THE JAPANESE EXPATRIATES IN MALAYSIA: INTERACTION AND ADAPTATION IN THE CULTURAL DIVERSE ENVIRONMENT

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─Abstract─

This study on the Japanese expatriates in Malaysia attempts to answer two research questions, i.e. (i) what is the classification of the Japanese expatriates based on communication skills, interaction and adaptation of culture, and (ii) what are the factors that are hindrance to communication and interaction? This study uses the analytical framework which argues that the Japanese society becomes the dominant culture of that corporation, and of individuals who work for the corporation. The study of culture and attitudes of the Japanese includes their lack of exposure to cultural diversity, the hierarchical nature of the Japanese society and certain concepts. A purposive sampling was used in selecting 24 Japanese expatriates as informants for in-depth interviews, besides personal observation. These 24 Japanese expatriates are working in the Klang Valley, Seremban, Kuantan and Penang. The study revealed that the Japanese under study was classified into four groups; (i) "Provincial (or Insular)", (ii) "Individualistic", (iii) "Semi-cosmopolitan", (iv) "Cosmopolitan". Of the 24 Japanese expatriates under study, 18 were classified as "Provincial (Insular)" and "Individualistic" as compared to only six who were classified as "Semi-cosmopolitan" and "Cosmopolitan". This shows that the dominant Japanese culture is internalized by the Japanese expatriates in Malaysia which in turn shapes their character, attitude and behavior. Such a situation causes a divide between the Japanese expatriates and the locals.

Key Words: *Japanese expatriates, interaction, adaptation, culture*

JEL Classification: Z1

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Early Development of Japanese Investment in Malaysia

Japan, which is the second largest economy power country in the world after the United States, is the only country in Asia which its development is comparable with the West. Due to high operating costs, such as labour and production, have made many Japanese corporations setting up their manufacturing operations or corporations abroad in order to be more competitive.

In Malaysia, the first Japanese investment was in 1957 with the establishment of a joint venture textile manufacturing (Golley, 1983 as cited in Everett, Khrisnan & Stening, 1984). The first establishment of the Japanese heavy industry was Malayawata Steel, Penang in 1961. It was a joint venture between the Malaysian government and Yawata Steel. In 1962, there were eight joint ventures in the field of manufacturing and processing and in 1969 there were 46 companies Japanese transnational corporation (Golley, 1983 as cited in Everett et al., 1984). Malaysia's economy has grown well and has been attracting foreign investments, particularly the Japanese.

1.2 The Japanese Expatriates

The development of corporations has led the dispatch of their employees abroad. According to Ab Aziz (2000), in general there are three reasons for the dispatch of expatriates to the destination country; (i) to commence operations, (ii) to develop business operations, and (iii) to perform the tasks entrusted by capable and qualified employees. To ensure their corporations abroad run smoothly and well, the headquarters in Japan also have dispatched qualified individuals abroad including Malaysia to oversee the affairs and administration of the corporation.

Those individuals selected by the management are generally known as 'expatriates' or 'global managers' working abroad – in a totally different environment with the diversity of culture, race, language, and so forth. The expatriates are the middle-class professionals and elite. The expatriates play an

important role, not only to their respective corporations and countries, but also to the country of destinations. The migration of the Japanese expatriates to Malaysia is on a temporary basis, i.e. for a specific period such as three to five years and their so-called 'migration' is more to the compliant to orders, directives and requirements of the management.

According to Sugimoto (1997), nearly half a million of Japanese who are married live far away from their families due to their transfer to another branch where it is far from where they live. For the majority of the Japanese expatriates in Malaysia who are married, do not bring their families along due to some factors for instance, children's education issues, the differential of food, environment, cultures and traditions.

2. PROBLEM OF STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this globalization era, the presence of these corporations is welcomed by developing countries, especially in case of Malaysia. The process of globalization has made the Japanese community in Malaysia increases from year to year in line with the increase in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), the increase of Japanese transnational corporations (TNCs) and joint ventures and collaboration with local companies, cultural exchange, technology transfer, and so on.

In Malaysia, most of the Japanese community is expatriates who work in accordance with the process of globalization of international trade (Jomo, 1994a). The Japanese expatriates are closer to the local community than other subgroups of the Japanese community. This is partly they are engaged with local co-workers or local workers employed in the Japanese TNCs.

In Malaysia, the Japanese expatriates are the largest group among the expatriates. The Japanese expatriates' lifestyle is perceived as more luxury and exclusive than of the local executives. In addition, there are some problems of interaction and adaptation to the local culture which it is something important and interesting to study.

