Determinants of Sinic Civilization and their impact on Organization Theory

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Abstract

This paper traces the impact of Sinic Civilization and its underlying virtue ethics of Confucianism on the principles of management and organization theory. Sinic Civilization is envisaged to include the cultures of China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Apart from linking the core Sinic ethics with organization theory, this paper also studies Sinic philosophy, cosmology, governance, and linguistics. The Japanese and Chinese management practices and cardinal principles are discussed in the light of traditional Sinic ethics. The past, contemporary and future contributions of Sinic way of management in terms of management style, organizational forms, organizational epistemology and ontology, organizational cultural orientations and major organizing principles are also discussed. The paper concludes that flexible, fluid and organic structures, emergent strategies, team work, coordination and, horizontal and flat organizations are natural outcomes of the Sinic ethical discourse which is manifested both in its historical as well as organizational discourses.

According to S P Huntington (1996, p. 45)Sinic Civilization captures the "common culture of China and the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and elsewhere outside of China as well as the related cultures of Vietnam and Korea". Because of the dominance of Confucius' thoughts on development and formation of Sinic as well as Japanese civilization, this paper includes Chinese, Japanese and Korean cultures under the umbrella of Sinic civilization.

Most of the scholars agree that Chinese Civilization existed as far back as 1500 BC. The ancient Chinese civilization is known for its order, stability, symmetry and rationality (Wright, 1960). It is considered 'stable' because of its geographical isolation, conservative values, clan organization, and imperial bureaucracy (Cressey, 1929; Gibbon, Vol. III, n.d., p. 627).

The leading figure in the history of ancient China was Confucius. He was born in 551 BCE during the times of the Zhou Dynasty (Davis, 2004, p. 69). Confucius was a professional teacher much like the sophists of Greek Civilization. He spent many years traveling through northern China. His basic teaching was that past values were of supreme importance and that man must enact the role given to him by life. He envisaged a ruler to act as role model for his people with the prime responsibility to promote their well being. He thought that people will not only obey but also imitate such a moral ruler whereas an evil tyrant would be resisted. His teachings were underpinned by the notion of 'moral worth' or virtue ethics which he describes as the 'right' things to think and do (Mou, 2003, p. 99). He differentiated human being from animals on the basis of morality, goodness to others and benevolence (Chai & Yang, 2006). His concept of an enlightened man was based on nobility and humbleness. He used the metaphor of 'wind' to describe an enlightened person and taught that as the wind bended the grass, the knowledge of a person quietly and gently bended the grass or common people (Durant, 1935, p. 661).

Like other scholars of the Axial Age, Buddha, Plato and Aristotle, he looked beyond gods. For him ethical life and moral worth resided within oneself. To him universal order and harmony originated from showing respect and fulfillment of obligations of one's own immediate family and its protection. Scholarship and education were the only ways to achieve family success and universal harmony. His ideas consisted of three basic elements. *Tao*, the Way[1] or path to a destination entailed within human nature, *jen (ren)*, a form of goodness and moral worth leading to the highest perfection attained through morality, hard work, natural and humanistic love and, *I*, righteousness or justice (Roetz, 1993, p. 119; Watson, 2005, p. 162-163; Schirokauer, 1989, p. 29-32). The basic tenet of Confucianism is the preference of morality over materiality. His students collected his words and passed them through generations in the form of *Analects*. Scholars agree that the central idea of *Analects*, filial piety and benevolence, played a formative role in defining the intellectual discourse of ancient Chinese society (Wu, 1969, p. 4-6; Chai & Yang, 2006).

Confucius taught that emperors have to be 'sage-kings' who do not rule through binding procedures and legal codes or power alone but also with morality, modesty, kindness and non-violence. His ideal government was a government of *wuwei* or non-action. According to Confucianism the governance had to be underpinned by 'Five Constant Virtues' which included humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faithfulness. These five virtues were to be expressed in 'Five Cardinal Relations' which include relation between the sovereign and subject, parent and child, elder and younger brothers, husband and wife, and friend and friend (Ambler *et al.*, 2009, p. 75).

