

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE – ASIAN CONCEPTS OF KAIZEN, GONGFU AND XIUSHEN

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Purpose: The aim of the article is to present the organizational method of kaizen and Chinese concepts related to self-development – gongfu i xiushen, which are typical of Asian countries.

Design/methodology/approach: The method of desk research was used in the study. Kaizen, gongfu, and xiushen derive from the major premises and values of the organizational cultures in Japanese and Chinese companies. They are becoming more and more popular in Europe and the USA. They are essential in managing change as they can develop key values necessary for organizational improvement and support the implementation of organizational change strategies. Therefore, they increase companies' innovation on the market. The article presents a brief description of the organizational culture and the essence of the concepts of *kaizen*, *gongfu* and *xiushen*. It also presents a comparison of these approaches in terms of the cultural conditions of the Japanese and Chinese economies.

Findings: In the context of management science, in the literature, there is a lot of information on the Japanese concept of kaizen and very little of gongfu and xiushen. Although all of the concepts developed in Asia and are related to improvement, they differ from each other.

Practical implications: The possibility of a future increase in the attention of non-Asian managers on Chinese methods of improvement is recognized.

Originality/value: The new value is presenting the concepts of gongfu and xiushen within management science. As well as the comparison of concepts of kaizen, gongfu, and xiushen.

Keywords: organizational culture, *kaizen*, *gongfu*, *xiushen*, China, Japan.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, there are many management concepts and methods that enable companies to search for new better methods of improvement and development which enhance their competitiveness and innovation. Values adopted from organizational culture as well as systemic

solutions for continuous improvement become essential (Butler, Szwejczeński, and Sweeney, 2018) in improving the functioning and adaptation of the enterprise in the rapidly changing environmental conditions. The concepts of kaizen, gongfu and xiushen are typical of Asian cultures. The concept of kaizen is widely known in Japan and China whereas less known concepts of gongfu and xiushen along with their main assumptions and goals are presented in this article.

2. Organizational culture - general approach

In Every culture should be based on quality and improvement as well as safety, respect for work, ethics and trust. These are the essential foundations of a solid organizational culture. Without them it will be fragile and non-durable. Edgar Schein defines organizational culture as: “(...) the basic model assumptions of a given group discovered or developed in learning to cooperate with external adjustment problems and internal integration and that can be considered valid and therefore can be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 2010; Witte and Muijen, 2010; Alvesson, 2011; Sikorski, 2008). Organizational culture is a valuable asset of every organization as it develops its potential, shapes its identity and earns internal and external recognition. Without developing the organizational culture it is difficult to persuade employees to change and improve. Both scientists and management practitioners point out that the strength or weakness of the organizational culture may depend on such values as clarity, i.e. employees’ understanding, behaviours desired in the organization and its standards. They may also refer to such aspects as the degree of popularization or the depth of being rooted in the national culture (Kostera, Kownacki, and Szumski, 2000; Schein, 2010). In case of the degree of popularization, the problem is the extent to which culture should be known and shared by employees. It is important that standards and adopted assumptions does not refer only to selected groups of personnel or top management, but are clearly communicated to all employees. In the case of the depth of being rooted, the difficulty may arise from the insufficient application of the norms and values that a given organization represents (Sikorski, 2008; Wiśniewska, 2021). Among the determinants of quality some “soft” factors, which also include cultural aspects, may be indicated. Therefore, meeting certain criteria requires focusing not only on the appropriate use of knowledge, skills and medical technology, but also on developing appropriate interpersonal relationships, working conditions necessary to develop employees’ talents, their competences that would allow them to properly develop and communicate, provide a sense of certainty and identity which as a result would improve the entire organization (Lucas, 2005).

There are many models that describe and identify the levels of organizational culture (Sikorski, 2008; Pałac, 2021). One of the most acknowledged theories developed by Edgar Schein, emphasizes the multi-level nature of organizational culture's structure. Artefacts are among the most visible and yet most demanding levels of organizational culture (Schein, 2010). They can be divided into linguistic artefacts (i.e. the manner and form as well as the language of communication between members of the organization); behavioural artefacts (e.g. organisational behaviours and customs) as well as physical artefacts (organization's logo, its trademark, characteristic equipment and elements of infrastructure, technology or other material objects associated with the specificity of a given organization (Kostera, Kownacki, and Szumski, 2000). Norms and values create a deeper and slightly less visible level of culture. They are more persistent than artefacts and at the same time only partially visible and partially realised. Norms and values are embodied in goals, strategy, quality policy, image and even in employees' characteristics of the organization. They are reflected in the company's relationship to the environment, in the features of the organizational structure and in the style of management. Quite often values associated with improvement are considered in terms of the national culture as they are embedded in widely acknowledged stereotypes and general social principles of a given country. Therefore, national aspect plays a significant role in differentiating improvement approaches, which are different in Japan and China. This issue will be discussed in more detail in the next part of the article. The deepest, completely hidden and unrealised level of the organizational culture is based on assumptions. Depending on what they refer to, assumptions may be divided into reality and truth – they are essential for the functioning of the organization and interpersonal relationships in it (Wiśniewska, 2021).

