# Representations and Origins of the Cultural Differences Regarding Hierarchy Between Chinese and Japanese Employees in the Workplace

JIANG Xi[a],*

[a]Lecturer. School of Journalism and Communication, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangdong, China.
*Corresponding author.

## Abstract

The views and outlooks of Chinese and Japanese employees regarding hierarchy in the workplace are not as similar as certain researchers in the field of interculturality may think. Through a series of over 50 in-depth interviews, this article illustrates that there is a big difference between how the Japanese insist on a strict hierarchical structure within a company and how Chinese employees demand equality, especially among young people. These cultural differences originate from the diverse histories behind the Chinese and Japanese cultures. Japanese culture is very hierarchical, as reflected in the family structure and the inheritance system. Chinese society, on the other hand, is just as hierarchical but less rigid, due to its different family system and the influence of the imperial examinations.

**Key words:** Interculturality; Hierarchy; Corporate communication; China; Japan

# 1. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

## 1.1 Theoretical Framework

Every time Asian groups are mentioned, we often think of their cultural differences compared to Europeans, Latin-Americans or Arabs. Asians are often regarded in a very simplistic manner by many social and human science researchers as being just one cultural category, in which there are few differences between the values, mindsets and behaviours of the peoples (Kwok, 2006). Works in cultural comparison are full of very vague terms, such as "oriental culture" or "Asian culture" (Shang, 1998). Despite historical and traditional motives, such as the considerable influence of Confucianism, there are still different cultural traits between East Asian cultural groups, just as there are between Germans, French and Americans, despite their physical similarities or common historical and cultural roots. It is, of course, difficult for certain Westerners who have never been to Asia or who do not have many opportunities to associate with Asians, to distinguish between Chinese people and Japanese people at first glance and to recognise their cultural differences. However, we cannot forsake the cultural differences between these peoples or overlook it. Even if certain researchers have already carried out research on the cultural divergence between Chinese people and their Japanese neighbours in this field, there are not many wide-ranging discussions and in-depth analyses of these differences, for example, as far as hierarchy is concerned.

According to the very well-known work of Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede, hierarchy, or more precisely for Hofstede, the "distance of power", refers to the perception of the degree of inequality of power between whoever holds the power and whoever is subjected

to it. This reflects the distance between the different hierarchical levels of an organisation and how inequality between individuals is treated (Hofstede, 1994; Angué & Mayrhofer, 2010).

In countries where there is little hierarchical difference, the distribution of power is rather equal. There are few differences between the various classes and there are not many conflicts between those who hold the power and those who do not. In such a society, certain people are considered to be better leaders than others but they aim to display their power as little as possible in public. Thus, in the professional world of these countries, the relationship between superiors and their subordinates is based on equality and there is limited dependency between them. Furthermore, these superiors are often approachable. They listen patiently to the points of view of their staff or management and choose participatory processes to manage staff and give their subordinates more independence. In the eyes of the subordinates, the superiors are people just like them and they display a preference for consulting them when needed (interdependency between superior and subordinate). Finally, the emotional distance between the two is relatively small: subordinates may approach, and even easily contradict, their superiors.

In countries where there is considerable hierarchical distance, power and wealth are distributed in an unequal manner. Certain people have more of these than others and this is often considered to be normal. This gives rise to conflicts and the relationship between different people belonging to such a country is not harmonious. In the professional world, subordinates depend considerably on their superiors. These superiors have considerable authority over their subordinates and are used to making decisions personally without consulting the opinion of their subordinates. For the subordinates, executing the "orders" of their superiors is considered to be a professional principle. When dealing with rules and standards, those of a higher hierarchical rank have the privilege of not having to respect them, whereas those of a lower hierarchical rank must respect them.

According to Geert Hofstede, both Chinese and Japanese cultures are characterised by the fact that the power is not divided equally. This being said, China and Japan are two countries that are culturally very hierarchical (Hofstede, 1994). On the other hand, the limitations of the work of Hofstede have elicited much criticism in the scientific world. Is it really best to explain the culture of an entire nation with a comprehensive list of its implicit and explicit characteristics? As the work of Philippe d'Iribarne shows, Hofstede's research tends to characterise national cultures in terms of a few numbers and categories, but a culture cannot be simply reduced to a collection of independent dimensions (d'Iribarne, 1989). The French sociologist maintains that all human practices are strongly linked to the tradition and to the history of each cultural community (d'Iribarne, 1989). In this way, cultures which appear "similar" are effectively different because of their different historic origins, just as the hierarchy is different in Chinese culture and in Japanese culture.