Chinese philosophy witnessed the development of a major idea around the time of Confucius. That idea conceived that everything and thought was composed of two eternal and alternating elements: a weak, passive, negative and destructive force or *Yin* and a strong, active, positive and constructive force or *Yang* (Chan, 1963, p. 244; Kerr & Wood, 2004, p. 232)[2]. Each person was considered to have two souls in him or her. The *yin*-soul was identified with *kuei* or body and the *yang*-soul with the life principle and the personality. The main aim and challenge of Chinese philosophy was the reconciliation of these two opposing yet intertwined forces of *yin* and *yang* (Kit, 2002, p. 17; Watson, 2005, p. 162). The *yin* represented the dark, recessive, soft, feminine, low, short, hollow and, changing and becoming. While the *yang* represented the light, dominant, hard, masculine, high, long, full, solid and, unchanging and being (Mou, 2003, p. 87). All things were considered to consist of varying proportions of these two opposite forces. The balance between the two did not mean static parity but a dynamic and ever-happening interchanges and restorations. The ancients Chinese scholars and philosophers recognized that the world tended to prefer the *yang* over the *yin*. They therefore sought to rebalance things by emphasizing *yin* over *yang*. It is said that the Chinese cultural products from martial arts and judo to Mao Zedong's military strategy have recognized and implemented this principle (Lusthaus, 2002).

The discussion on Confucianism and *Yin/Yang* has so far revealed that the ancient Chinese philosophy had certain distinctive features. It was non-theological (but not non-cosmological), non-systemic, based on reasoning without logic or syllogism, humanistic and was underpinned by clarity and honesty of thought, genuine love and care for family and community and avoided metaphysics. The philosophy of Confucianism can be summarized as underpinned by the ethics of filial piety, wisdom (*zhi*), justice (*yi*), benevolence (*ren*), humaneness, propriety (*li*) and, indifference to formal religion (Yao, 2000, p. 40; Loi-Shun & Wong, 2004). Other Chinese philosophers' main ideas were centered around universal love, societal hierarchy, simplicity and frugality, austerity, continuously reexamining the previously established formulations, reconciling the polar opposites,
universal cosmic unity, natural inequality, avoidance of greed and preference of monarchy over democracy (Durant, 1935, p. 678-679; Lee, 2005, p. 47; Sellmann, 1995, p. 131; Wu, 1969, p. 139; Chai & Yang, 2006; Li, 1977, p. 149-151; Ackerly, 2005).

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[1] In its most basic sense Tao means "the way things do what they do, there is a Way to cook, a Way to fight, a Way that water behaves, a Way to tie shoes. If one has the Way, one can do things effortlessly and effectively and when one astray from the Way this deviation from the natural pattern leads to danger and calamity" (Lusthaus, 2002; Ambler *et al.*, 2009, p. 72-73; Chanzit, 2004, p. 30-31; Yi-Jie, 1991, p. 1-2).A Taoist did not pray for he did not believe in any god. For a Taoist the way to seek answers was through inner meditation and outer observation (Pollock, 2002, p. 160)

[2] *Yin Yang* theory underpins every aspect of Chinese knowledge ranging from governance to medicine. In Chinese medicine, for example, examination of the pulse can be divided into *yin* and *yang* pairs. *Yang* pattern will reflect a rapid and forceful pulse while a weak, slow, sunken and forceless pulse would be classified as *Yin* (Liu, Zheng-Cai & Hua, 1999, p. 39). Similarly excess in body heat reflects a *Yang* while deficiency in heat or cold represents a *Yin* pattern (Kaptchuk, 2000, p. 236). As cosmological forces, the essence of *yin* and *yang* is said to be stored in heaven and earth (Chai & Yang, 2006).

Because of the importance attached to the notion of order, imperialism and bureaucracy were two defining elements of the ancient Chinese political and cultural discourse (Mote, 2003, p. 742). Chinese governance and civil service examination systems inspired many European governments from 17th century onwards (Teng, 1943; Sterba, 1978). The civil service examination of the Chinese prepared 'scholar-administrators' who found themselves in perfect harmony with the conception of State and governance as laid down by Confucius (Elman, 2000, p. xvii-xx; Hsu, 1967, p. 337).

