THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN ASIA
Toward Transnational Reflexive Dialogues

Nobuyuki Chikudate
Hiroshima University

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to scrutinize published studies that, as a body, provide only a confused picture of issues related to organizational culture in the framework of comparative management between East and West. As such, it goes beyond the slew of reviews, books and handbooks of organizational culture that began to appear in the 1980s and continue to be published (e.g., Ashkanasy, Wilderom & Peterson, 2000; Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). It highlights the conceptual and epistemological limitations of the mass of research in this area, especially as applied to Asia, and shows how a reflexive methodology can advance the critical analysis of studies, often comparative, involving Asian contexts. Such reflexivity is valuable for those in search of a more comprehensive planisphere in which to locate the studies that propose to address the subjects of culture, management and organization.

A critical analysis of studies of organizational culture in Asian contexts must begin with studies related to Japan. First, the surge in interest in issues related to organizational culture coincided with the increased attention that management scholars began to focus on Japan and, more specifically, Japanese organizations. Second, as this review will discuss in more detail, there are extremely few academic studies of organizational culture (as opposed to “national” or ethnic culture) in Asian contexts besides Japan. Finally, the current malaise of Japanese companies—both in the financial and ethical senses—suggest new research questions related to organizational culture that can also construct a bridge between Western academic tradition and Asian contexts. It is important to note, however, that the “western” academic tradition referred to here does not mean that promoted and practiced in US-centric organizational science
(e.g., Pfeffer, 1993), but that of German phenomenology and critical theory and French postmodern social theory. It is also necessary to clarify the terminology that I will use in this chapter. First, although many definitions of culture have been introduced (e.g., Louis, 1983; Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1985; Siehl & Martin, 1984; Van Maanen, 1988; Trice & Beyer, 1993), in this chapter I use Hatch’s definition of organizational culture as “the way of life of an organization” (1997: 294). This definition precludes the alternative uses of “culture” to denote the general socio-conventional idiosyncrasies of the population of a particular nation-state, to which I refer as “national characteristics”. Furthermore, “comparative” rather than “cross-cultural” is used to refer to differences among nation-states or organizations.

The chapter begins with a review the intellectual roots that have generated alternative paradigms for studying organizational culture in management studies. This is the basis for critically reviewing the studies of organizational culture in comparative and particular Asian contexts. The next section addresses the potential for bringing western intellectual approaches—in particular, critical theory and reflexive analyses—to bear on current management issues in Asia, such as organizational inertia and ethical lapses, for which an organizational culture perspective is particularly relevant. The chapter concludes with suggestions for comparative methodologies to advance the study of organizational culture in Asian contexts as well as across contexts.

**ALTERNATIVE PARADIGMS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

In spite of the views of organizational scholars such as Donaldson (1996, 1998) and Pfeffer (1993) who have criticized the profusion of terminologies and methodologies, alternative paradigms for the analysis and discourse regarding organizational culture have emerged and represent a positive, even necessary, aspect of academic inquiry. Three paradigms in particular—managerial, anthropological and critical—have emerged as the major schools of thought related to culture and organization in the Western literature. As discussed later in the chapter, however, the managerial perspective has dominated the few studies of organizational culture by researchers studying Asian contexts or making East–West comparisons. While the anthropological studies have a longer academic tradition, they are relatively scarce in management and especially comparative studies, for reasons discussed later. More recently, promoted by the clear weaknesses of “Japanese management” and fundamental corporate weaknesses across Asia that were exposed by the Asian financial crisis since 1997, the issues derived from the critical perspective are receiving increased attention.