders to centralize decision-making, which can result in an apparent arbitrariness on the part of leaders[1]. This leadership style has been termed paternalistic, and indeed, the leader's role is reminiscent of the sole authority wielded by the father figure, who rules the group as he would his family – with benevolent ethics and moral integrity (Cheng *et al.*, 2004).

In a study of top leadership and subordinate relations at large-scale enterprises in Taiwan, Cheng *et al.* identified four characteristics of the type of authoritarian leadership style common to his subjects: the assertion of authority and control, degrading subordinate competence, building a lofty image, and adopting a didactic style in managing employees. Subordinates were expected to respond to this leadership style with compliance, obedience, respect, shame, and especially fear (*ibid.*). This latter response – emotional fear of the leader – was identified by the authors as the psychological mechanism by which the

authoritarian leadership style continues to operate. Silin (1976) likewise identified fear as an important employee response to interactions with the leader; specifically, that the fear of being fired should be ever-present in a properly functioning enterprise. This is not to say that leadership operates on fear alone: authoritarian leadership must operate in conjunction with what Cheng *et al.* (2004) termed benevolent leadership and moral leadership. The psychological mechanism propelling benevolent leadership is the feeling of indebtedness that the subordinate has toward the leader. Moral leadership, meanwhile, operates predicated on an identification process the subordinate goes through by which he acknowledges the leader's role as the morally superior individual and seeks to emulate his behaviour.

Given the exalted position that the leader holds in the estimation of his subordinates, it is considered extremely bad form for a subordinate to question a decision made by the leader. In terms of communication, the focus is on positivity and positive outcomes, as it is only through a positive attitude that thought can be translated into action. Thus, negative communication (bad news, opposing viewpoints, or suggestions that run counter to the leader's perception) are often greeted with negative reinforcement. Such expressions of alternate opinions are taken, at best, as expressions of a lack of trust in the leader and, at worst, as an attempt to "take down his table", or attack him (Silin, 1976).

The only exception to this rule is in private communication by trusted interactors (interaction time with the leader, and not rank or seniority, is considered a better measure of influence), who will agree with the boss in public, but then tactfully express their honest opinion afterwards, and only in private. Thus, the hierarchical model assumed to be the default structure of East Asian organizations is less representative in the case of Taiwan, with power concentrated at the top, and the most influential power brokers at lower levels not necessarily inhabiting the

penultimate rungs of the corporate ladder, but rather those interactors – individuals of any rank – who have access to face time with the leader.

Given this cultural predisposition, the American example and not the Japanese may be a more appropriate one for Taiwan administrators to follow. Writing on the topic of collectivism, Huo *et al.* (1999) note that the old truism of America being a culture that embraces and rewards individualism, in this case, is accurate. Leaders are not averse to soliciting opinions and different viewpoints from the group, especially in the modern organizational environment in which this is often taught as good management practice. In reality, however, such inclusiveness in the American decision-making process is usually employed merely as a method of overcoming group inertia and defusing resistance, rather than a genuine attempt to seek alternative perspectives. In this way, it differs from the Japanese leader's building of consensus and is more akin to the tendency in Taiwan for the leader to avoid delegating authority, except insofar as even the mere appearance of soliciting input would seem to go against the traditional dynamic at play in Taiwan.

This dynamic may seem counterintuitive, especially considering the work of Hofstede (1980), whose research identified an even higher level of collectivism in Taiwan than in Japan. He defined "individualism" as the degree to which people prefer to act as individuals rather than as members of a group (Hofstede, 1994), the definition of "collectivism" being the converse to this. And indeed, Huo *et al.* (1999), who interviewed corporate managers in Taiwan, noted that leaders emphasized the importance of securing cooperation from employees, but this is distinct from the consensus-seeking employed in Japan. How this collectivism is expressed therefore must be different in the two countries.

The characterization of Asian cultures as "collective" is a view – indeed, almost a stereotype – that is rarely challenged, and yet according

to Wong (2001), it is too easy to simply accept the popular assumptions about the collectivism of Chinese work behaviour. The findings of his examination of the characteristics of Chinese collectivism in the workplace noted that it differs greatly from that in Japan, as well as between Sinophonic societies (Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, etc. …). By incorporating vertical and horizontal components into the Hofstede measurement of collectivism, Wong concludes that Chinese collectivism is mainly reflected as loyalty to the family, whereas Japanese collectivism includes allegiance to workplace. Indeed, in the Chinese cultural context, the well-being of the family is more important than that of even family-run businesses (Cheng *et al.*, 2004). If accurate, these findings have great implications for how Taiwan managers might best choose leadership styles to emulate and institutional frameworks to adopt, whether from America or Japan.