Chinese language played a decisive role in the development of its philosophy. Two properties of the Chinese language are especially noteworthy: its ability to express sublime abstractions in concrete forms, images or visual graphs and the absence of Western-styled subject-verb-object orientation. Each word in Chinese language is a subjective-objective creation and favors 'affect' over the 'logic'. As a result Chinese philosophy is not merely concerned with rational cognition but places subjective, affective, will and emotion over and above it. This results in absence of search for 'rational truth' from Chinese philosophy (Yasuo *et al*., 2005; Lattimore & Lattimore, 1957; Wu, 1969; Hansen, 1985; Leuk & Paul, 1993, p. 46). Ancient Chinese thinkers attempted to reconcile the forces of natural environment with human will and as a consequence their science and philosophy did not treat the environment as the 'other' and there was little effort to conquer it in a way so commonly seen in the West. This perhaps explains the focus on inner contentment rather than the fulfillment of ambitions related with the outer world (Ping, 2002, p. 11).

Like the Chinese, ancestor worship was part of earlier Japanese religion. This religion later came to be known as, *Shinto*, or the Way of Gods. *Shinto* required no creed, rituals, clergy, special priesthood or consoling doctrine of life after death (Ono & Woodard, 2003, p. 2-3). It only demanded the pious reverence for ancestors, the emperor, and the past. Japanese borrowed their culture, dress, sports, cooking, writing, poetry, administrative and management methods, music and arts and, architecture from China (Schirokauer, 1989, p. 140-141; Waley, 1929).

Philosophy also came to Japan from China[3]. The Japanese started turning to Confucianism around the 16th and 17th centuries (Yao, 2000, p. 125). Complemented by Confucian precepts, the political and moral philosophy of Japan took new shape and started developing in the Chinese mould. Confucianism and *Shinto* were considered to have common essence as both taught that daily work was religious practice leading to salvation. They also shared the view that expressing gratitude to seniors and superiors would establish a just and moral society. Japanese society, like the Chinese, was inherently hierarchical and ordered. The maintenance of this societal order and preservation of the ethical codes were considered the main responsibility of the mankind. The highest ethical virtues were wisdom, filial piety, reverence among human beings, respect for an unbroken line of imperials, humaneness (*jin*) and, the Way of the Sage-Kings of ancient China (McGreal, 1995, p. 291-400).

Japanese and Chinese also shared the epistemological framework, underpinned by the dual ideas of a direct and immediate experience and, indeterminateness of thought. The basis of the emphasis on immediate experience has its roots in Buddhism and the "indeterminateness of thought follows from the perception of reality through immediate experience of which the subtle and vague nature of the Japanese language is one reflection" (Peterson & Shimada, 1978). This epistemology fitted well with the known historical fact that the "ancient Japanese were not much concerned to know the ultimate interrelationships of the concrete phenomena of their existence, but rather saw those phenomena in terms of their immediate practical usefulness" (Fridell, 1972).

In contemporary Japan, the Confucian doctrines continue to underpin the thinking and behavior of managers in subtle but important ways. Three of his teachings are particularly relevant in the current context of Japan: unquestioned obedience to family or filial piety, total loyalty to one's superior and, a reverence for education. The strict Japanese family norms continue to influence relations not only in the natural family but in the 'corporate family' as well. The notions of *on*, *giri*, and *ninjo* need a brief explanation. The concept of *on* originally referred to a feudal lord's or parents' benevolence. It is like one's constant shadow which never leaves him or her. *Giri* is on a lower level on the scale of obligatory relations. It is like a debt which has to be repaid with mathematical equivalence to the favors. Favors received must be repaid, whether the relationship is superior-subordinate, salesman-customer, buyer-supplier, or any other mutually beneficial connection. *Ninjo* is obligatory in the sense that all true Japanese are expected to demonstrate this quality.