Following the preceding discussion, we should like to ask the following questions:

If no two cultures are completely identical, it follows that Chinese and Japanese cultures are certainly different as far as hierarchy is concerned. But what are these differences? Is there a historical link concerning this hierarchical divergence? Finally, how do these differences in terms of hierarchy manifest themselves in social life, for example, at work, when it comes to professional cooperation between Chinese and Japanese people, and what are the problems created by this divergence?

Firstly, we will try to identify, through our research, the different hierarchical representations of Chinese and Japanese employees at work and their values, behaviours and mindsets relative to the distance of power present in their professional cooperation. We will then try to find, in support of our groundwork and documentary work, the root historical and traditional causes of the cultural divergence in hierarchy between Chinese employees and their Japanese colleagues.

## 1.2 Methodology

An exhaustive list of answers cannot pick up all the characteristics of a culture, and a survey consisting of closed format questions can only give very superficial answers, especially for Asian cultures as the cultural divergence between them is less explicit. What we need is to make the interlocutors, or the employees from different cultures within a company, express themselves, to establish genuine bilateral, dynamic and interactive communication founded upon mutual trust, in order to capture what they think of our research questions.

For this reason, we chose the format of a semi-structured interview to carry out our groundwork. We have already discussed the process of carrying out the interviews in another article entitled "Representation, Transformation and Discussion of the Collectivist Identity of Young Chinese Employees in Foreign-Invested Enterprises" (Jiang, 2016, pp.7-14), as both studies are within the framework of wider research on cultural divergence and on its different manifestations between Asian employees in international companies.

## 2. OUTCOME OF THE INTERVIEWS

Starting from the year 2010, we have in total had over 50 interviews on our topic of research, and we will now talk about the different hierarchical representations between Chinese and Japanese employees at work, on the basis of the information obtained from our in-depth interviews.

## 2.1 Professional Recruitment: Different Attitudes to Degrees

Right from the professional hiring interview stage, almost all Chinese employees very quickly realise the hierarchical nature of companies that are culturally Japanese: they have already been preselected by the companies based on their university degrees before being interviewed. Many Japanese companies have their own criteria for candidates' degrees. Depending on the position offered, the Human Resources department has lists of different universities. The greater the importance and higher the rank of the post, the shorter the list. If the candidate has a degree from a university on the list and if they have obtained satisfactory marks and references, they could thus be selected for the next stage of the hiring process, often either for professional exams or for an interview. On the other hand, if the candidate does not have a degree from a university on the list, they will probably be rejected very quickly, even if they are effectively qualified for the position offered by the company. This illustrates the importance of degrees in Japanese culture.

Some Japanese interlocutors gave us their opinions on this during their interviews. "In my work, I often choose between candidates in this way. In my opinion, this is an efficient and quite objective method. It is not easy to do studies. To get a good mark and to be admitted into a good university, you must have intellectual capacity as well as other equally important abilities: being conscientious, persistent and having initiative, knowing your strengths and your weaknesses, having the ability to adapt to different people and environments, etc. All these competences mentioned are not just important for studying, but also for work. Therefore, if a candidate has a degree from a good university, we can say that he is better than many others and that he more or less displays these qualities and that he will be capable of performing well in the position offered." "Those with a degree from a good university are certainly better than the others. We live in a competitive society, including at school. If someone cannot defeat their school classmates, how will they be able to do any better in other areas? We need strong candidates, who have lots of abilities and lots of confidence in themselves." "I worked very hard at school. While the other children were playing football or baseball, I stayed at my desk to do Maths or English exercises. I slept late but I also got up very early. I didn't rest much, even on weekends and on holidays. That's why I got admission to Keio University (a very good Japanese university). It is unthinkable that companies could not recruit candidates like us in favour of those who didn't work very hard at school and who don't have good degrees either." "A degree is a criteria, a prerequisite. Without a degree, you have no real chance; without a degree, no opportunities. You may think that I'm exaggerating but that's the reality in our country."

