

A Reconcilable Strategy for Sustaining Vietnam's Competitive Advantage

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Abstract: This paper theoretically explores the need for crafting a new framework for crafting a Vietnamese national competitive strategy, whether in international relations or business, rather than repetitively applying Western derived models from one culture to another. The recommendations for such a framework put forth here call for the application of a new cross-cultural strategic model. Dilemma theory is introduced as a means for eliciting and resolving failed geo-political marketing strategies. The recommendations also provide professional practice a tool for synthesizing values between cultures to create a better strategy. The study further implies that transference of a Western model to Asia, specifically Vietnam, without integrating cultural differences first, will result in failed strategies. The originality of this article stems from the application of an existing cross-cultural model of reconciliation to the field of international relations and global business strategy. The mindsets of Asia will undoubtedly conflict with the mindsets of the West. A tool has been provided for strategists, both business and diplomatic, to map out cultural differences as a means for making decisions that will allow enterprises in Vietnam to achieve a competitive advantage. This study maintains that by not building reconciliation into the strategy formulation process, the execution of a market strategy for growth will not be sustainable.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Vietnam, cross-cultural marketing, Southeast Asian market strategy, international relations, international marketing, international business.

1. Introduction

Even as ASEAN continues to move toward integration, this and other forms of Asian unity, attempted or imagined, still seem fragile and fraught with countervailing forces mostly originating within the Southeast Asian region itself. As a region, the linguistic heterogeneity and cultural diversity of Southeast Asia make

analogies to Europe or other areas of the world inadequate. In fact, a paradox exists between an evident high level of Southeast Asian economic integration and the absence of regional institutions which would support the stability required for continued prosperity (Solana, 2013). As a littoral state, Vietnam exemplifies both the continental and maritime features of Southeast Asia. It's economic and security policies when competing with other Southeast Asian states and those outside the region are similarly bifurcated: symmetrical cooperation

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with states within the region, asymmetrical struggle and cooperation with large states outside the region.

This paper attempts to bring together multiple cultural voices, strategic positions and values in considering this and related issues to form an inclusive, rather than an exclusive, praxis to demonstrate the need to build new strategic cross-cultural frameworks that might be universally applicable for operating effectively in different destination cultures. Genuine moments of cross-cultural pathways seem to be punctuated, ultimately, by exercises of hegemonic cultural power. Dilemma analysis (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1997), the methodology employed here, enables the mapping of mindsets of key players at a time of failing internationalism. By learning how to identify and extract the different meanings of the key players' value systems, one is able to map out a new cross-cultural strategic framework for sustaining the evolution of an elite capacity for change, whether in international relations or marketing. Deconstruction in cross-cultural arenas is long overdue, and this can be reconciled with the reconstruction of a new cross-cultural framework.

It is argued that organizations need to learn to manage cultural diversity with a new framework that has the strategy-making participants' cultural values built into it rather than adapting an Anglo-American or European model to other cultures, such as those in East, South or Southeast Asia. The need for the development of organizational ideologies that build on cognitive structures, culturally sensitized to diversity, is central to a generic strategy for managing increasingly culturally-diversified organizations that make up the globalized economy.

2. Going local: A vital strategic imperative

Societies with Anglo-American work ethics have created value systems which emphasize that individuals can succeed if they have talent and commitment. There are also value differences within these work ethics that are often neglected in increasingly multi-cultural organizations. These differences are certainly visible even in the cross-cultural settings among "psychologically-close" cultures (Sappinen, 1992). Similarities are defined as those of a cultural, social, and economic kind. Cultural "similarity-difference" in an Asian context can still arouse sometimes highly contested, scholarly debate, such as can be found in the competing viewpoints on the West and its effect on Asia expressed in recent works by Niall Ferguson (Ferguson, 2011) and Pankaj Mishra (Mishra, 2011). In the feud that has developed between these two authors in particular, Mishra has criticized Ferguson for being "wistful" about imperialism, and Ferguson, while acknowledging imperialism's inequality and racism, regards Mishra as simplistic and emotional mainly because of his emphasis on Western culpability in stifling Asian development during the era of high imperialism. In an examination of the other value system, value difference, despite assumed similarities, Asian integration, particularly at the regional level, is not a historical or cultural given, and not likely to proceed smoothly.

