

WORK AND SOCIETY

Labour and Human Resources in East Asia

Edited by

**Ian Nish
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Hong Kong University Press
香港大學出版社

Hong Kong University Press
139 Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong

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ISBN 962 209 391 4

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Printed in Hong Kong by Caritas Printing Training Centre.

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1

Introduction

The Editors

The essays collected in this volume have been grouped in three sections. The first deals with different aspects of managing a business and organizing work in the East Asian setting. Beginning this section, chapter two, entitled 'Enterprise, Its Management and Culture: A Comparative Reflection in a Transnational Context', addresses the culture factor in the shaping of a variety of modern perspectives on managing people and work across different societies. It argues that the mainstream literature, previously dominated by Western writings derived from Euro-American experiences, has become increasingly culture-sensitive since the arrival on the scene in the late 70s and onwards of the internationally successful Japanese enterprise. It traces the way in which Western attempts to emulate the efficacious management styles and practices of Japan lead, first, to the hybrid image of a mixed 'Japanese-American' prescription called the 'Theory Z' organization and later, to the entire agenda of cultural adaptations in a new era of business internationalization, in which multinational corporations operate across various cultural and national frontiers. Illustrating with case-studies of a Swedish-Polish joint-venture and of human resource management in Japanese multinational corporations in France, it examines the question of transferability of managerial know-how and skills, as well as the twin issues of the scope and strategy for cross-cultural collaboration and 'multi-cultural' accommodation. The authors see in China an important arena for further testing of this culture thesis now that modernizing Chinese enterprises are anxious to adopt, against their socialist background, trendy management concepts such as that of the enterprise culture.

Chapter three, 'Adaptation Issues in the Internationalization of Business: The Experience of Japanese Managers Overseas', looks at the transnational

dimensions of managerial and work behaviour more specifically from the perspective of organizing, selecting and preparing appropriate human resources for enterprises and organizations. Drawing empirical references from a Hong Kong study of Japanese firms, this chapter identifies a number of key adaptation problems associated with the assignments of Japanese managers to their subsidiaries abroad, as well as the coping devices which both employees and employers have adopted in facilitating the transition. The study uncovered sufficient friction in the Japan-to-Hong Kong acclimatization processes to create scepticism about the logic of continuing, as has been almost a corporate tradition in Japan, an ethnocentric approach to the internationalization of business. The study poses a challenge which Japanese corporations may need to address in the future if they wish to make their international operations less alien to their host societies.

Such a culture focus, and the importance of tailoring top-level decision making and planning mechanisms of corporations so that they consider its effects, are lucidly discussed in chapter four, 'Directors and Boards: The East Asian Experience'. This chapter questions the way in which joint-stock corporations — originally a Western concept — have been adapted to the predominantly Confucian and often authoritarian nations of East Asia by exploring these nations' respective arrangements for corporate governance in their incorporated companies. The experiences of the East Asian NIEs, such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Hong Kong and China as they undergo modernization, are reviewed in comparison to the more established practices of corporate governance in the UK, Germany, Japan, etc. Acknowledging the importance of both technical rationality and cultural prudence in the design of company boards, this chapter points out the options for re-inventing the corporation in ways suited to the emerging situation in China and East Asia. This discourse may provide useful lesson for other nations now in search of workable model(s) to help improve the performance of their companies' boards.

The question of whether corporate information strategies can be formulated in a relatively technocratic fashion, free from the constraints of any culture-bound preferences of the designers, is posed in chapter five, 'Corporate Information Strategy: Some Key Issues in the Hong Kong Context'. This chapter examines empirically the behavioural propensities of corporate information managers in Hong Kong, in terms of their choice of either centralization or decentralization as a strategy for fashioning their companies' installation and utilization of information systems. Analysing the research data with reference to the variables of (i) organizational objectives, (ii) economic dimensions, (iii) technological influences and (iv) organizational structure, the study reveals, rather consistently, a preference of the Hong Kong firms investigated for a centralization strategy for designing corporate information systems and activities. However, there are also growing signs of a shift towards

intermediate arrangements as a compromise. The question remains, therefore, as to the extent to which such preferences are in fact explained by an Oriental (and conservative) concern for authoritarian and structured control, as a culturally determined property which defies the global trend (noticeably, in the west) of organizational decentralization in search of the pay-off of flexibility.