Of course, we also noticed that two of the interlocutors expressed different points of view compared to their colleagues. They do not believe that this method is infallible, and they admit that it can lead to overlooking certain competences, but they still acknowledge that: "Their degree proves to us that they are better than the others, at least in terms of the ability to learn. What's more, if you choose candidates with degrees from less prestigious universities over them, that is not fair either because those first candidates have really studied well…" "There are often too many candidates and not enough time. Choosing on the basis of their degree is an efficient method. Besides, our whole society does so, if we did it differently, it would be bizarre…"

While the majority of our Japanese employees agree with this method of selecting according to university degree, many Chinese employees give different opinions. And this is particularly true for certain young Chinese employees who are strongly opposed to this method. For them, this "discriminatory" approach does not take into account the true abilities of employees at work. "A degree only proves that you are a good student, but that is not necessarily directly linked to your future career. Whether someone has a degree from a good university or not does not ensure that they will be better at work than others. Working is different from studying. It is much more complicated: professional relationships, internal and external environments, the situation, the tasks themselves, all of these are very complicated." "A degree only means that you have a good knowledge of your speciality. But at work, you need both competences and knowledge. I don't think that candidates from the best universities can necessarily become the best employees." Some of our interlocutors even mention the special situation of university admission in China. This does not take place at the national level, but at the provincial level. A university can give different admission quotas depending on the province. This means that if the number of candidates is high and the particular quota is not very high, then candidates will have a lower chance of admission. For example, Beijing or Shanghai, where the majority of good Chinese universities are, have higher quotas but the number of candidates from there can even be lower than from certain other, more populated, provinces. Therefore, children from these two cities have a greater chance of being admitted to the best universities. "I come from the province of Hubei. There are so many candidates that the competition is very tough. I got 640 out of 750 in the national competitive examination for university admission. However, one of my university classmates from Beijing got a mark only just over 500. That is not at all fair for candidates from my province. If a school student from my province got such a mark, they would never be admitted to my university, or even to relatively less prestigious universities, because the threshold in

my province is well over 600. Because of this, can we really say that such a candidate is less gifted at studying than my university classmate, if we judge people simply by their degree? Will he never have the chance to get a good job, while my university classmate from Beijing is employed by a very good company and is well paid? It's discrimination!" One Chinese interlocutor tells us this story with great emotion.

## 2.2 Diverse Views on the System of Administration

After recruitment, the new recruits of Japanese firms have a stronger sense of hierarchy. They very quickly find that their tasks and positions are very well defined in hierarchical terms. They have their work to carry out, their own rights and duties. They also have superiors and possibly subordinates and assistants. The dependency of subordinates on superiors is considerable and obvious, just as it is in families with Japanese characteristics. Superiors play the roles of fathers/older brothers and subordinates could be considered as sons/younger brothers. Thus, the former give the orders and fix the tasks of the subordinates. When these subordinates make mistakes or their work is not satisfactory, the criticism that awaits them is very harsh and pitiless, such that it is sometimes difficult for Westerners to understand. For subordinates, listening to and following the orders of their superiors is of the utmost importance. It is better not to take things for granted and to try to be too "intelligent" and to "invent" your own methods or paths. If you have problems, it is possible to ask for advice or suggestions from superiors, but discussions on an equal footing, such as in certain Northern European countries, are almost unheard of.

In the eyes of the Japanese, this style of administration guarantees stability, solidarity and the efficiency of the company. "We work like an army. The superiors are the generals. They make decisions and develop strategies for the growth of the company. The employees are soldiers. They execute and carry out the orders of their superiors. They are positioned around the leaders, with the aim of winning the battle. Solidarity is important for the development of the company." "In our company, each person's tasks are very clearly defined. We know what we have to do and what we cannot do. This allows us to guarantee work efficiency… if the superiors do not have enough authority over their subordinates, how can they manage their department? If the subordinates do not follow the requests of their superiors, or they question their decisions too often and argue with them, will we still have stability and solidarity in our company? And this destabilisation will harm the development of the company!"