These and other impediments to integration arise because many Southeast Asian citizens are still driven by "primordial attachments" to place, identity, language, and culture (Noor, 2013). Interestingly some viewpoints on Asian integration in the present day blame not the legacy of imperialism or distant outside threats

so much as forces which originate closer by, within a given region itself. These forces brought about by “bad neighbors” and nearby “evil foreigners,” as one observer identified them, have been blamed for a variety of the region’s difficulties (*ASEAN Beat, The Diplomat*, July 2013). Yet, questioning the notion of regional harmony has never really disappeared. This is especially evident in the pessimistic re-thinking of Asian unity expressed in the writings of those who experienced the Asian financial crisis of 1997. For those analysts who remember that time, a “Concert of Asia,” based on the nineteenth century Concert of Europe, is unworkable because, among other things, the financial crisis revealed the ineffectiveness of the region’s security arrangements. Another factor inhibiting an Asian concert is the plurality of regimes as ethnic and religious divisions that do not encourage a similarity in outlook (Khoo and Smith, 2001).

Similarities and differences may also be exemplified by country-led conglomerates. In East Asia, these include the South Korean *chaebol*, Samsung, and the Japanese *keiretsu*. Sony and their operations in the culturally close societies of Vietnam and China. When these same corporations operate in other Asian cross-cultural contexts that might likewise be assumed to be similar, differences of a more complex kind have unexpectedly arisen in clashes over work and operational ethics, as have occurred in Indonesia and Thailand (*Kyoto Review of South East Asia*, 2011). These differences stem from the different fields of experience, broadly defined, of each society (Huo and McKinley, 1992; Kelley, Whatley, and Worthly, 1987). Similarly, in an organization’s formative context (whether it has experienced organic and/or acquisition-based

growth), history and circumstance determine organizational success (Kakabadse, 1991).

3. Market adaptation requires internal change

Adapting a successful market strategy from one culture to another requires an internal organizational change, and this will serve as a perception for gaining the competitive advantage. In pragmatic marketing terms, there is a business case for “change” driven by the need for increased sales, if not for purely altruistic reasons. Besides altruism, cultural changes are also influenced by many other factors, such as the organization's founder, its history, changing market, IT advancement, the actors’ changing profiles and leadership (Bennis, 1993; Korac-Boisvert and Kouzmin, 1994; Korac-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, 1997a, 1997b; Kouzmin and Korac-Boisvert, 1995). In a broader context, organizational culture forms an important ideological element within a global re-structuring of capital, labor and markets and a shift towards a more fluid organizational philosophy of “flexible accumulation” (Harvey, 1989). In order to harness these changes consciously, organizations need, in addition to a progressive cultural policy, an infrastructure and “new-age” leadership vision, or an egalitarian ideology (Korac-Boisvert and Kouzmin, 1994), actually to sustain and increase market share.

In Bakhtin’s (1968) terminology, organizations need to provide a hybridization model not unlike that which has been recently adopted by Samsung Electronics (T. Khanna, J. Song and K. Lee, 2011). The intent of this model is to bring together the exotic and the familiar through the actors’ broader cultural awareness. In the case of the

Samsung model, there is a blending of traditional Japanese and modern Western systems. Organizations need to change in ways such as this in order to accommodate actors from a variety of cultures, providing equal opportunity for the fulfillment of each actor's intellectual, emotional and socio-economic aspirations alike, irrespective of the cultural or ethnic differences (Korac-Boisvert and Kouzmin, 1994). The emerging global option highlights the need to think realistically about culturally creating an effective worldwide business (Ali and Falcon, 1995; Kakabadse, 1991; Zuboff, 1983) which reconciles cultural differences among the manufacturers, suppliers, channel partners and end-users when marketing their products or services in different destination societies.

