"Unravelling Hierarchy in Japanese Workplaces an Exploration of Cooperation Between Japanese and Western Research Laboratories"

Florence Dujarric

Abstract: Effective global collaboration hinges on understanding cultural nuances, notably evident in Japan's organizational dynamics. While often perceived as hierarchical, Japanese structures defy simplistic categorization, as revealed by this qualitative study led by a French scholar. By interviewing Japanese and Western researchers, the research navigates through discordant perspectives, challenging conventional Western views. While some uphold a top-down structure, others advocate for a more egalitarian interpretation, reflecting Japan's nuanced reality. Central to this exploration is deference, shaping interactions and decision-making in Japanese workplaces through linguistic and non-verbal cues. This deference emphasizes mutual respect and collaboration rather than solely denoting power dynamics. Moreover, collective decision-making, a cornerstone of Japanese organizational culture, fosters ownership and commitment among team members, contrasting with Western hierarchical models. In summary, this research illuminates Japan's complex organizational dynamics, highlighting the importance of cultural reflexivity in fostering effective intercultural collaborations. Understanding nuances like deference and collective decision-making is crucial for navigating the complexities of global partnerships and overcoming misinterpretations.

Keywords: Japanese Hierarchy, Intercultural Collaboration, Qualitative Research, Social Structures, Collective Decision-Making, Confucian Norms, Language Barrier, Deference, Power Dynamics, Ringi System

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Japanese animated film "Spirited Away", by Hayao Miyazaki, the protagonist Chihiro, a human girl, finds herself unexpectedly transported to the spirit world where she has to navigate through complex social structures and hierarchy. She often struggles about how to address the spirits and assert herself in unfamiliar situations.

A Westerner transported to Japan may experience similar bewilderment when dealing with a Japanese work organization. In the landscape of global collaboration, Japan has long been viewed through the lens of hierarchy, a concept often associated with rigid power structures and top-down decision-making processes. However, Japanese organizational dynamics are more intricate than some Western perceptions might suggest.

This research embarks on a qualitative exploration, aiming to illuminate the nuances of hierarchy within Japanese research laboratories and universities, offering insights gleaned from interviews with both Japanese and Western researchers engaged in collaborative endeavours.

Perspectives which emerge from the respondents and the literature seem contradictory at first. While some assert a top-down structure reminiscent of Confucian norms, others advocate for a more egalitarian interpretation. Junior staff defer to their seniors through intricate linguistic nuances and non-verbal cues, shaping interactions and decision-making processes. This deference, however, does not always denote power dynamics but rather underscores a cultural ethos of mutual respect and harmony. Moreover, collective decision-making emerges as a cornerstone of Japanese organizational culture. Decisions are not imposed from above but rather crafted collaboratively, fostering commitment among team members. This participatory approach contrasts with Western notions of hierarchical authority, often leading to misinterpretations among foreign observers.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research project aims to facilitate the establishment and development of scientific and academic partnerships with Japan. The French author aims to provide insights that could enhance collaboration among European and North American faculty, while acknowledging the significant cultural differences within these groups.

While studying the specificities of Japanese culture and their expression in universities and research laboratories as described in academic literature, the author initiated a series of 12 interviews with researchers and teacher-researchers practicing intercultural collaboration. Six Japanese researchers and six Westerners were consulted, to gather and analyse their perception of the difficulties inherent to intercultural communication, and to recommend adaptation strategies aimed at facilitating and sustaining exchanges. Questions were asked about language barriers, hierarchical structures, cultural differences, support systems, and finally personal suggestions from the Interviewees [17][18][19][20]. With the exception of 4 specialists in language, culture and society, the other teacher-researchers interviewed were specialists of physics, mechanics and chemistry. Most respondents were based in Japan. The 12 interviews were conducted in English. Each lasted between 40 and 80 minutes, and was subsequently transcribed, producing a corpus of over 150 pages of raw data.

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The codes of anonymization used for the respondents, details regarding their national origins, laboratories of employment, languages spoken etc, are featured in the "Participants' profiles" table.

Based on the transcriptions, the question of hierarchy appeared to be among the most complex and pivotal. It is the topic we have chosen to develop in this paper.

III. DISCORDANT VOICES ON HIERARCHY IN JAPAN

The interviews reveal numerous contradictions, varying between respondents and sometimes even within individual interviews. Japanese Respondent 11 assertively states that hierarchy in the Japanese business world "is all top-down", while American Respondent 9, who works in a Japanese university, claims that Japan is "one of the most egalitarian societies in the world".