Whereas the majority of Japanese directors favour this system of administration, many of our Chinese interlocutors who we questioned in our interviews, particularly the younger ones, challenge it and some of them are even strongly against it. They believe that it is too rigid a hierarchical system and that it does not respect employees. "I understand very well that there is still a hierarchical relationship between superiors and subordinates. It's the same everywhere in the world. But how can superiors possess such absolute authority? What I find surprising is that I often see managers criticise their subordinates publicly in a very harsh manner, without taking into account their side. I've already seen new employees, often girls, crying in the toilets. On the other hand, if superiors ever make mistakes, only very rarely does anyone have the courage to point it out to them, as if they were always correct. The problem is that nobody is always right and that everyone can make mistakes. Why can we not point out superiors' mistakes? If the subordinates always remain silent, I do not think that this is beneficial for the development of the company." When there are problems at work, some young Chinese employees try to rely on discussing it with their superiors. Normally, these requests are accepted, but what happens next does not go according to these young employees' expectations. "Once we sat down, I realised almost immediately that my superior was not very happy. He asked me first of all why I hadn't been able to resolve the problem myself, as if I wasn't competent. Throughout the discussion, he never looked cheerful. At the end of our meeting, my superior made it clear to me that he was very busy and that this was the last time" a young 24-year-old Chinese employee who has just started working in a Japanese company tells us. Indeed, other young Chinese employees similarly inform us that there is not much communication between employees at different ranks in the hierarchy. Unlike European or American companies where internal communication between superiors and subordinates is not rare, managers in companies that are culturally Japanese are used to having a distance of power with employees at lower ranks in the hierarchy. They barely ever initiate communication with their subordinates, even if there are problems. During our interviews, some Chinese employees showed us their concern: under this system of administration, subordinates no longer have the courage to have discussions with, and to communicate with, their superiors. What is important is to complete your work without mistakes. If this continues, what will become of creativity and innovation, which are both very important for any company?

## 2.3 Length of Service: Very Important for the Japanese

The third part of the hierarchical system in Japanese-style companies that we called into question regards the length of service. This has much more significance than being just a number of years that somebody has worked for a company. Indeed, it determines your salary, promotions and even the status you have within the company. The length of service plays a crucial role in all of this. The longer you work for a company, the more loyal your

boss will consider you to be. Employees with a longer length of service generally have more authority than their colleagues who are at the same rank in the hierarchy. This means that they can criticise and define the work of new recruits just as much and they can even transfer some of their own work to employees who have served for less time, despite this being officially forbidden. Furthermore, salary is also determined by length of service. The longer you have worked for a company, the more you earn. According to the employees questioned in our interviews who still work for companies that are culturally Japanese, many of them cannot understand the fact that their colleagues earn the same or more than them due to their length of service and not their competence. This is demonstrated in the words of a young Chinese girl: "It's not at all fair to those who are more competent and who have brought greater contributions to the development of the company. How can people earn more simply because they have been working for longer? That will reduce the motivation of employees who really want to work in favour of those who are not hard-working!" Finally, promotion in the workplace also stems from the length of service. For example, when a managerial position in a department becomes vacant, the management often think of somebody who has more years of service, whereas the name of another person who is more competent but has been serving for less time often is not the first one that comes to the mind of the management. While the majority of our Japanese employees consider this to be normal, this type of professional promotion really demotivates our young Chinese employees. It makes them feel as if their contributions to the company and their competences are not recognised. For many, it is an important factor in changing jobs and company, because, in their view, it is not worth working for a company where their competences are not valued. These are notably particularly people who are hungry to succeed and to be recognised by others. The opinion of a young 28-year-old Chinese boy epitomises this feeling. "I can't stand it any more. If I want to be promoted in my company, I have to wait for many years simply because there are two other employees in the department who were recruited before me. But why should I be promoted after them? They are less competent than me. Yes, that's not just my personal opinion. My superiors recognise it as well, but they also advise me to wait!"

## 2.4 The Status of Female Employees: Very Varied From One Group to the Other

Taking the results that we obtained from the in-depth interviews as a starting point, we find that there is a big difference in the status of female employees. Chinese women are much more ambitious in handling important tasks, whereas female Japanese employees are more or less "marginalised" in the professional world by their male colleagues. Indeed, even though this divergence may

be linked to the backgrounds of Chinese and Japanese cultures, it is also the result of current situations and social evolutions in the two countries, particularly in China. We therefore plan to discuss this in more depth in another article.