This study attempts to address two issues; (i). What is the classification of the Japanese expatriates based on communication skills, interaction and adaptation of

culture. It will analyze how their communication skills may affect their interaction and cultural adaptation, and (ii). What are the factors that are hindrance to communication and interaction? It will synthesize the factors that hinder to interaction and communication with the locals.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the structural-functional perspective as the theoretical framework that extracts from two theories in relation to the social order and conformity members of the community to the social order by Durkheim (Edward, C. Cuff, Wes W. Sharrock and Dave W. Francis, 1979) and Parsons (Parsons, Talcott and Edward Shils, 1951 as cited in Jeffrey, Alexander and Steven Seidman, 1990).

Both of these theories assume that a society acts in a collective consciousness that is seen to act in a certain way for individuals and groups to create community consensus among its members. Consensus is formed from the values, attitudes, norms, thoughts and behaviors that are the core of groups' culture in a society. It is practiced by every individual in the society through the process of socialization of the family, school, media, religion, government, corporations and the like.

4. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON EXPATRIATES

Several studies have been done by other scholars on expatriates.

Everett et al. (1984) conduct a research on the connection between Japanese expatriates and local colleagues in ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) and Hong Kong. The main purpose of this study is to investigate mutual images (stereotypes) by the Japanese expatriates and the local colleagues in Japanese Transnational Companies operating in these countries. Based on the survey data of 664 Japanese expatriates and 624 local managers, the comparison of each country is made to assess the level of satisfaction of certain aspects such as communication, interaction, and their respective views that are related to the Japanese expatriates and the local managers. Everett et al. (1984) sum up that Japanese expatriates have problems in communication, make no effort to know the local culture, being exclusive and are

only concerned with return of investment (ROI) exceeding the goals of the host country itself.

Elashmawi and Harris (1991) study the multi-cultural management. They suggest that the development of the market through mergers and acquisition, joint ventures, working in multi-cultural company abroad, are more effective when the management of companies are sensitive to the cultural matters. Three different cultures, namely, American culture, Japanese culture and Arab culture are selected as a guide in the evaluation and management of cultural diversity.

Guy and Mattock (1991) discuss on the question of expatriates' communication. They argue that communication is a growing and the world has been 'shrinking' for a long time. They conclude that to ensure an effective communication, it should be based on the shape of the pyramid that is, (i) culture (which includes the biggest part of the pyramid shape) and followed by (ii) the company, (iii) the characteristics, (iv) the methods, (v) the time, (vi) discussion. When the two sides of 'we' and 'they' have understood these six basic elements, the international communication would be easier. Guy et al. (1991) formulate that understanding others' culture is fundamental which indicating culture plays an important role in achieving effective communication.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used the qualitative approach. A purposive sampling method was used in selecting informants based on the purpose of study and research objective which is more to socio-cultural, attitudes, value, thoughts and behaviour of the Japanese expatriates.

This study was carried out by interviewing 24 Japanese expatriates working in Malaysia and they were randomly selected from a list of Japanese companies in Malaysia. Informants were selected from various areas of work background for gaining a variety of information. However, as most of the Japanese expatriates work in the manufacturing field, the number of informants from manufacturing exceeded the number of informants from other fields of work.

The fieldwork was conducted in the Japanese community in Peninsular Malaysia, especially in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya (Klang Valley), Prai (Penang), Kulim (Kedah), Nilai (Negeri Sembilan) and Kuantan (Pahang). Those areas were divided into two, namely, (i) the metropolitan areas which has high population density and modern environments such as, Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, and Prai, (ii) the mid-city area (less metropolitan environment) as Nilai, Kulim and Kuantan. The locations of the fieldwork are as illustrated in Figure 1.

To facilitate the interview with the Japanese expatriates, the researcher used Japanese language as medium of interview as the informants could describe their views and discussions in a more orderly and systematic.

Figure 1: Locations of Fieldwork

Source: http://www.murni.edu.my/node/167, online 1 April 2013

6. FINDINGS

The Japanese expatriates in Malaysia were affected by Japanese culture and society which was homogeneous. Indeed it was different compared to a situation

in South East Asia countries. In comparison, the Japanese were lack of exposure to cultural diversity and pluralistic society (for example, as experienced by Malaysia), although they also had a minority community. This made one of the reasons as why the Japanese rather lack of understanding of attributes of multiculturalism, multiracial, and identity of other countries. Thus, Japanese society was more ethnocentric which was based on a sense of belonging to its own society and did not take into account other groups of society who were different from their group.

The Japanese expatriates brought together 'Japanese' culture when they lived and worked in Malaysia. This group could be classified into four groups, namely 'Provincial (Insular)', 'Individualistic', 'Semi-Cosmopolitan' and 'Cosmopolitan'. The Japanese expatriates' classification as stated in Table 1, was divided into two dimensions, namely, (i) the level of communication skills and, (ii) the level of interaction and cultural adaptation.