3. The Importance of Communication

One of the most oft-cited qualities in a good leader is the ability to communicate, and yet even within this relatively straightforward concept there is significant room for deviation among cultures. Leaders in the United States tend to equate the ability to communicate with the ability to speak well, and thus there is a skewed perception about the importance of giving speeches compared to the ability to listen. In Japan, in contrast, leaders with good communication abilities are widely perceived as being good listeners. According to Huo *et al.* (1999), Taiwan walks a middle path between these two extremes.

The idea that subordinates might have valuable input that must be taken into account in the decision-making process assumes a worldview wherein the leader does not have a monopoly on wisdom. Huo *et al.* (1999) credits the influence of Confucianism for this tendency among

Eastern administrators to hold the view that leaders are not necessarily smarter than their followers. This is expressed in different ways, however. In Japan there is the aforementioned leadership prerequisite of being a good listener and seeking input from all members of the group, whereas in Taiwan, leaders are wary of overtly competent subordinates and those with leadership potential. Both paradigms assume the existence of wisdom and leadership abilities among the group, yet react to this in different ways.

Americans, meanwhile, believe strongly in the individual and his ability to rise to great heights in a system that rewards virtuous traits such as intelligence, ability and tenacity. In such a meritocracy[2], the leader is promoted over others because he is more deserving, and therefore the one most qualified to make the hard decisions unaided. As a result, the importance of listening is overlooked in favour of being a good motivator. Hence, the leadership quality of communication is often conflated with the ability to speak well – to articulate the corporate vision, or verbally rally the troops to work toward a common goal. This focus on effective speaking abilities is found in Taiwan, as well: once an individual assumes a leadership role within a group, there is the tendency to attribute his success to the ideological or value-oriented beliefs that he holds, and it is part of his job as the morally superior individual to effectively verbalize these beliefs for the betterment of his subordinates (Silin, 1976).

There is little cross-cultural research to date on the qualities of leadership specific to the emergency management (EM) profession. While communication is just one of many skills an emergency manager must have in his leadership toolbox, it is one that has perhaps received the most attention from cross-cultural researchers. In terms of EM and crisis control, Low *et al.* (2011) used Hofstede's model to examine how culture affected the crisis strategies employed by leaders in Taiwan and

the United States in their respective efforts to communicate with citizens for the purposes of image repair following major disasters and perceptions of government failure. In Taiwan, the decisions examined were those made by the administration of ROC President Ma Ying-jeou following the August 2009 devastation wrought by Typhoon Morakot, while the American example was the response by the administration of US President George W. Bush after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in 2005. Both disasters incurred great loss of life and massive destruction of property and infrastructure, and in both cases the polity blamed their governments for mishandling the events, accusing them of responding too slowly, being unprepared, and exhibiting a lack of compassion for the victims (Low *et al.*, 2011).

Of Hofstede's five dimensions, uncertainty avoidance and power distance were used to compare America with Taiwan in terms of crisis communication, as they perhaps best contain clues as to how a culture perceives risk and crisis (Taylor, 2000). While the study examines only one aspect of how the two governments behaved during the respective disasters (i.e. image repair), it is instructive from a broader perspective as well inasmuch as communication between authorities and the public is one of the most important aspects of EM.

The research found that in Taiwan, which rates much higher on the uncertainty-avoidance scale, there is a need for a formal structure and clear, well-defined rules governing behaviour. The authors suggest that this dynamic may have influenced Ma's decision to apologize to the families of the victims after being accused of a slow response to the crisis and lacking compassion for the needs of the people. In contrast, the United States is a culture with low uncertainty avoidance, which could be why Bush resisted any acceptance of blame for the handling of Katrina, and was slow to take corrective action in response to such criticisms.