All the listed levels of culture are related to each other and create a relatively permanent structure. Organizational culture may vary in different national and social groups. For example:

- The Americans represent a pro-transactional, non-ceremonial, monochrome and diverse culture.
- Germany represents a protractive, moderately ceremonial, monochrome and restrained culture.
- The Poles are representatives of a moderately pro-partnership, ceremonial, poly-chronic culture, with unstable expressiveness.
- The Japanese are representatives of a pro-partnership, ceremonial, monochrome and restrained culture.
- The Chinese are representatives of a pro-partnership, ceremonial, monochrome and restrained culture.

On the one hand cultural differences are obvious – each country has its own specific culture. On the other hand, they significantly determine all socio-economic changes and their course. These changes may be evolutionary as in Japan. Japanese permanent cultural structure is based on traditional principles of collective cooperation and self-improvement (kaizen), derived from entrenched Confucian tradition over a long period of time (Calingo, 2002). Long-term

orientation or Confucian work dynamism is the extent to which society's cultural values reflect those of Confucianism. Long-term-oriented societies, or cultures high on Confucian work dynamism have greater concern with the future and value thrift and persistence. Such societies consider how their current actions could influence future generations. On the other hand, values in short-term-oriented societies are oriented toward the past and present. There is respect for tradition and fulfilling social obligations is a concern, but the here and now is most important. Similarly, Chinese cultural values are based on Confucianism. However, in China changes are extremely intense (due to the socio-economic revolution and organizational transformation).

The general idea of improvement is based on the verification of goals, mission, strategy, organizational structure and knowledge (Nadeau, 2020). Knowledge is a key factor of improvement. Since improvement is based on leadership styles and management of human capital, it is possible to create new levels of organizational culture and thus build a unique set of pragmatic values for the improvement of organizations and even entire societies. Hence the concepts/ philosophies of: kaizen in Japan and gongfu and xiushen in China.

3. Japanese *Kaizen* culture

The concept of kaizen originates from the traditional Japanese ethical code of warriors (samurai) – Bushido. This tradition has been reflected in all aspects of life including philosophy, care for physical health, professional duties, improvement of culture, work, faithfulness and courage. Even though samurai privileges were abolished in 1876, samurai code has been applied in Japanese industrial and military concepts developed in the early 20th century. Later, in the late 1940s, it was used in corporations and public administration offices.

The word “kaizen” is a combination of two Japanese words: kai – “change” – and zen – “good”. Literally translated, it means “change for the better”. There are many definitions of this concept in the literature on the subject. In the publication entitled “Quality Vademecum” (Vademecum Jakości) kaizen has been defined as “gradual orderly and continuous improvement, added value” (Pieczonka and Tabor, 2003, p. 86). According to another interpretation, it may be defined as “the concept of management based on the constant search and application of even the smallest improvements in all areas of activity, at every workplace. It aims at achieving great success with small steps” (Bernais, Ingram, and Kraśnicka, 2010, p. 164). However, the most significant explanation of kaizen refers to the human factor: “the striving of all employees at the decision-making and executive level to constantly improve all aspects of company's operations” (Mikuła, Pirtruszką-Ortyl, and Potocki, 2007, p. 217). This approach is consistent with the original meaning of this concept promoted by Japanese scientists: “Kaizen means improvement. In addition, it means continuous improvement in personal, domestic, social and professional life. In the company, kaizen means continuous

improvement of everyone – both managers and employees” (Brannem, and Kleinberg, 2000; Imai, 2012).