Table 1: Classifications of the Japanese Expatriates in Malaysia

Communication Skills	**HIGH**	**'Individualistic' (7 informants)** High level of communication skills and have the opportunity to meet people. Have the opportunity to understand and reach out to the local cultures and traditions, but do not curious.	**'Cosmopolitan' (2 informants)** Communication skills and interaction and cultural adaptation are high, have many friends of different races, very understanding about the local cultures and traditions.
	LOW	**'Provincial (Insular)' (11 informants)** Low level of communication and interaction and cultural adaptation, do not have a local connection, more focused on the company's life and condominiums, do not curious and understand the local cultures and traditions.	**'Semi-Cosmopolitan' (4 informants)** Have low level of communication skills, but high level of interaction and cultural adaptation, have many local contacts, very curious and try to understand the local cultures and traditions.
		LOW	**HIGH**
		Interaction and Cultural Adaptation	

Source: Fieldwork

The 'Provincial (Insular)' were the less interaction and not interested in local cultural adaptation for some problems. These included the lack of communication

skills in the English language, not being open but more to be ethnocentric. This group had a lot of problems in their daily lives.

The 'Individualistic' were able to speak well in English, but they were less in their openness. This means that the 'Individualistic' only move within their own race without even care with the local cultural environment.

The other two Japanese expatriates of 'Cosmopolitan' and 'Semi-Cosmopolitan' could erode the stereotypical view of the local community against the Japanese expatriate community. Both of these groups were more open minded and interact with local communities and non-Japanese community.

Of the 24 Japanese expatriates under study, the 'Provincial (Insular)' were the largest number of 11 people. The combination of the two groups 'Provincial (Insular)' and 'Individualistic' were 18 people of which three-quarters or 75%. There were a number of local workers less satisfied because of the Japanese expatriates' indifferent attitude towards the local culture which should have been respected. This was because the Japanese expatriates considered that understanding and respecting other people's culture was not something that was important to learn and adapted to their lives.

Hindrance to interaction and communication on the Japanese expatriates depended on the problems they faced. Generally, there were two problems, namely, (i) problems in themselves, (ii) work-related problems.

Problems in themselves refer to problems such as language and communication, as well as homesick. Language and communication problems could not be underestimated as they related to effective communication when communicating with the local community or local employees. Language and communication skills were not skills that could be acquired in a short time. However, not all Japanese expatriates under study had their own initiative to learn at least English. They heavily relied on local workers who graduated from Japanese universities to help them as 'unofficial translators' when facing with language and communication difficulties.

Homesick was a very serious problem as it could affect their responsibility as expatriates. A number of Japanese expatriates who faced problems trying to deal

with by making themselves busy with various activities, such as recreational activities, hobbies and so on. There were also some lonely expatriates had lovers (*aijin*) whom were primarily acquired when visiting *karaoke* pubs. Often this kind of relationship cut off when the Japanese expatriates returned to Japan.

Work-related problems focused on culture and Japanese-style work ethic. Time management in Malaysia had yet to reach the stage as expected. For them, such punctuality was one of important cultures. Several informants pointed out that most locals took for granted of time management. The local workers were also said not to be proactive and aggressive because sometimes they failed to complete tasks within a specified time. In addition, there were subordinates who failed to report from time to time and discussed issues related to work with the Japanese expatriates who were their superiors.

7. CONCLUSION

The 'Provincial (Insular)' are those who are bound by Japanese culture only, are not free from the shackles of Japanese culture, are self-centered and not self-conscious and do not appreciate the nature of the local culture in which they live. Thus, the sensitivity of the diversity of cultural values, traditions, religion and the like, is less or none at all. English communication skills seem as a stumbling block for the Japanese expatriates to interact, particularly in understanding the issues of local cultural values. However, the question is, why does the 'Individualistic' which is the second largest numbers still exist?

The view of Nakane (1970) on the Japanese society can be summarized as follows. First, the social structure does not change even if times have changed. Second, all groups are structured according to the principle of vertical, so the society is generally a homogeneous. Third, the members of society tend to be conformity as they follow the instructions from those who have higher positions in the hierarchy. Fourth, basically, the Japanese is an egalitarian society where everyone, regardless of level of ability wishes to find common ground and a place in the vertical structure. Fifth, the Japanese success in modernization is as a result of the vertical structure (Jomo, 1994a).

Due to the nature of ethnocentric, the Japanese expatriates want the local workers to understand the customs and culture of Japan, but at the same time, they do not even bother to know and care about the local cultures, customs and traditions. Such a situation also exists in Singapore as mentioned by Ben Ari and Clammer (2000) that, 'during their service in Singapore, expatriates (Japan) are more likely to build and nurture relationships with Japanese from other geographical areas and their colleagues in Japan, and more sensitive to the cultural idea that is applicable to be shared together'.

This shows that the dominant Japanese culture is internalized by the Japanese expatriates in Malaysia which in turn shapes their character, attitude and behavior. Such a situation causes a divide between the Japanese expatriates and the locals.

One of the significance of this study is useful to review the government's policy in attracting foreign investors, particularly the Japanese who are less interactive and have difficulty in adjusting to the local culture.

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