## 3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Using the results obtained from the in-depth interviews as a basis, we can observe that there are evidently different views on hierarchy between Chinese employees and their Japanese colleagues. Japanese employees call for a great deal of respect in almost all professional areas, from the hiring process to the professional promotion via the system of administration, while Chinese employees, particularly young employees born after the launch of the economic reform and after the "one child only" policy, rather look for a company that is less hierarchical and demand more independence and equality within the company.

What are the origins of these two such different representations of hierarchy at work between Chinese and Japanese employees? As we have discussed earlier, all human practices are strongly linked to the tradition and history of each cultural community (d'Iribarne, 1989), despite some similarities between Chinese and Japanese societies, they have both had different historical backgrounds and these influence, both implicitly and explicitly, cultural aspects in the two Asian societies, for example, hierarchy. Personal relationships in all Japanese institutions are determined by hierarchy. This is strongly connected to the family structure and the inheritance system. On the other hand, Chinese society, by virtue of its different family system and the influence of the imperial examinations, is just as hierarchical but less rigid.

### 3.1 Japan, an Extremely Hierarchical Society

While the value of equality is a very important notion and is recognised by the majority of people in Western cultures, that is not the case in Japan. For the famous American sociologist Ruth Benedict, Japan is a society in which everyone sees their international and internal relations from a hierarchical viewpoint. "Taking up your own place in society" is the foundation to understand the Japanese well. Unlike Westerners, hierarchy is fundamental to the Japanese notion of interpersonal relationships and the relationship between the people and the country (Benedict, 2005). Even what the Japanese did during the Second World War was built on and guided by this hierarchical vision. "[The Japanese people] had to fight in order to establish a hierarchy, under its control of course, because this, to them, represented a truly hierarchical country from top to bottom, and therefore they understood the need to "take up their own social status"(Benedict, 2005, p.43). These days, Japanese society is evolved compared to how it was 50 years

ago, but the hierarchy still exists and exerts a profound influence, both implicitly and explicitly, on the mindsets and behaviours of the Japanese. It plays an important role and influences all the aspects of daily and professional life in the territory of the archipelago. For the Japanese, accepting the existence of the hierarchy is as natural as breathing (Benedict, 2005).

In Benedict's view, despite Westernisation, Japan is "still an aristocratic society" (Benedict, 2005, p.47). It is still possible to perceive a certain hierarchical distance in all social contact between Japanese people. Benedict gives us some examples in his book "The chrysanthemum and the sword: patterns of Japanese culture". Japanese people are very fond of choosing different words and formulations when speaking to different people, in a very polite way and with a light-hearted tone. The older generation uses more honorific suffixes such as "sun", kun" or "chan". On the other hand, if the interlocutors are from lower-status social groups or are younger, the situation changes considerably: from this point on, the formulation will be more authoritative. In this case, far fewer honorific suffixes are used; the tone of voice becomes drier and more confident, and there are also changes in behaviour, such as bowing (Benedict, 2005, p.47). This is a sign of respect and politeness in Asia. Chinese people also do it. But this gesture is far more different and complicated in Japan. In this country, bowing does not just involve the simple act of lowering the torso and head. Depending on the different statuses of the interlocutors, the Japanese choose different ways of carrying out this action: bowing completely for very important people, such as the head of the family or the president of a company; bowing halfway for fairly important interlocutors, namely superiors or older people; bowing slightly to express courtesy. If the interlocutors are inferior in terms of social status, the Japanese do not bow but wait for them to bow to them. Between friends of the same age, bowing is not the done thing. But if one of the two is in military uniform, the others must bow to him on special occasions. Furthermore, the length of time for which you bow is equally important. When you bow, when you do not bow, all of this conveys information concerning the hierarchical relation between the people present (Benedict, 2005 & Shang, 1998), but also concerning the different contexts for each person.

Similarly in all Japanese institutions including family, school, business etc. the interpersonal relationship is measured according to hierarchy, just like a vertical iron chain. Each link has its own place; the one above is superior to the one below, and it is the hierarchy that connects them so precisely. As shown by Japanese sociologist Nakane Chie, the Japanese always look for criteria to fit each person into a hierarchical dimension, which brings about the "vertically ordered society" (Nanake, 1982, p.56). In a company, the employees are classed according to their age, degree, the university they

graduated from, their recruitment date etc. There are many criteria that allow them to be distinguished hierarchically. At school, the pupils know exactly what they must do and what it is necessary to do with older or younger classmates. This is not just about simple respect. This relationship exists even after they have left school. The oldest are thought of as "parents" of the youngest, they must take care of them and help them. The youngest must treat the oldest as "parents" and obey them.