The importance of rediscovering ancient teachings in instructing the practice and logic of modern management is highlighted in chapter six, 'Three Chinese Sages and Modern Theories of Human Resource Management'. Although the setting and the text of these classic writings are Oriental, the paper attempts to transcend parochial frontiers by demonstrating that the three classic Chinese scholars Confucius, Sun Zi and Han Fei Zi are worth studying and emulating in other cultures, provided that there are suitable adaptations to the context of modern management theories and to the local environment where they are being applied. It is argued, in particular, that human resource management today can be enriched substantially by the reinterpretation of these Chinese classics, which offer cross-cultural similarities to Western theories on leadership and management in the contemporary literature.

The debate as to whether there exists a distinctively Asian approach to work values and organizations is an explicit theme of chapter seven, 'Work Values and Organizations: A Glimpse of the Asian Syndrome'. It notes that the east-west cultural divide does not necessarily imply divergent assumptions and practices about work and relations in work places; yet it concedes that the universal theme of industrial determinism, which postulates the convergence of societies in evolving increasingly similar values and institutions as they industrialize, has been contradicted by the amazing growth of the Japanese economy since the 1970s, which suggests that the culture variable could explain the success of some national types rather than others. However, the essay is optimistic in claiming that this culture-bound argument has given rise to a more systematic inquiry into the logic of performance in East Asian enterprises. This academic curiosity is probably oriented towards the industrial agenda of, *inter alia*, stimulating business and economic renewal in the west, which is now in the doldrums of sustained stagflation.

The second section of this book deals with East Asian people and society. Chapter eight, the first in the section, is entitled 'Capitalism and Civil Society in China and the Role of Hong Kong'. It discusses Hong Kong's future under China's rule. Giving a critical prognosis of China's potential to develop into a modern civil society considering the influence of its political philosophy, its history of evolving science and technology, its administrative traditions and Confucian values, this essay discusses the inherent contradictions of a socialist market economy which may make it difficult for China to become a country which promotes individualism, specialization and abstraction, as well as other regulatory institutions which are part of a civil society. However, the article is very positive about the leverage provided by 'very powerful, ultimately

Confucian, value systems' and suggests that Hong Kong can play a key role in China's development by virtue of both its heritage of China's tradition and its role as a cosmopolitan social laboratory for the mainland.

Central to the people and society of Hong Kong is its work ethic, which is known for its rigour and is believed to have led to an industrious, instrumentally oriented and adaptable labour force. Chapter nine, 'The Hong Kong Work Ethic', examines the topic suggested by the title using a rich variety of empirical evidence dealing with the following issues: (i) the individual's urge to succeed, (ii) hedonism vs deferred gratification, (iii) worker diligence, (iv) submissiveness of the worker to authority, and (v) work-centredness vs marginalization. Against the post-war background of the territory's socio-economic development, this essay raises the question of whether or not worker attitudes have remained unaltered since the Second World War. It points out visible changes in Hong Kong workers' lifestyle and the social meaning attached to work, with notable implications of these transformations on labour-management relations in the work place.

What has influenced the performance and productivity of the Hong Kong labour force is not just the work attitudes of its people but also the quality of their education both before and after they join the full-time labour force. Chapter ten, 'Management Education in Hong Kong: Some Issues and Strategies', deals with the territory's efforts in the area of human (capital) investment, that is management education. It reviews some of the classic writings on the role of these training-cum-education activities for industrialized and industrializing societies, pointing to a variety of options and issues covered in the philosophy, logic and method of organizing and delivering applied work- and business-related education. The essay, however, is concerned about the present state of diversity of this industry in Hong Kong, where programmes and courses are offered by universities as well as private consultancy or tuition firms, both locally and in collaboration with overseas institutions. Such pluralism in the provision of management education is seen as an outgrowth of, and commensurate with, Hong Kong's ethos of marketplace competition. However, the essay notes that the management schools in the territory still need to address, as do those in other East Asian NIEs, the perennial issues of the gap between theory and practice, of matching learning and application, and of ensuring that skills taught truly suit the industry's needs.

Beyond the frontier of education and training, a transcending theme in understanding East Asian NIEs' people and societies has been the central imperative of industrial development, together with its repercussions for East Asian societies' structure, superstructure, polity and industry. This is the focus of Chapter eleven, 'The Role of the State and Labour's Response to Industrial Development: An Asian "Drama" of Three New Industrial Economies'. The chapter begins by identifying certain common institutional and cultural factors shared by Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea in shaping their spectacular

industrializing successes since the 1970s, and argues for the strategic role of human resources in the future development of these three societies. Given the advances in their economies' growth and their people's affluence, the essay examines, from a comparative perspective, the interrelated agendas of labour legislation, wage control and industrial conflict as they have evolved in these three NIEs. This review subsequently leads to a paradoxical observation that the state has been conspicuously emasculated through these processes, in the currency of both economic development and political democratization which it has ironically sponsored. Such East Asian experiences, the essay suggests, add a new dimension to the classic writings of Kerr et al., Bell, Dore, Kassolow and other authors, by both concurring with and contradicting Kassolow's conclusions about the effects of industrial development.