Turning to published works by academic specialists in intercultural communication does little at first to dispel the confusion. Egitim observes that the Japanese higher education system is still deeply rooted in Confucianism, and that Confucian norms emphasize power distance between superiors and subordinates. Management is based on a single authority where decisions are made at the top and then communicated through a chain of command [1].

His narrative case study of 8 Western faculty members in Japan seems to confirm this perception: "When the participants were asked about their perception of the leadership in the department, 'top-down', 'exclusive', and 'hierarchical' were the words mentioned" [2].

However, the statistic survey of power distance among IBM employees from 74 world countries carried out by Hofstede & son, produce a very different result. Hofstede polls the employees' perception of their bosses' decision-making styles as autocratic or paternalistic, and their perceived lack of freedom to express disagreement. He finds out that Japan ranks comparatively as a low-power distance country, with a score of 54 (0 being the lowest power-distance and 104 the highest), with only 7 countries displaying lower power-distances, while France scores 58 and Russia 93 [3]. Hofstede defines "power distance" as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally"[4]. Then Hofstede goes on to list some characteristic features of large power distance cultures: "Students give teachers respect, even outside of class. Teachers should take all initiative in class. Teachers are gurus who transfer personal wisdom" [5]. Our own respondents unanimously insisted that Japanese students never speak out, and that their high respect for teachers prevents not just any contradiction, but almost all interaction. So, when analysing our collected data through the prism of Hofstede's definition, Japanese universities seem to practice large power distance.

The apparently conflicting reports may actually proceed from the fact that the concept of hierarchy and the structures of power as we understand them in the West simply do not apply to Japan. The definition of "hierarchy" as found in the Oxford Dictionary is: "a body of persons or things ranked in grades, orders, or classes, one above another". We will show below that the image of overlapping layers, one resting upon another and pressing down on them, proceeds from a Western world view that does not work to describe power dynamics in a Japanese workplace.

Critical distance is particularly difficult to maintain when one was educated in a Western industrialized country, because the research we read in English is overwhelmingly done by educated people from Western industrialized countries. The quantity of analytic literature written from a Western perspective with an ambition to objectivity and an urge for generalization can influence the thinking even of some Japanese commentators and survey respondents. So much is available, that the necessarily-limited Western approaches sometimes tend to be perceived as the truth, even by the Japanese themselves.

Most interviews of Japanese people by Westerners about intercultural matters are carried out in English, and our own interviews are no exception. And most Japanese who speak English well enough to delve into these deep topics have spent substantial amounts of time abroad, and are likely to have acquired intercultural skills. Some of them may even have been raised in a Western country. Any study in English is likely to be about the attitudes of people who already have the basic means and will to engage in intercultural interaction. The point of view of the Japanese respondents is therefore, in a way and to some extent, externalized. They themselves often claim to be hardly representative of their country's people. Our survey Respondent n°1, although born and bred in Japan until he graduated from high school and currently employed in Japan, claims to be a "half-foreigner". Participant 10 is Japanese but spent most of his life in France, and the collaboration he engages in from France with Japanese universities can hardly be called intercultural. Neither he nor Participant 12 reported encountering any particular difficulties cooperating with foreign universities.

The people who really struggle with intercultural communication are also at a disadvantage to express their struggle. Therefore, a study conducted in English can only address these matters diagonally. It seems that the differences in language and world view between Japan and the West run so deep that it is very difficult for each culture to approach, circumscribe and describe the other culture.

IV. DEFERENCE

Respondent 9, a scholar of intercultural relations, states that "Japanese hierarchy is not related to power but to deference". Deference is the act of showing respect or yielding to the opinion, judgment, or wishes of another person, often based on their authority, expertise, or seniority. It involves acknowledging their position or status and behaving in a manner that reflects that acknowledgment.

Deference in the Japanese workplace is ascribed according to seniority, and this begins as early as high school, when younger students begin to address their seniors as *senpai* and become *kōhai* to their elders. This entails a more formal, restrained mode of communication between age groups. The age limits then become a bit more blurred in the workplace, where perceived seniority can depend on the date of first employment within the company, or the position title.

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Still, in academic environments, professors are respectfully addressed to as "sensei", which, if we break down the Chinese characters that compose the word, means "born before me", as Respondent 2 points out.