4. Crafting cross-cultural marketing strategy by applying dilemma theory

Dilemma comes from the Greek word *Dilemma*, two propositions, which means a situation in which a choice has to be made to gain or avoid between two equally urgent, yet cunningly incompatible, alternatives. It is true that decision-making is sometimes about choosing between two unpleasant alternatives which quite often leads to a dilemma. Hampden-Turner (1990) sees dilemma as two contrasting propositions, so choosing between them is a challenge. There are dilemmas which are impossible to solve because the person imposing the dilemma is determined to disintegrate the victim's value system. Hampden-Turner (1990) sees these as dilemmas because the author argues that any value one cares to name - such as universality or rule orientation - has the task of accounting for many particular instances or exceptions to

its rule. Hampden-Turner (1990) maintains that dilemmas are often defined as choices between unfavorable alternatives. This would certainly sharpen the dilemma, but it is also a dilemma to have to forgo one alternative for another when one would like to have both. Hampden-Turner (1990) argues that one needs to extend Dilemma Theory to describe a very common experience, such as management wanting rapid market growth and high profitability, but it is difficult to obtain both. Hence, the effectiveness of the rule is how frequently one deals with encompassing, or failing to encompass, the unusual exceptions.

Choice includes combining values, not simply dividing them. The "horns" of a dilemma can be used like the cross-co-ordinates on a chart, allowing an organization to navigate and to plot its progress. Hampden-Turner (1990) argues that since Dilemma Theory holds that one can *oscillate* from horn to horn, the actual location of a quarrelling company is of less concern than the quarrelling itself. An organization, its working assumptions and strategies, constitute a whole mental and cultural pattern. Hampden-Turner (1990) argues that one can try to analyze the whole into discrete dilemmas, but these are not, in fact, discrete or separate. All solutions or near solutions make the other dilemmas easier to resolve. All failures or near failures to resolve a dilemma make the other dilemmas harder to resolve. Dilemmas are connected by a generalized skill in the capacity to resolve dilemmas - akin to steering a ship skillfully.

Moreover, such skills are learned not simply by individuals but by whole groups and organizations, so that the resolving of several dilemmas is mediated by *organizational learning* - by routinized ways of combining the

needs and the claims of different groups both inside and outside the organization. A cycle or, more precisely, a helix shows development on all three dilemmas sequentially. As the helix develops, the corporations concerned become steadily more differentiated, yet better integrated, and encounter greater turbulence to which they respond even faster to achieve even greater economies of scale - supported by increased flexibility and versatility. By concentrating on key dilemmas, one discovers which issues and which resolutions are crucial to building a new global strategic framework for marketing across cultures.

5. Asia beyond ideology: Applying unified strategy to inter-Asian marketing through harmonization

The conceptualization of unity through diversity, or unity permeating difference, is becoming more acceptable today as part of some of the changes which have given rise to the Information Age undermining the cultural integration of the nation-state. The concurrent incorporation of the state into large units and the transformative effects of global economic and cultural flows require a global unity within which diversity can take place.

Moving from the national state to the trans-national or global one, whereby the world becomes united to the extent that it is regarded as one place and one global culture, poses a number of challenges (Robertson, 1990; Wild, 1994). There are arguments both for and against cultural integration and homogenization at the global level. This is evidenced by multinational capitalism - Americanization; Japanization and media-imperialism - which assumes that local differences are being obliterated by universal forces exemplified by

increased international flow of people, capital and symbolic goods (Gassner and Schade, 1990). Factors that mediate between national cultures, global financial markets, international law and various international agencies and institutions form the trans-national or "third culture" (Gassner and Schade, 1990). It is this cultural imperialism that also exports its ethical framework for the way things should be done without taking into consideration the different value systems of the other cultures.

6. Asia misunderstood

With globalization pressures operating and Neo-Liberal propaganda dominant since 1978, many governments in East, Southeast and Central Asia, socialist or otherwise, as China, have found the pressure to accept Anglo-American economic and managerial recipes (re-structuring, de-layering, re-engineering, privatization) irresistible or unavoidable. The idea that these recipes might not have been appropriate is, often, inconceivable. As with all other policy and organizational choices, there are costs as well as benefits associated with choice; every gain in short-term efficiency carries with it a potential loss of longer-term capability. Unfortunately, potential losses are more often than not intangible and, thus, very often under-estimated (Kakabadse, 1991, 1993). Nonetheless, these losses are real and often have very marked long-term effects. Opposing these "traditionalist" views, others have perceptively pointed out that Asian countries have, in fact, been seeking their own norms, values, institutions, and rules of order, not satisfied with those imposed from outside (Pyle/Tellis, 2011). The operating factor, of course, in the present wave of globalization is the shift of the center of gravity in the international system from West to East (Tellis, 2011).