Moreover, Taiwan's high power-distance level implies a dependence on more powerful people in society's hierarchical structure, and that members of this culture want strong leaders to take decisive action. Thus, in the initial stages of the post-disaster fracas, when the Ma administration tried to blame villagers for their own plight (such as for failing to evacuate, etc. …), the wider society saw it as unseemly for a president to shift blame to society's powerless in such a way, and upbraided him for this failure to take appropriate responsibility as leader.

Taiwan's high scores in both the uncertainty-avoidance and power-distance dimensions have an effect on what leadership strategies developed in the West might best be employed in Taiwan, and more importantly, how they can best be adapted to suit local contexts. Consciously or not, successful leaders tend to adopt a leadership style that follows the values and mores of the culture, and Western leadership models directly imposed upon a Chinese society without modification might result in unfavourable outcomes (Cheng *et al.*, 2004).

In a comparison of the effectiveness of the "transformational" style of leadership in the United States and Taiwan, Spreitzer *et al.* (2005) likewise invoked Hofstede's power distance, expanding the variable to a construct of traditionality, built upon that employed by Farh *et al.* (1997), to encompass "expressive ties among people manifested in values such as respect for authority, filial piety, male-domination, and a general sense of powerlessness" (Farh *et al.*, 1997: 424). The values represented by traditionality identify that every relationship is hierarchical, with a power holder and a submissive, each with clearly defined roles and a range of appropriate behaviours permitted to them. Leaders in traditionalist societies such as Taiwan's value harmony and conflict avoidance over productivity or performance.

4. Oriented around Relationships

The task-oriented dimensions of transformational leadership (those of articulating a vision, setting high performance expectations, and intellectual stimulation) were found to be perceived as less effective given the Taiwan concept of leadership, at least among traditionalists. The relationship-oriented dimensions (providing individualized support, an appropriate model, and fostering group goals) showed much stronger support among traditionalists, as these would seem to support Confucian-influenced values such as preserving harmony. In short, a transformational leadership style, so effective in the United States, is not regarded as particularly useful among Taiwan's more traditionalist leaders.

What implications do these differences have for public administrators in Taiwan? Administrative bodies from the United States are commonly used as templates that Taiwan administrators attempt to follow[3]. At the sub-national level, some Japanese prefectures have adopted interesting public-private partnership models to anticipate and mitigate losses from natural disasters affecting them regularly – models that might serve as exemplars for Taiwan. The question of interest here is whether, in the current focus, such templates and lessons are applicable to the Taiwan context, and so an examination of the cultural characteristics of Taiwan and how they may coincide with or differ from those in Japan and America is in order.

In Western nations, governments take the view that the wide-ranging effects of almost all types of emergencies and disasters render these events too large and too all-encompassing for a single agency or jurisdiction to handle alone. As a result, there has been increased attention paid to the practice of using Community-Based Strategic Planning (CBSP) techniques to draw other stakeholders into the process.

An example of this process is very much in evidence in the city of Vancouver, Canada, with the emergency management structures they have in place. The EM infrastructure in British Columbia, especially in the City of Vancouver, is one with which the author is personally familiar, and while it may not represent a standard used across North America, it is nonetheless a fairly typical example and therefore useful as an illustration of the Western method of using CBSP in EM.

In BC, various governmental and non-governmental stakeholders contribute to the common task of emergency preparedness from the very beginning of the process: that of mission focus. Through negotiation and consultation, a mission statement is composed in such a way as to ensure buy-in by all stakeholders, mitigate mission-drift, and heighten the capacity for inter-jurisdictional and inter-agency cooperation. An example of such a mission statement could be to develop and maintain a comprehensive plan to prepare for, respond to, and recover from all types of major emergencies that might occur in the jurisdiction.

This process is known in BC as a "Framework for Cooperation", and it illustrates very neatly how duties and responsibilities are portioned out to various stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, charities and various agencies in the federal, provincial and municipal governments. Information provided by Emergency Social Services (ESS) in Vancouver, BC, shows that a variety of organizations, charities, and public and private bodies are actively involved in all aspects of emergency planning and callouts. This model is not provided as a template that should be followed, nor as a standard that must be met. Rather, it is to illustrate the depth and breadth of CBSP structures within the EM community in one part of North America and how this theoretical construct is expressed in a real-world application.