The spreading of the Japanese concept of TQM in the United States, in which kaizen was an essential element typical of Japanese quality management techniques (such as: zero defects, the Edwards Deming cycle, quality circles, the prevention system, just in time), was crucial for the development of this concept. According to this approach everything can be improved and small steps can lead to the desired results. Everything should be improved, and improvement itself should happen every day, by everyone, from small incremental improvements to big strategic changes (Piasecka-Głuszak, 2011, p. 372). Kaizen should encourage employees to improve the workplace, contribute to their greater independence and self-control. The basic goal of kaizen is to improve three parameters: quality, cost and delivery time. This means improving the quality of products and services, processes, as well as the final results, striving to reduce costs at every stage of the organization’s operations.

The main benefits of using kaizen, through the gradual improvement of all aspects of the company’s operations, include:

- cost reduction by reducing supplies, accelerating material flow, increasing labour productivity and spending less,
- improving the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of work,
- reducing the time of completing orders,
- reducing the number of mistakes,
- increasing the efficiency of machines and devices,
- maintaining production continuity,
- greater customer satisfaction,
- improving customer service,
- introducing clear, legible standards and work visualization,
- reducing or even eliminating the number of deficiencies, errors and corrections, and thus production costs,
- reducing changeover times,
- eliminating, simplifying, integrating and automating processes,
- improving traceability and response time to production and quality problems,
- optimising distribution of production resources for more effective use of production space,
- increasing the efficiency and comfort of work and others.

Improvement is the key element of the kaizen concept. It is slow and gradual, it applies to various areas of companies’ operations, but most of all it refers to people and innovations introduced by them (Negrão et al., 2017). The human factor is the most important aspect of the entire change process. The implementation of kaizen usually results in a new organizational culture focused on improvement. It is primarily based on feedback provided by employees,

who take the initiative in submitting new ideas. Therefore, it is essential to get feedback from employees even for the smallest improvements. The main idea of this approach is based on the assumption that everything in the company can be done better. One of the ways to achieve this goal is to develop an employee suggestion system.

Constant search for small adjustments in all business areas and in every workplace, may prevent companies from experiencing major problems in the future. Employees' commitment as well as intensive cooperation between superiors and employees stimulate further development. Therefore, improvement of the company should take place every day, involve all employees and range from small incremental changes to great innovations.

The company's adoption to kaizen requires the development of a new incentive system that includes training and evaluation of employees, verification of improvements and new solutions and defining rules for teams responsible for the implementation of individual tasks. The new system must be adjusted to the changes that occur during the implementation of kaizen. It is important to evaluate employees not only based on their results, but also their attitudes and the effort they put into achieving results. Regardless of the advancement of kaizen implementation, it is important to ensure that employees will benefit from their better and more efficient work, provide incentives that will encourage employees to become more involved in the process of permanent change. Material and non-material motivation plays an important role in proper and fair remuneration of employees, however, in many cases non-material motivation may be more effective. Non-material stimulus may increase self-esteem and sense of belonging, job satisfaction or the sense of participation in the success of the organization (Karaszewski, 2006, p. 288). This type of management may also increase the broadly understood knowledge and qualifications of employees, increase employees' awareness of the need for organisational improvements and allow to solve problems using new techniques and methods, which not only will recognize and eliminate unfavourable elements but also will help to learn from mistakes and create favourable conditions for implementing innovations and discovering new opportunities. Proper use of these opportunities gives the company "the ability to dynamically integrate, build, reconfigure internal and external competences in order to adapt to a rapidly changing environment" (Szuster, 2011, p. 183).

Regardless of the level of advancement and preparation of participants as well as the premises that drive enterprises to introduce changes, kaizen is generally recognized as very profitable and effective. The main goal of many companies – resulting mainly from the need to adapt to the changing environmental conditions – is to gain a permanent innovative advantage, which may be achieved by implementing kaizen (Negrão et al., 2017).

Important elements of kaizen concept ensure standardization and support system for managing the change. In practice, once standards are defined they must be constantly improved. This is the only way to upgrade existing conditions with continuous kaizen activities. Nevertheless, the application of this concept does not exclude radical innovations – in fact, they can be supported and strengthened by kaizen. It can affect not only the measurable economic

results but also the behaviour of employees, their knowledge, skills, openness and commitment. Therefore, the additional value of implementing kaizen is the increased awareness of employees about the improvement needs of the organization (Farris, Aken, Doolen, and Worley, 2009, p. 46). In this context, the combination of kaizen and improvement can be very rational, because: “kaizen is understood as maintaining and improving standards by means of small, gradual steps, and innovation is treated as a radical change related to large investments in technology and/ or equipment” (Imai, 2007, p. 18).