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[3] During 8th century Emperor Korken ordered every house to keep a copy of Chinese Classics on 'Filial Piety'. The Emperor rewarded the people manifesting virtues of filial piety with prizes (Armstrong, 2000, p. 22).

In the Western context, one expresses sympathy only *after* being told of another person's problems. To show *ninjo*, however, is to understand another's personal anguish, anxiety or grief *without* being told. This subtle ability is described as understanding another's *hidden* feelings of deprivation and despair. The modern Japanese values of we Japanese, group identity, strong work ethics, frugality, sense of duty, conformity, networks par excellence and, maintenance of face, are all deeply rooted in the traditional Confucius-based Japanese values (Whitehill, 1991, p. 6-7, 11-13 & 50-56; Gibney, 1996, p. 85-93; Cole, 1979, p. 224; Kubota, 2003; Kikuzawa, 2006). The success of Japanese auto industry in the later part of 20th century sparked a global interest in trying to understand the management and organizational phenomena of the Sinic civilization (Schirokauer, 1989, p. vi). Recent economic progress of China has further sparked this interest.

One of the most important social and business themes prevailing in Sinic Civilization is the need for stability. Chaos and disorder are abhorred and considered unnatural. Respect for age, seniority and authority is commonly ascribed to Confucianism (Metcalf & Hateley, 2001, p. 19). Good management process and practice is generally considered as the avoidance of decisions. The search for consensus and involving employees in both decision making and implementation is a hallmark of Sinic way of managing (Kirkeby, 1998, p. 235). Cultural values play major role in business relationships. The Chinese corporations attach special importance to the notion of *Guanxi* or building long-term interpersonal relationships, connections and networks (Luo, 2000, p. 1, Millington *et al.*, 2005). It is said that unlike West where friendship may be a consequence of business, in China and Japan, business flows out of friendship. Chinese and Japanese businesses and management are to be seen and understood as families rather than a set of tools, techniques and frameworks. There is more conservatism and formality in their organizations as compared to the West. Business is conducted under the umbrella of five pillars of Confucianism.

Guanxi or network of contacts is the first pillar. *Continuity*, the second pillar, reflects slowly changing patterns of thinking and flows from Taoism. The need to rush to solve the problems is not felt important. *Market* in the form of trading and bargaining is as natural to China and Japan as complaining about the weather is in England. The fourth pillar of *ren and organization*s defines a leader's obligations and responsibilities to all his or her subordinates and employees. The concept of *ren* goes beyond merely involving employees in decision making process. The business leaders also care for the lives and emotions of their employees. The Great Wall of China and the Bamboo Curtain may have been the *Obstacles,* the fifth pillar, of the past. The current obstacles are the intangible barriers like Chinese and Japanese language, culture and stringent rules and regulations for conducting business (Ambler *et al.*, 2009, p. 255-266). The subtle ways of conducting business in the Chinese and Japanese lands is best captured by the following excerpt:

"when capable, feign incapacity; when active, inactivity….feign disorder and strike (the enemy)…the elements of art of war are first, measurement of space; second, estimation of quantities; third, calculation; fourth, comparisons; and fifth, chances of victory…..as water has not constant form, there are in war no constant conditions…..when I have won a victory I do not repeat my tactics but respond to circumstances in an infinite variety of ways" (Tzu, 1971, p. 66-131).

Applied to business scenario the battlefield becomes the industrial sectors and warriors, the companies. The companies are made invincible not through their resources alone but by their strategies and tactics. The 'commander' of the battlefield is the top manager of an organization and the 'method and discipline' (Tzu, 2008, p. 9) of the warriors equates with the careful and calculated approach to business (Lee, 2005).