Chapter twelve closes the section by focusing upon Singapore's recent effort to upgrade its people's working life quality and increase their participation in the work place. This chapter, entitled 'Quality of Working Life and Employee Participation in Singapore', charts the present terrain of Singaporean companies in promoting and adopting a spectrum of activities pertaining to quality of working life (QWL) improvements and enhanced employee participation, which cover both non-financial arrangements such as suggestion schemes, quality control circles, and joint labour-management consultation, and financial provisions such as profit sharing plans, employee stock ownership plans, employee share option schemes and company stock ownership schemes. Although the efficacy and values of these QWL and participative schemes are hard to establish unequivocally, this essay is optimistic that they have helped create a more satisfied work-force as well as consolidate more democratic managerial styles in the Singaporean work place. However, it recognizes that the scope of such developments could be limited in the future, inasmuch as younger Singaporean workers will want more opportunities to share power with management, while local employers will be increasingly exposed in their relative incapability, as compared with their foreign counterparts, to organize and develop full-scale QWL programmes.

The propinquity of working life enhancement in society to the conflicting of interests between labour and management in the employment situation points to the main vein of discussions in the last section of this book, which are concerned with issues of labour and industrial relations. Three of the essays collected in this section are reflections on various aspects of the Japanese system, while two discuss the Hong Kong situation, one from the perspective of industrial harmony and the principal integrative institutions behind it, and the other presenting a longitudinal profile on past developments and future prospects of labour in Hong Kong. The last essay is about the Australian system, which, though it is theoretically outside the geographic horizon of East Asia, is highly relevant to the region's concern about its future labour and human resource agenda. The essay offers critical insights into parallel experiences

in Australia from which East Asian societies can learn and gain as they move towards post-industrialism.

Chapter thirteen, entitled 'The Japanese Labour Movement Under Rengo Leadership,' is a succinct account of Rengo which puts the recently united Japanese Trade Union Confederation in a well-researched historical context. It lucidly explains why and how this new body was able to unite the once sharply fragmented Japanese labour movement and become one of the world's largest trade union centres shortly after its formation. The essay begins with a narrative describing Japan's labour history of union disunity dating back to the pre-war era, and follows with a portrayal of the politicized diversity in its unionism in the few decades after the war before analyzing the unifying factors and efforts which led to the inception of Rengo in the late 1980s. After surveying the philosophy, structure and leadership of the organization, this essay offers some critical thoughts on the future of Rengo, especially in terms of its prospects of being recognized as a true and equal partner in a tripartite system of industrial relations — a possibility which could be highly inspirational for other labour movements in the East Asian NIEs.

Whether Japanese practice is effectively emulated outside Japan is an issue of perennial interest for those who are sceptical as well as those who are fascinated by the new imagination Japan epitomizes. Chapter fourteen, 'Japanese Industrial Practices and the Labour Contract', provides some insight into this question. It identifies those salient aspects of the contractual relationship between the employer and the employed under Japanese employment practices, which include, *inter alia*, the non-distinctiveness of the contents of the employment contract, the importance of the principle of seniority, the norm of lifetime employment and the general liberty of the employer to transfer his/her employees at will. The essay points out the general reluctance of the courts, given the prevalence of such practices in the industry, to ascertain and establish explicitly whether a breach of contractual duties has been committed in disputes over rights pertaining to labour contracts. Instead, Japanese judges are characteristically more concerned with restoring the balance of interests and the power equilibrium between the two sides. The essay suggests that such a judicial approach and the conspicuous ambiguities of the labour contract, while appearing loose and alien to Western industrial relations practitioners and labour law scholars, are rational in the Japanese context since they exemplify the very essence of the collectivistic spirit and corporatist character of Japan's employment system.