Deference in Japan manifests itself verbally through a complex set of honorifics. Brown & alii explain: "Mr. Kato would be addressed as Kato-sama and referred to respectfully as Kato-san" [6]. There are seven different forms of *keigo*, or respectful language, to address others depending on both speakers' relative positions. "Because of its complex set of honorifics, the Japanese language itself is often seen as both mirroring and contributing to a hierarchical culture" [7]. One might even be tempted to say that polite language in Japan *is* the hierarchy: it stands for a hierarchy which does not necessarily imply the exercise of power, but exists in and for itself. As Respondent 9 explains,

Japanese linguistic hierarchy is about an abstract kind of social status, it's not about power *per se*. If someone is older than you, you use an honorific, if they are customer, you use an honorific. The fact they are a customer doesn't mean they have power over you, it simply means that within that abstract notion of politeness, they are someone that should be deferred to. According to Hooker, other, non-verbal expressions of deference may include "avoiding remarks that could embarrass superiors or cause loss of face", or even avoiding to "describe problems in the company, because this could suggest that the boss has failed to manage properly" [8]. It might include the much-commented on ritualized exchange of name cards at business meetings, or the ceremonial occurrence described by Respondent 8, a Japanese Professor who lived in Switzerland and Germany for several years and considers the Japanese culture from a distance. She was "shocked" when an associate professor from her university went to the airport to welcome a full professor from the same university, just to carry his colleague's luggage to the taxi and then off to the hotel.

Nonetheless, both professors would have addressed each other as "*sensei*", for, as we will show, the Japanese workplace is much more egalitarian than it seems. Japanese power dynamics run much deeper than the surface, and hidden currents flow along directions which will surprise the Westerner.

Whether or not they dig any deeper into the Japanese culture, Western professors wishing to enter collaboration with Japanese academics would be well-advised to gather information about protocol when being introduced to someone for the first time, exchanging business cards, etc., which abound on the Internet. Of course, they won't be expected to master the finer details of Japanese etiquette, but showing an interest will already go a long way.

V. COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING

Showing an interest in the Japanese culture and language contributes to good relations in business, and good relations are paramount when it comes to Japanese business. Gheorghe and Gyongyver claim that "the Japanese philosophy is that only the company in which the human relations are good will succeed" [9] [16]. In that framework, decisions cannot be made by an individual in a position of power without consulting the rest of the team. Respondent 9 explains: "A boss who ignores the opinions of his team is seen as incompetent or a jerk." Japanese hierarchy is not so much about power than about responsibility. The administrator needs to enlist everybody to work with him/her, because he/she will be the one ultimately responsible for the result. According to Wolf [26],

the management style in Japan does not usually empower the manager as the source of exclusive information, who is responsible for solving every problem in the company. Every employee, even the most junior among them, is invited to voice his opinion and ideas, and to take part in improving the management and production of the company [10]. Power is exercised collectively, along horizontal and diagonal lines, but usually not vertically.

The result is a perception of the workplace as mostly democratic, as evidenced by Respondent 8, the same professor who was "shocked" by the elaborate ceremonial gestures of her colleagues at the airport. She hesitates in expressing her view, as if taking stock of a conflict in her experience: "Somehow I feel like... Japanese culture... how to say... respects the democracy. So, I felt like in Europe, I saw a stronger leadership, where one guy or one director says something, he has a clear... like a vision, and then everybody follows, because what he says is cool. So this type of thing doesn't happen much, at least around me, in Japan." Respondent 11, a professor from a different university and a different specialty field, reports on a similar experience: "in Japan consensus is very important, they have probably lots of discussions there, for instance at the university like ours I think, everybody is treated almost like equal when they express their opinion okay". Most of the discussions happen in between meetings. The communication style is informal and egalitarian, and most participants report that a lot gets done over drinks at the end of the workday.

Human relations and influence are the decisive factors in decision-making. When changes are to be made or a new policy implemented, a team works toward a consensus by setting in motion a system called *ringi*. Respondent 7 explains: "The *ringi* system is such that the person closest to the problem has to write what the problem is and solutions and then it goes up in the hierarchy" [23]. The initiative comes generally from the lower echelons of hierarchy. And, Sagi adds, "even if the initiator is a higher-lever manager, […] in almost every case he or she will give the idea to his or her subordinate(s) and let him (them) propose it." [11] So, contrarily to what foreign faculties working in Japanese universities often report, the dynamics of initiating *ringi* seem to follow a bottom-up axis.

A document called *ringi-sho* is then circulated at all levels of hierarchy and slowly edited with everybody's contributions. This helps maintain *wa*, or harmony, and give everyone a chance of adding their personal contribution. Each participant can therefore commit fully to the project, which gives it a greater chance to succeed. When a consensus is reached, the section heads affix their seals to the document. Then a meeting is called. The decision having already been made, the meeting merely validates it, and usually no-one objects since most participants have already been consulted. In Japan, decision-making is collective.