In contrast, the public governance concept of CBSP is not widely employed in EM structures in Taiwan. Indeed, the practice of emergency management and disaster response are solely within the purview of the government, and private sector actors are kept at arm's length. Moreover, EM is primarily seen as the responsibility of the central government, with elected leaders expected to handle such concerns, or at the very least to take a leadership role.

Unlike Western nations, in which local governments generally enjoy a high-degree of autonomy (although they often receive support) from the central-government level, Asian nations in general, and East Asian nations in particular, are partial to a very centralized system. Governments at Taiwan's county, city, and township levels are often not tasked with establishing, on their own, the kind of emergency plans and response frameworks that their Canadian counterparts are mandated to establish by federal law. Rather, such plans, including the charting of escape routes and rally points for citizens fleeing a disaster, are produced at the central-government level and passed down to the towns and villages. This is in direct opposition to the practice in North America, wherein the first step of composing a municipality's emergency plan is to gather stakeholders (citizens' groups, business interests, even the disenfranchised) and begin negotiations about what should be included in that plan[4]. It is generally accepted EM practice that communities take ownership of their own emergency plans and preparations, albeit with material and financial help from higher-level governments, because it is these communities that intimately know what their needs are, as well as exactly what hazards, risks and vulnerabilities they face. In BC, it is believed that, were this job left to a central authority, a standardized, one-size-fits-all plan would be imposed upon disparate communities, and such a plan would stand a very slim likelihood of achieving its mission.

5. Hierarchical Structures

East Asia is made up of Confucian-influenced societies, and as such there is a tendency to be very conscious of hierarchy and position. This is often perceived as familism and a concentration of control with the patriarch at the apex of the family structure. It should be noted that this pattern, though imposed from above, is nevertheless a framework in which many Asians feel comfortable, even at the lower levels. For one thing, it reduces the stress associated with making decisions and apportioning responsibility. This dynamic is especially pronounced in a culture that puts a premium on conformity and in which, as the saying goes, the nail that stands out the highest gets hammered down first. Within such a paternalistic worldview, it is not surprising to find that the approach to emergency preparedness, response and recovery is dominated by an expectation that the father-figure – in this context a role played by the central government—is a protector and therefore solely responsible. Indeed, the aforementioned example of the Ma administration's failures in Typhoon Morakot and the steps taken to implement image-control measures bear this out. This cultural trait would make it extremely difficult to implement CBSP structures in Taiwan.

Moreover, the cultures of East Asia have a very strong tendency to employ personal relationships, or what the Chinese call *guanxi* (關係), in all aspects of professional life. It may therefore prove to be that this factors into the way in which CBSP is conducted and roles are negotiated, through the cultivation of long-term personal relationships. *Guanxi* is central to all social and business relationships, and its value is in the reciprocal obligations of the parties involved. For this reason, it is seen in much of Asia as preferable to the legally binding contracts employed by Westerners[5]. Given this attitude toward contracts, it seems likely that CBSP frameworks built in East Asia would be more fragile

than those in the West, as they depend not on institutional continuity but on a web of personal relationships between the heads of the organizations involved. It is therefore unlikely that such mutual-aid agreements would survive intact the replacement of one CEO or top manager, for example, forcing negotiations to begin anew. This would likely have serious consequences for the growth and effectiveness of EM measures, or indeed any endeavour predicated upon these cooperative frameworks. It would also have important consequences in the realm of ethics, as such practices are more easily subverted by corruption.

Notes

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1. Far from detracting from the leader's esteem among his subordinates (as would be the reaction in an American or Japanese context), this arbitrariness contributes to the mystique that surrounds the leader in Taiwan, and helps build trust in the leader when projects succeed and the boss's seemingly arbitrary decisions are proved to have been the correct ones.
2. Opinions differ on whether the American meritocratic system is a reality or a myth, and it is not within the purview of this article to assess the assertion. Regardless, the belief is widespread that the American method of success is, at its heart, a meritocracy.

3. For example, Taiwan's National Communications Commission, formed in 2006, was modelled directly on the Federal Communications Commission of the United States.
4. This process is as much to secure buy-in from all sectors of society as it is to develop a workable plan that suits the unique life patterns of the people actually living in the community in question.
5. Chinese culture perceives human beings as being basically good: as such, writing every duty and responsibility of each party down in a detailed contract is a demonstration of distrust.

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