The Japanese tradition, in turn, is liable to breed its inconsistencies when it is forced to come to terms with newer, often more pluralistic, features of structuring industrial relations today. Some of the contradictions which have infected the development of the nation's trade union institution, as measured against the international norm on the freedom to associate, are explored in the context of Japan's enterprise unionism culture in chapter fifteen, 'Legal Problems

with Multiple Labour Unions in the Japanese Company'. The chapter examines some of the salient legal issues affecting Japanese enterprises in which labour-management relations are organized around more than one house union. One pertinent concern relates to the basic obligations of the employer in such a multi-union plant situation, especially in terms of his/her duty to bargain simultaneously with the minority and majority unions so as to maintain his/her neutrality, instead of discriminating against the minority union in favour of the majority union. The legal issue is complicated by other controversies such as (i) the debated status of those legal provisions purportedly preventing employers from extending discriminatory wage increases and bonus awards in the process of personnel evaluation so as to ensure uniformity of treatment of employees belonging to different unions; (ii) the dubious rights of access of different in-house unions to the employer's facilities, which are otherwise available to a single union within the plant, and (iii) the extension, or otherwise, of the check off, union shop, and overtime work agreements from one union to the other, etc. The essay optimistically discusses the possibility that the Japanese Supreme Court and the Labour Relations Commission shall evolve a satisfactory benchmark of judicial interpretation of the constitution, the Labour Unions Act and the Labour Standards Act to accommodate these new issues which have surfaced along with the rise of multi-unionism in the Japanese work place.

Industrial relations in Hong Kong are also examined in this volume. The contrast between the labour and employment systems of Hong Kong and Japan clearly illustrate the diverse practices and experiences of the East Asian region, which exist in spite of common influences such as that of Oriental Confucianism. Thus chapter sixteen, 'Industrial Harmony, Trade Union Movement and Labour Administration in Hong Kong', provides an overview of the present Hong Kong situation by first, noting its apparently high level of industrial harmony and second, surveying the socio-economic contexts of its latest developments which suggest its fragile nature. The latter notwithstanding, the essay recognizes that a key lever for stabilizing the territory's industrial relations has hitherto rested upon the protective and ameliorative roles performed by the labour administration. Despite its history of internal fragmentation, the labour movement has begun claiming a more equitable and representative partnership with both the government and employers, thanks to the advent of electoral activities which have grown popular in the territory during the pre-1997 political transition. The chapter extends its approval of the principle of tripartitism, which has allegedly been implicit in the approach of the official administration to all major labour policy deliberations and formulation, and advocates the continuation of such a consultative and collaborative spirit of joint participation beyond 1997, if Hong Kong is to remain a free market capitalist economy in the future.

In sketching a post-war profile of the stance of Hong Kong's labour administration and labour legislation, chapter seventeen, 'The Development of

Labour Relations in Hong Kong, and Some Implications for the Future', addresses fundamental issues regarding the territory's labour development strategy, which are probably shared to varying degrees by other NIEs in the region. The first is to recognize that Hong Kong has attained its industrial relations equilibrium essentially through its adherence to a prudently regulated state of legal permissiveness in this arena. The second is the question of how far Hong Kong is prepared to go in attempting to modify this atmosphere of permissiveness for the sake of a more equitable, just and socially efficient society. This chapter expresses reservations about the value of Hong Kong's free market system as a model for other East Asian societies, given the noticeable immaturity of its institutions in various spheres of development, an immaturity which has ironically been sanctified today, in the age of the marketplace, as a crucial source of Hong Kong's resilience and flexibility when competing in the global economy.

The idea of transferability, across geo-cultural boundaries, of employment practices, as well as of the feasibility of industrial societies emulating each other when developing or reforming their industrial relations institutions, is explored in the final chapter of this volume, entitled 'Recent Developments in Australian Industrial Relations: Their Relevance to the Asian Region'. The chapter gives a succinct review of the recent trends in Australia as it moves steadily from a centralized to a more decentralized system of industrial relations. In this analysis, the salient factors contributing to these changes are identified, especially in the context of their convergence with, or departure from, the latest international trends. The chapter suggests that Australian experiences of transition from compulsory arbitration (highly institutionalized and structured) to collective bargaining (decentralized and permissive) may provide an example other than the cases of Britain, North America, Europe and Japan for younger East Asian societies in their search for a workable model for their future industrial relations systems.

The essays collected in this volume cover at best a partial cross-section of contemporary East Asia. Its people, organized as human resources in the work situation for business and other activities, have coped competently, on the whole, with a variety of problems and challenges during half a century of post-war industrial development, but are destined to face more and greater difficulties as their future unfolds in this era of growth and uncertainty. A glimpse of the shifting East Asian terrain is offered in the epilogue of this book, entitled 'Hong Kong and Asia at the Crossroads', which has been written as a note of remembrance for Professor Keith Thurley, to whom this volume is devoted.

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