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However, Western faculty, whose command of the Japanese language and management practices are often imperfect, are often left out of the lengthy procedure of *ringi*, and only attend the final meeting. Which explains why they sometimes perceive Japanese decision-making as "top-down", and yet are unable to explain how the decision was made [12]. They are struggling with a system which does not match their framework of reference, and may therefore cause resistance and rejection [24]. As Joseph Shaules explains [25].

The predictive nature of cognition renders us highly sensitive to novelty in foreign settings—we notice details which contrast with what we are used to back home, and are puzzled or bothered when people behave in unexpected ways. [13].

There seems to be no hierarchy as we Westerners understand it in Japan. Instead, there is a continuous collective effort towards harmony. Decision-making authority can originate from anywhere. According to Respondent 9 [21],

Non-Japanese don't understand Japanese power dynamics because they're often related to influence, not power. They're not related to the organisational tree. They're related to who is friend with whom and who is seen as a cooperative one, who is seen as hard-working and easy to get along with [22].

VI.   CONCLUSION

When we look into another culture, we must be aware that we are also looking into a mirror, and reflect on what we take for granted in our own culture. Each statement, including this entire paper, should be carefully examined for provenance and underlying assumptions. This is written by someone who comes from a specific culture, the French culture, and by necessity it has blind spots because the author is from a culture they have not theoretically studied: they *are* it, and are mostly unaware of its implications.

Indeed, it is often more challenging to examine one's own culture compared to examining another. This is also true for the Japanese, who can sometimes seem hesitant regarding the interpretation of their own workplace power structures. In the recent Japanese sci-fi/ comedy movie *Mondays*, by Ryo Takebayashi [14], some office workers discover that they are stuck in a time-loop, with the same week endlessly repeating itself. They first try to break the loop through step-by step referral to hierarchy, a chain-of-command process where the employees actually lay out the company organization chart on a board with name tags, and address one step of the hierarchical ladder at a time. But this doesn't work, so instead they try collectively helping each other achieve goals and building relationships. This, in turn, succeeds in breaking the time loop, and the normal flow of time towards future can resume. Interestingly, the agency and the crucial information are not delivered from top to bottom, but from the bottom of the hierarchy to the top. This is reflected in the Japanese title of the movie, which is translated as "Mondays: This time loop will not end until the boss is made aware of it". Science-fiction is often very revealing of a society's values, and the two-step resolution of the crisis in this movie manifests hesitation regarding the source of power and decision-making even within a Japanese company.

It can therefore be no wonder that Westerners struggle to come to grips with understanding organizational structures in Japan. It takes time and effort to start to understand a very different culture. As the Japanese would say, *ganbarimasu* [15]!

DECLARATION STATEMENT

Funding	No, I did not receive.
Conflicts of Interest	No conflicts of interest to the best of my knowledge.
Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate	No, the article does not require ethical approval and consent to participate with evidence.
Availability of Data and Material	Not relevant.
Authors Contributions	I am only the sole author in this aticle.

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PARTICIPANTS' PROFILES

Code	Gender	Age	Nationality	Place of Employment	Research Field	Languages Spoken	Work Experience Abroad
1	M	70's	Japanese	UEC Tokyo, Japan	Physics and chemistry	Japanese, English, French	USA, France
2	M	50's	German	UEC Tokyo, Japan	Mechanics	German, English, Japanese	Japan
3	M	40's	French	LIMMS, Tokyo, Japan	Material Science	French, English, Japanese	Japan
4	M	40's	French	ELyTMaX, Sendai, Japan	Chemistry	French, English	Japan
5	F	50's	Japanese	UEC Tokyo, Japan	Physics and engineering	Japanese, English	USA
6	F	50's	French	CNRS, France	Anthropology and sociology	French, English, Japanese	Japan
7	M	60's	US, Japan	Kyushu Sangyo Uni, Japan	Intercultural communication	English, Japanese, and 30 others	Columbia, Poland, Japan, Thailand
8	F	40's	Japanese	University of Tokyo, Japan	Chemistry	Japanese, English	Switzerland, Germany
9	M	40's	American	Keio University, Japan	Intercultural communication	English, Japanese, French, Spanish	Mexico, Japan
10	M	50's	Japanese	ENS Paris-Saclay, France	Chemistry and engineering	Japanese, French, English	France
11	F	40's	Japanese	UEC Tokyo, Japan	Language pedagogy	Japanese, English, German	Sweden, USA
12	M	60's	Japanese	NAIST, Nara, Japan	Physics and chemistry	Japanese, English	USA

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