The Japanese hierarchy is also strongly connected to their family structure and to their inheritance system: that of primogeniture. According to Emmanuel Todd, the very varied ideologies and political persuasions of the modern world can also be strongly influenced by the just as varied traditional family structures on our planet, which Todd considers to be a very powerful explanatory variable in relation to the different forms of modernisation trajectories (Todd, 2011). Inspired by the works of Frédéric Le Play and based on the different forms of marriage, the different relationships between brothers and sisters as well as the relationship between parents and their children, Todd was able to categorise three main family systems (Todd, 2011):

- The nuclear family: The family is only composed of couples. Once the children are married, they leave the family and form their own household. The inheritance of the parents' fortune is divided between the children in an equal fashion. There is the absolute English nuclear family unit which is at the root of the Anglo-Saxon individualism and political liberalism, and the egalitarian nuclear family, which has a strong influence on the mentality and ideology of French society.
- The stock family: In this family structure, one of the couple's children, often the eldest, will be named the unique successor, from which the much talked about "primogeniture" arises. After marriage, the other children leave the household, while the couple consisting of the successor still lives there with their children.
- The community family: This family system is particularly characterised by the fact that all the married male children stay in the family and live with their parent, while the girls leave the household and live in the houses of their husbands. Inheritance is shared out equally between the brothers.

According to Todd's typology, Japanese society is very much influenced by the stock family system, which is dominated by the authority of the father and inequality between siblings. Primogeniture has existed for a long time as a traditional inheritance system (Todd, 2011).As it is often a man that inherits the entirety or the majority of the fortune as well as the relevant social status (such as the family dignity), the eldest child along with their family hold authority over the others. They do not only represent the heritage and the continuation of the family

lineage, but must also play the role of protecting, helping and taking responsibility for the other children. In return, the latter must always pay eternal "royalties" to the eldest and to their family. They must also regularly express their respect to others, obey them and cooperate closely with them. At the time of important rituals, the other family members organise themselves formally to bless the eldest and the members of their family. This relationship founded on "royalties" progressively transforms into a hierarchical relationship and spreads to become the foundation of Japanese society.

The consideration of the hierarchy in Japanese society and the influence of the family structure as well as the inheritance system constitute important reasons for the views of Japanese employees on hierarchies within companies. It is therefore not difficult to understand why they demand strict respect of hierarchies in almost all professional spheres: hiring, length of service and the system of administration.

### 3.2 A Hierarchical but Less Rigid Chinese Culture

Chinese culture is equally characterised by hierarchy. The distance of power between those belonging to the culture is explicit and plays an important role. Certain people enjoy a superior social status. Since they have a more important function and therefore more privileges, they are respected by the other members who are from a lower-status social group. On the other hand, if you observe and carefully compare the hierarchy in Chinese culture and with that of Japan, it is not difficult to notice that hierarchy in Chinese culture is exhibited in a less rigid manner.

#### 3.2.1 Joint Ownership as a System of Inheritance of the Family Fortune

The Chinese certainly recognise the existence of the hierarchy and respect it. Parents hold authority over their children; older people are respected by young people; pupils are asked to respect their teachers; employees must follow the orders of their superiors etc. However, it is also possible to see a young Chinese employee be promoted faster than his older colleagues; young people have discussions with their bosses and refuse any of their demands that they deem "unreasonable" or "unacceptable"; and, above all, women have more economic, political and social independence than those in other Asian countries. These differences in representations of hierarchy between China and its Asian neighbours are linked to history as well as to Chinese social evolution.

According to the work of Emmanuel Todd on the different family systems in the world that we have already mentioned, it is the community family that prevails in the traditional Chinese society and which influences this in important ways (Todd, 2011). In contrast to Japan, the entire fortune is not inherited by the eldest son in China. Primogeniture does not predominate in Chinese history.