The underlying business values of Sinic organizations include patience, humility, silence, respect for age, collectivism, value for kinship, emphasis on psychological than legal contracts and, disdain for contractual relations. Japanese corporations or *kaisha* place high value on technical and production capabilities and their strategic focus is on manufacturing, industrial engineering and production techniques. Staff functions are also considered an integral part of manufacturing system and the ultimate corporate commitment lies with production excellence (Whitehill, 1991, p. 44-49 & 232-237). Cultural collectivism of the Sinic civilization is carried through in the corporate sector and the corporations are considered to be autonomous organizations which adapt to their environment through groupism and group dynamics (Monden *et al.*, 2007, p. 75). Chinese and Japanese organizations manifest their roots in Confucianism by taking simple, direct and effective decisions to solve complex business and organizational problems (Kit, 2001, p. 284-293).   The corporate philosophy of Sinic organizations is based on the notion of theory Z developed by William Ouchi.

The Z approach to work advocates trusting the employees and seeks to make them an integral part of the organization. The workers and employees are as important as the top managers in decision making and problem solving processes (Lewis *et al*., 2007, p. 47; Bachmann & Campbell, 1984). The Chinese and Japanese differ significantly from their Western counterparts in the treatment and meaning of setting goals and objectives. In the Western view, objectives are hard and fast and clearly stated for all to see. In the Japanese view, they *emerge* from a more fundamental process of exploring and understanding the values through which a firm operates. This exploration is done jointly by all the employees and not just the top managers. In Sinic organizations, learning is underpinned by the 'ritual of *ringi* which is a collective decision-making process (Child, 2001, p. 118).

The well known Japanese quality movement was however initiated by an American Edward Deming. Deming was recognized in US in the 1980s but the Japanese had been utilizing his ideas and techniques since 1940s. The Western literature on Quality and Total Quality Management (TQM) agrees that "By the 1980s, leading industrialists in the United States were where their Japanese counterparts had been in the late 1940s" (Goetsch & Davis, 2002, p. 18). Deming's teachings came naturally to the Japanese because their own values fostered participative management, continuous improvement, customer-focus, education, self-development and, team work.

Another value-based concept in Japanese management discourse is that of Kaizen, where *Kai* means change and *Zen* good. Kaizen, as a business strategy, means "on-going' improvement involving everyone – top management, managers, and workers" (Imai, 1986, p. xxix). Kaizen amounts to making changes for the better on a continual, never-ending basis (Jackson & Tomioka, 2004, p. 2). In a typical Japanese cultural backdrop of holistic movements and solutions Kaizen seeks to develop an employee as a 'whole' person and not simply as a utilitarian resource who is used as a mean to obtain corporate ends. The principles of Kaizen include focus on customers, continuous improvement, open acknowledgement of problems, promoting openness, creating work teams, nurturing the right relationship processes, developing self-discipline and, keeping every employee enabled and informed (Wellington, 1995, p. 14-22). Most of these principles can be directly traced back to the traditional Confucionist Japanese and Chinese values and work ethics.

The tradition of developing corporate clans and industrial groups that support and assist each other is also based on the traditional Sinic ethics and values. This tradition, called *Keirtsu*, came into full use after the Second World War when most of the Japanese companies were not owned by a single family. The *Keirtsu* are characterized by mutual shareholding and decision making among the members firms. Some examples of the *Keirtsu* or corporate clans include Toshiba, Matsushita, Mitsubishi and Toyota (Karan, 2005, p. 325). Despite many differences, the contemporary Western notion of 'supply chain' has its roots in *Keirtsu* (Murray *et al*., 2005). The Chinese and Korean enterprise groups called *jituan* and *chaebol* respectively are also formed on the pattern of *Keirtsu* (Keister, 2001; Oi, 2005).

Discussion

Sinic civilization is based on virtue ethics of Confucianism and Taoism. These ethics are manifested as concern for moral worth, scholarship and education, hard work, goodness, humanistic love, justice and righteousness, wisdom, modesty, faithfulness, respect and loyalty for elders and ancestors, indifference to religion, quietism, reflections, suppression of worldly desires, collaborating, suspicion towards leisure and, avoidance of shame to self, family and nation through honest and hard work.