This phenomenon, at the very least, commends our re-examination of previous marketing strategies and an exploration of what may inform strategies emanating from the East. The past experience of many Asian, African and Latin American governments which resulted in large investment in economic and management training at prestigious foreign universities, has yielded ambiguous results. The often quasi-anecdotal comments that ‘the authoritarianism and misbegotten economic policies of many countries can be blamed on the Harvard Business School (Walsh, 1994), reveals a need for governance and management capabilities sensitive to formative context and other unique, developmental requirements. In the least, it requires a theoretical understanding that “asset stripping”, from the public to the private sector, is a major tenet of Neo-classical, economic macro-strategy, facilitated through contracting out and privatization (Johnston and Kouzmin, 1998). Jim Rogers, the so-called Indiana Jones of finance (McGrath, 2003), in his lecture to Korean MBA students at the Harvard Business School illustrates how Wall Street arrogance has been interwoven into the projection and export of American business ethics to China, Japan, Korea and elsewhere. This all may have been avoided if Anglo- Saxon values had not been built into the ethnocentric frameworks exported around the world.

Liberalized financial markets are unlikely to lead to allocative efficiency within an economy and, furthermore, may prove particularly inadequate in promoting long-term development strategies or dynamic efficiency (Cowling, 1987). The appropriateness of Anglo-American financial models of development for transitional economies, if applied to the frontier markets of Vietnam or Kazakhstan may, at best,

be questionable, based on experiences demonstrated in the Russian republic and the former Warsaw Pact states of Eastern Europe, or, as suggested by Corbett and Mayer (1991) and others (Sheldon, 1987, 1990; Ziauddin and Davies, 1992), largely non-transferable.

The now well reported economic gap, prevalence of corruption, and lack of transparency in China, and their increasing exposure in Korea, and Vietnam, demonstrates how states can become preoccupied with their competitiveness rather than making sacrifices for the common good (Anna, 2010; Soros, 1997). On the other hand, despite the amorphous, fluid, and hidden structures of non- state actors, transnational corporations, no matter their country of origin, have shown an increasing adaptability where they have invested in practices which promote social responsibility (Lim, 2000).

The West has a long record of getting the East, whether China, Japan, Korea, or Vietnam, among others, wrong for an equally long time. Simply put, China and many other countries in Asia are not like the West and never will be. Among many Westerners, perhaps the most misleading assumption is that the modernization of these Asian societies will inevitably lead to Westernization. But, this is wrong, because modernization is not just shaped by markets, competition and technology, but also by the identity these societies derive from history and culture (Jacques, 2009).

It is incumbent upon governance scholars, especially, not only to recognize that, apart from ideology and propaganda, they may have little to offer Asians with regard to political and governance transfer relevant to crisis transitional contexts, but also that current Western, Liberal, democratic praxis, to which

Asian intellectuals may have been historically looking, may, like previous political and historical misunderstandings, leave them with only one option: turning within, again, in order to determine specific transitional economic, political and governance outcomes in a highly distinctive, asi identified in the Russian manner (Kouzmin and Korac-Kakabadse, 1997).

Political and governance failure on behalf of Western scholarship to understand processes of *radical* economic and political change is not only regrettable, it is also dangerous (Burawoy and Krotov, 1993; Burawoy, 1994). Over 200 years the West dominated the world and was not required to understand other mindsets. Porter (1980) never entertained cultural differences of the suppliers, buyers, potential entrants, substitutes and industry competitors. In the future, as has often been the case in the past, whatever happens in, or comes from, Asia may be a surprise. Western scholarship failed not only to fully understand Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese culture and history, but also most other Asian peoples within the context of crisis and change prescriptions - or, "Transformation Management," as it has been called (Kumar, 1995).