Instead, whether they are born to an official wife or to a concubine, or even to other women out of wedlock, the siblings of the same family all have an equal relationship and have the same rights to the inheritance. Exactly as is described in the great novel of Chinese literature "Dreams of the Red Chamber", the sons of large families have the same number of domestic servants, get the same education, receive the same amount of pocket money every month and, above all, all these boys can share the entirety of the family fortune after the death of the head of the family. This is therefore a case of joint ownership. This has been well protected by the laws of Chinese dynasties (Johnson, 1997; Todd, 2011). This inheritance system plays an important role in Chinese society and influences almost all aspects of Chinese social life (Chau, 1991). This helps protect the stability of the family and secure the lives of all the successors. In this context, the eldest son has a certain authority over his siblings, but he does not have as much power as has historically been the case in Japan. He cannot decide everything without consulting the opinions of his other siblings. The spirit of sharing is incorporated at the heart of the whole family. In difficult times, the members of the family come together, often on the more or less explicit advice of the eldest son, to find a solution through discussion that everyone can agree to.

#### 3.2.2 Influence of the Imperial Examinations

Apart from joint ownership, imperial examinations are another source of the flexibility of the Chinese hierarchy. These examinations, which started during the Sui dynasty and lasted around 1,300 years until its abolition in 1905 (Ma, 2005), greatly influenced the society and history of China. As Gilles Martin-Chauffier says in the magazine "Paris Match", if "China put its faith in the hands of well-read people covered in degrees rather than, as elsewhere, in inheritors that were happy enough just to be born" (Martin-Chauffier, 2012). It is very much this system of selection that guaranteed the stability of Chinese society and the non-stop continuation of Chinese civilisation. The aim of the very selective imperial national examination was to select the most talented and to make them enter the bureaucratic system of the State. This allowed people born into ordinary families and in less favoured regions to get the chance to climb the social ladder. According to the statistics of He Ping Ti, around 50% of those who passed the examination in the last two Chinese dynasties came from families whose last three generations of ancestors were not among the senior government officials (He, 1962; Ma, 2005). Thus, although there are certain economic and social difficulties, and similarly some corruption, if you work hard and you have a real will to succeed, it is possible for children from families who were from lower-status social classes during the Chinese feudal period to change their lives and become part of the managers' clan. At the same time, for those who descend

from families of senior government officials, their social status is not always assured. If they fail the examination, their future will become uncertain and it is not impossible that they will lose their social status in the short or long term. In this way, in such a society, social status is not as fixed as elsewhere. It is not simply determined by birth or by wealth. It can be changed. This is the reason for the spirit of equality among well-read people in China. Thanks to this system of selection of members of the managers' clan, for the majority of the duration of the Chinese feudal period, in complete contrast to other countries, there were no large noble Chinese families that were able to have such a long history.

Thus, the imperial examination greatly influences the view of Chinese people on hierarchy and this influence is visible in the fact that Chinese employees demand more equality at work than their Japanese colleagues.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite their geographical positions being so close to each other, as well as their close historical relationship, the frequent contact both historically and currently between their populations and the strong influence of Chinese doctrines such as Confucianism and Taoism on their social lives etc., the people of China and Japan are quite far from being similar in terms of their hierarchy. Japanese society is extremely hierarchical. Personal relationships in all Japanese institutions are measured by hierarchy. This is very strongly connected to the family structure and to their inheritance system. However, Chinese society, on the other hand, due to its different family system and the influence of the imperial examination, is just as hierarchical but less rigid.

These cultural divergences related to hierarchy manifest themselves in the professional world. It is possible to notice different views on hierarchy between Chinese and Japanese employees. There is a big difference between the insistence of the Japanese on a strict hierarchical structure within the company and the demand for equality by the Chinese employees, particularly those who are young.

It is always a big challenge for international companies to synergise the actions of employees from different cultures, without stifling their own values, ways of thinking and behaviour, in order to reach a common goal (d'Iribarne, 1989). Of course, the differences between Chinese and Japanese employees in terms of hierarchy are not as significant as those between Asians and Europeans, but these differences cannot be completely overlooked particularly in relation to management, even more so because culture is a dynamic, fast-changing process and because cooperation between Chinese and Japanese employees is more and more frequent due to the growing economic relationship between the two Asian countries.

This is therefore, in the current context, an important project to reflect on.

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