The predominant management style of Sinic organizations favors people orientation at work. The ethics of filial piety and concern for societal goodness resulted in preferring humans over machines in the Sinic civilization's discourse. In spite of people-centeredness, the overall management style of Chinese and Japanese organizations is however 'closed door'. The objective of this type of bureaucracy is not control but ordering of the group, organizations and society. Respect for seniority and authority are the basic reasons for adopting 'closed door' management style. The Sinic corporate leaders have generally exhibited a sense of obligation and responsibility for lives and emotions of their subordinates. Participatory management, involving all cadres of employees, has also been a predominant management style of organizations of this civilization. The general form and design of Sinic organizations is fluid, horizontal and organic. This is because bureaucracy is not used to control and dominate but to order and create discipline. The top management of Sinic organizations adopts a parental role in managing their employees. This is based on the centuries old Confucius' ethics of filial piety, ancestral worship, respect for seniors and benevolence and love for juniors or subordinates.

The Chinese and Japanese organizations' epistemology is constituted by practicality and clarity of thought which is based neither on objectivity nor on metaphysical abstractions. It however, draws from mysticism and subjectivism, rationality and empiricism and, quietism based on mind-to-mind communication. Chinese and Japanese languages play a major role in defining the epistemology of their organizations. The organic and graphic nature of these languages makes them pragmatic, yet free of conceptual and philosophical abstractions because one visual graph has the potency to clearly express the abstractions. Other languages on the other hand rely on words and metaphors for expressing abstract concepts.

The ontological combination of realism and cosmology creates a unique mix of hierarchy and fluidity in Sinic organizations. The hierarchical and bureaucratic lines of authority are based on realist philosophy. Subjective awareness and personal experience based mysticism, *Yin/Yang* cosmology and the negative methods of Taoism are intertwined with the solid lines of authority to create this mixed organizational ontology.

Collectivism and communalism have been the general cultural orientation of Chinese and Japanese organizations. Sinic civilization's core ethics seek harmony and not control of the environment. Family, clan, groups and collective societal goodness is considered far more important than personal ambitions, desires and success. A culture of communal bonding and family orientation has generally prevailed in the Sinic organizations.

Future Implications

The future potential contributions from Chinese and Japanese civilization are enormous. Ethics of Confucianism and Taoism, concern for harmonizing humans with nature, clear and practical philosophic thought, a focus on wholeness and, principle of Yin and Yang which seek to restore the cosmic unity are perfectly suited to adapt to complexity sciences and contemporary organization theory. The contributions of Sinic civilization in advancing organization theory during 1970s and 1980s are also noteworthy. The concepts of theory Z, keirtsu, kaizen, TQM, JIT, horizontal organizations, team based organizations, learning organizations and, emergent strategizing are all examples of the recent impact of Sinic thought on organization theory.

Bureaucracy is a major organizing principle of Sinic organizations. Chinese bureaucracy is considered more cultural than political because its intent was order and harmony and not control and suppression of people and the environment. Other major organizing principles of Sinic civilization include collective decision making and participatory management practices, negative management through non action and avoiding decision making, concern for stability and abhorrence for sudden and drastic change initiatives, guanxi or networking, quiet contemplation, responding to complexity through simplicity, continuously improving all work operations through small incremental changes and, formulation of corporate company clans.

Concluding Remarks

The above discussion and the preceding discourse of Sinic civilization highlight that flat and organic structures, team work oriented collectivistic culture, corporate clans and emergent strategizing are natural outcomes of Sinic ethics of filial piety, respect for authority, quietism, ancestral worship and communal love. Unlike other cultures where these organizing principles are inculcated in employees through explicit training and organizational development programs demanding much effort, time and cost, Chinese and Japanese employee learn these skills implicitly from their families and cultures throughout the course of their lives. They are therefore naturally inclined to work in conditions demanding coordination, clan controls, process (horizontal) rather than functional (vertical) orientation and, turbulent and dynamic environments. The past and contemporary contributions of Sinic civilization to organization theory and management are undeniable. Its future contributions towards emerging schools in organization theory (reflexive, reflective, complexity sciences) cannot be underestimated.

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