4. Chinese concepts of *gongfu* and self-cultivation *xiushen*

Chinese word *gongfu* or *kungfu* / *kung-fu* is most often associated with martial arts *wushu* (武术). This association has been so prevalent that the popular PWN Dictionary of the Polish Language defined *kung-fu* as exclusively eastern martial arts, primarily unarmed, designed to attack vulnerable points of the body (PWN Polish Dictionary). It derives from the exercises originally designed to strengthen health, fitness and focus, which were used by the monks of the Shaolin Temple in Henan Province (Tsang et al., 2008). For this reason this approach is also known as Shaolin *gongfu* (少林功夫). According to some studies the correct use of the expression *gongfu* should include the full name of a martial arts style, emphasizing the highly developed skills (Osuch, 2002; Ciembroniewicz, 2019). Some researchers, however, defend the independence of this category, emphasizing that it was and is used by Chinese practitioners who needed a new term to describe their own practices. (Partikova and Jennings, 2018).

The term *gongfu* is associated with martial arts, however, it does not only refer to physicality, but also to self-improvement via meditation (Brzozowski, 2017), combining external and internal forces. Hence, the reference to the concept of complementary opposites of *yin-yang* (阴阳). *Gongfu* has been associated with martial arts due to its exposure to popular culture at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s and the fact that *gongfu* as an oriental martial arts became a tool of cultural diplomacy (Eperjesi, 2004) or in other words soft power of influence in the international arena. The constant practice of a combination of soft and brute force has been reflected not only in sports but also in the business. Singapore Airlines, considered as the leader of innovation in the airline industry, may serve as an example of using *gongfu* in economy and management (Heracleous, Wirtz, and Johnston, 2005). In terms of business activity *gongfu* has been applied in both private and public sectors (e.g. academic advisors) (Yang, 2020).

Other popular application of *gongfu* is reflected in the phrase *gongfu cha* (功夫茶/工夫茶) that is the traditional way/style of brewing tea or even tea culture, which has been popular on the Internet. *Gongfu cha*, as a masterful, skilful style of brewing tea combines the technical

knowledge about brewing (procedure, application of given parameters, etc.) with the atmosphere and aesthetic values associated with it. It is practised mainly in Chaozhou, Fujian and Taiwan. There are three types of gongfu cha ceremonies: everyday (e.g. cultivating relationships with family, friends and colleagues), the so-called “sophisticated” and commercialized (d’Abbs, 2019). However, the word gongfu (功夫/工夫) has a much broader meaning than the two described above. It reflects potential skills and efforts necessary to acquire them. It is not limited to any specific scientific discipline or sphere of life. The first sign gong (功) reflects the results and effects of work (工) and strength (力), meaning diligent work and the effort associated with it. The sign fu (夫) indicates an adult male – manual worker. It suggests expertise and proficiency in a given field. Therefore, it indicates activities that require time, effort and patience (Berkshire Encyclopedia of China, 2009, p. 1413), as well as the desire to achieve mastery in a given area. This meaning is reflected in the Chinese phrase *zuo gongfu* (做功夫) which means practice; the phrase *zhua gongfu* (抓功夫) suggests finding enough time. The saying “constant grinding can turn an iron rod into a needle” (只要功夫深, 铁杵磨成针) shows that with hard work, perseverance and commitment, even very difficult tasks can be completed.

As discussed before, gongfu is not just about combat – aspects of defence, duelling and competition – but also about self-development (Nešković, 2020) and a much broader philosophical background – the teachings of chan Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism (Ye, 2019). The Chinese philosophical aspect of improvement (self-cultivation) is often associated with the teachings of Confucius and his followers. Likewise, according to the main Taoist writing – *Daodejing* (《道德經》) – self-cultivation embodies inner power. Also, according to Buddhist teachings, personal improvement leads to a state of buddhahood (Tan, 2017).

Confucian ideal of self-cultivation – *xiushen* (修身) – can be considered as a gongfu since desires and preferences naturally align with the demands of reason and social norms (Wang, 2018). The philosophical aspect of gongfu of knowledge is related to the art of living, which requires developing practical skills and abilities rather than intellectual interpretations. It is not so much about reading and mechanically following specific instructions, but about understanding the content and going beyond the instructions. Gongfu of knowledge points out that a knowledgeable person should not only have an open mind but also an open heart. Therefore, this concept refers to the emotional aspect of the inner world. The essence of gongfu of knowledge it is not in knowing the truth, but in knowing the way (Ni, 2016, 2019; Li, 2018) – learning is knowing the Dao (道) (Tan, 2017).

