Convergence of work values in Tokyo, Seoul, and Shanghai?
Cross-country and intergenerational comparisons

ABSTRACT

Tokyo, Seoul and Shanghai are the commercial centers of Japan, South Korea (henceforth Korea), and China, respectively. Today’s young, highly educated people in these countries will become the future leaders of the new “Asian century” (Fortune, 2004. 149(1): 53). What can we expect from this new generation of leaders? How are they different from the previous generation? How do they differ across countries? Has a convergence of work values taken place? How can companies manage the workforce of the future?

This study provides an updated and in-depth analysis of the work values of the future leaders and their parents in Tokyo, Seoul, and Shanghai. These cross-country and intergenerational comparisons of work values may help find the answers to the above questions. From a theoretical point of view, this dissertation intends to increase our understanding of the highly controversial debate about the convergence-divergence-crossvergence theories (Di Maggio, 1994; Inglehart, 1998; Ralston et al. 1997).

Despite the popularity of research in the area of work values and the convergence-divergence-crossvergence debate, previous research has often been inconsistent and inconclusive. The problem starts with the definition and conceptualization of work values (Dose, 1997). Previous research was often fragmented and each discipline (Sociology, Psychology, and Business Administration) tended to develop its own definition and understanding. Therefore, this dissertation incorporates findings from different disciplines,
comprehensively defines work values, and simultaneously investigates three different concepts of work values following the logic of triangulation from within, which may improve the validity of the findings (Jick 1979). The dissertation also responds to the claim that more focused research on the booming Asian region is needed (M. Shin, 2004).

The data from 1,414 questionnaire respondents were analyzed. Values of young and highly educated people may predict economic growth and political development in a country (Inglehart, 1990). Given the importance the new generation of Chinese managers placed on career and their willingness to take risks, both of which are important in developing new businesses, the Chinese economy is expected to continue its growth path. Given that young Koreans also have a high sense of career and money orientation and are likely to devote their efforts to achieving these goals, the economic outlook is also positive. Because the work values of the young generation of Japanese have become oriented toward more quality of life and less work, the economic outlook might be less optimistic for Japan when compared to China and Korea (see The Economist, 2005).

Intergenerational comparisons within China, Korea, and Japan revealed intriguing findings. Striking differences in work values in line with rapid economic and social transformations were found in China indicating a generation gap. On the other hand, work value differences were much less pronounced between the generations in Korea and Japan where economic changes were less pervasive. In conclusion, the findings indicate that value change may occur at different speeds according to economic development.

Only the simultaneous consideration of cross-country and intergenerational analyses allows the ability to draw confident conclusions. While striking differences in work values
were observed across countries and within China, differences were less pronounced within Japan and Korea. Overall, the results largely support the convergence theory in that socioeconomic development influences the development of work values. At the same time, the findings indicate that other individual factors, e.g., gender and occupation, and other macro-level events, such as economic recessions and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, also have profound impacts on work values consistent with the crossvergence theory. I argue that these alleged competing theories can actually be reconciled because both theories include the notion that socioeconomic and other individual factors influence the formation of values.

So, how can companies manage their current and future workforces in Japan, Korea, and China? In order to attract, motivate and retain people, companies need to design a management system that corresponds to prevalent work values (Ng & Burke, 2006). If values and cultures converge, it is argued that companies can offer a standardized one size fits all approach and save cost in the process. Even though the findings largely support the convergence theory, no sufficient convergence of work values has taken place yet. At present and for the next few decades to come, companies are thus advised to localize their management practices. The study offers ample and detailed recommendations about how companies can adjust to local conditions in Japan, Korea, and China.

**Keywords**: work values, convergence theory, intergenerational change, Japan, South Korea, China