Precisely at a time when the US, in particular, sought to "re-invent government" (Wamsley et al., 1990; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992) and to recognize the legitimacy and functional imperatives of more oligarchic and complex, regulatory mechanisms required within internationalizing economies, the nations of Asia may provide a unique model of such governance, legitimacy and functionality, following crisis transitions from an overly-regulated economy to what is, now, increasingly, perceived to be dysfunctional,

oligarchic strategies mitigating the consequences of "shock" Neo-Liberal economic transition (Burawoy, 1994), rapid, criminalized privatization and economic misdevelopment. Drawing on the concepts of another universalism, that of the East - from Asia, and China and its cultural sphere specifically-we may be able to create a better drawing of the strategic framework for formulating and executing marketing strategy across different Asian cultures.

The concept of *yin-yang* (the blending of opposites, rather than their absolute opposition, as in the West) may in the end prove to be a useful starting point for harmonizing marketing strategies of the East versus West. Indeed, *yin* and *yang* are continuously reconciled and synergized, and neither is always dominant. Both systems theory and *yin* and *yang* direct our attention to context. It is after all the context, whether in the mundane world or marketing strategy which evolves and requires us to revise the way we perceive reality (Jamieson, 1995). This returns us to the hybridized and blended business structural and marketing approaches already found in parts of Asia that could be adopted in the West as a cross-cultural marketing strategy that reconciles cultural differences. Ethnic resilience to reconstruction has often been under-estimated, as frequently seen in newly industrialized societies such as Vietnam (Osiel, 1984) and Brazil.

Convergence, however, is never complete and the adoption of particular social forms is mediated by cultures and strong social forces of ethnics. Hofstede (1992, 1993) contends that research evidence indicates that cultural diversity and diverse ways of thinking will remain for the next few hundred years. Although ethnics cultural differences undeniably exist, the significance attached to these differences is the point of discourse. Some

theorists argue that differences in international organizations have less to do with culture and more to do with the absence of a shared experience within the organization. The argument is that being of a different ethnic culture should not be an issue (Kakabadse and Myers, 1995a). Kakabadse and Myers (1995a) argue that the real issue of ethnic differences is preventing the “inhibition factor” from rising to prominence; not acting on the challenges that exist in an organization simply because they have been labeled as differences of ethnic.

The Anglo-American management “curse” of gender, multi-cultural talent, and chronic human resource wastage, in the name of re-engineering both public and private sectors for short-term, least cost efficiency and competitive advantage, is yet to be confronted in any strategic or cross-culturally systematic way. This is why organizations based in Hanoi, Alabama or Shanghai need to sit with their local management team, suppliers, buyers and end users to craft a “new” marketing strategic model, from the ground-up, that takes each one’s cultural assumptions and imperatives into consideration because conflict without reconciliation can be costly as a result of a failed strategy that did not unify the integrated value systems. The proposed framework, extracted from dilemma theory, provides a tool for marketing professionals to map their strategy based upon two contrasting propositions from opposing values. Applying this framework to global marketing enables one to record customers’ values and allows these to be compared with the consequences of lower sales and market share results that follow.

7. Conclusion

It is clear that marketing strategists need to become aware of the need to account for culture

prior to market entry. It could be suggested that a better definition of global marketing would be reconciling the needs and wants of the customer. When crafting a marketing strategy, it is vital to adopt an anti-ethnocentric approach so explicit cultural differences can be recognized. More importantly, it is essential for marketing teams to understand that different meanings are extracted from the consumer in different cultures.

It is suggested that more research and considerably more thought must be put into the design and execution of a strategy for marketing techno-interventions and retail services such as these into a globalized workplace. In the field of cross-cultural marketing, ideologies and lifestyles can compete and collaborate at the same time. Dominant classes, represented by global enterprises, often impose culture on others in a globalizing world (Thorne and Kouzmin, 2004) with little or no consideration of the host cultures’ framework for formulating marketing strategy. The emergence of new economic partners from different destination cultures comes with different perceptions, assumptions and expectations. This paper suggests that organizations at the dawn of this new millennium will require a new cross-cultural strategic framework for formulating and executing marketing strategy. This framework will be custom designed by the various participants and one which will include different value systems eliciting difference, and with the many cultures existing in Asia, it is suggested that this newly introduced framework will be a tool for sustaining Vietnam’s competitive advantage.

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