The above-mentioned inner force can be seen as Confucian:

- developing moral nobility – a healthy personality (Zheng and Huang, 2007),
- developing character – cultivating such virtues as benevolence/ humanity (仁),

- ritual propriety (礼), wisdom (智), righteousness (义), and trustworthiness (信),
- self-reflection and a conscious attempt to change and improve (Berkson, 2021).

The values of change and improvement are related to modification (修) of man – his person, body/health (身). It is believed that an individual may at some point self-actualise, undergo moral transformation enhanced by rituals (Slote, 2020). Self-cultivation is considered as essential in keeping order in the family, the state and the whole world (Kim and Kim, 2014). This idea highlights the significance of morality and virtue embodied in interpersonal relationships which are harmonious when everyone acts virtuously. Harmonious relationships developed in family and in other social groups result in general social order. Harmonious social relationships are, therefore, a fundamental aim of xiushen (Yang, 2021). Similarly to the concept of gongfu, xiushen also emphasises the importance of considerable and sustained effort. Its goal is not to achieve fame and power, but to develop character, change perspective and behaviour. This transformation is enhanced by employing an elite group of officials (modern managers), selecting a virtuous ruler (superior) and providing access to education (Tan, 2017).

5. Comparison and conclusions

Undoubtedly, the concept of kaizen has been well known worldwide and has been recognized outside Japan, also in Europe. In case of the concepts of gongfu and xiushen, they are practised mainly in countries culturally influenced by the philosophical and religious teachings of Confucius and his followers. The differences in Japanese and Chinese concepts also become evident in terms of their availability. Kaizen and Confucian philosophy in general (xiushen is only one of its ideas) is widely available in many languages, also on the Internet. The available materials on gongfu discuss mainly martial art and brewing tea – gongfu cha, therefore, available resources are limited only to these two aspects.

Each of these concepts highlights continuous and long-term improvement, available to everyone regardless position and social role. It applies to every aspect (also professional) of life. However, due to the global popularization of kaizen it seems that it has become more popular than the Chinese ideas. Nevertheless, all of these concepts – kaizen, gongfu and xiushen – emphasize improvement and achieving better results. Moreover, each of them requires self-commitment, self-discipline and self-control (employee).

Chinese concepts focus mainly on self-improvement. Gongfu and xiushen are firmly rooted in the assumptions of the classical book of Yijing (《易經》), which introduces the Great Oneness divided into complementary elements of yin and yang and the fact that everything in the universe depends on their harmonious coexistence. Moreover, especially the concept of xiushen highlights the importance of developing moral qualities as it not only leads to personal

perfection, but also enhance harmonious social relationships, and harmonious society (also in companies). A detailed list of the main qualities of kaizen, gongfu, and xiushen concepts are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

The main characteristics of the improvement concepts popular in Japan and China

Main characteristics	Japan	China	
	<i>kaizen</i>	<i>gongfu</i>	<i>xiushen</i>
Continuous improvement	x	x	x
Relating to every person and every area/aspect of life	x	x	x
Strengthening fitness and concentration		x	
Harmoniousness	x	x – assumptions based on the Book of <i>Yijing</i> – combining internal and external forces	x – assumptions based on the Book of <i>Yijing</i> – harmonious social relationships
High skill level, proficiency		x	
Striving for mastery, perfection	x	x	x
Results of work	x	x	x
Patience, time commitment	x	x	x
Strength and effort	x	x	
Energy	x	x	x
Going beyond the instructions, consciously changing		x	x
Moral nobility	x		x
Developing character		x	x
The importance of rituals			x
The social order	x		x
Motivation	x – Internal – External (new motivational system)	x – Mainly internal	x – Internal – External (other members of society)

Source: own elaboration.

All of the above-mentioned concepts result from the values adopted in Asian culture and principles offered by Confucian teachings. These values differ significantly from Western cultures. However, studies have shown they have been increasingly discussed in European and American management (Brannem and Kleinberg, 2000; Imai, 2012) since scientists and management practitioners consider the Japanese concept of kaizen as an effective method of improvement that can be successfully used in organizations with completely different cultural structures. Therefore, it can be assumed that in the upcoming years the attention of managers will also be focused on Chinese methods of improvement – perhaps it will be the concept of gongfu and xiushen, which will become completely new premises for developing key success factors in the international dimension.

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