



An Analysis of Japanese and American Communication Styles As Seen through *Seven Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven*

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It is common knowledge that there is much value in using cinema as a means of studying and analyzing different cultures. As both an educational tool for group and individual study, this can aid in developing intercultural awareness and sensitivity. In this article, I provide an example of such an analysis. It is an examination and comparison of Japanese and American communication styles, and other culture-related issues, as observed through watching and comparing the Japanese movie, *Seven Samurai*, with the American movie, *The Magnificent Seven*. These two movies are examples of the same basic story told by two different cultures. Through watching the two movies, various intercultural concepts, such as high-context and low-context communication, can be clearly analyzed, contrasted, and understood. With that in mind, I highly recommend this type of comparison as a means of understanding, not only another “differing” culture at a deeper and more meaningful level, but perhaps more importantly, understanding our own society of origin, and our cultural val-

ues that we are often unaware of.

Seven Samurai was filmed in 1954 by the legendary Japanese director, Akira Kurosawa. *The Magnificent Seven* (based on *Seven Samurai*) was filmed in Mexico in 1960 by the American director, John Sturges. *The Magnificent Seven* consists of two hours and eight minutes of enjoyable entertainment. Although the writing is arguably no more than adequate, it is still a classic American “Western” with some of America’s greatest actors from that period. In comparison, *Seven Samurai* is three hours and eight minutes in length, an hour longer than *The Magnificent Seven*. It is a masterpiece, considered by many to be one of the best movies ever.

The basic story of both films is that a poor farming village is periodically being raided by bandits in a lawless region. Out of desperation, the farmers go looking for trained warriors who will help protect the village for meager pay. Seven trained warriors are eventually found, go to the village, set up defenses, train the villagers to fight,

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defeat the raiders, and lose four of their seven members in the process. In the end, both groups of surviving warriors ruefully observe that they had not won; the farmers had. Of course, there are major differences between the two stories. *Seven Samurai* takes place in the sixteenth century during Japan's "Sengoku Jidai", or Age of Civil War, a period of internal chaos. *The Magnificent Seven* takes place on the Mexican-U.S. border during the late nineteenth century, at the height of the Anglo-American western expansion.

An analysis of important differences between the communication styles of Japanese and Americans as observed through Seven Samurai and The Magnificent Seven

In his insightful book, *With respect to the Japanese* (1984), John Condon refers to Japan and America as "The Odd Couple". He says that no two countries could be more different, and then deftly describes why. In *Seven Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven*, many of these differences are readily visible. Although by no means exhaustive, these cultural differences will be analyzed in the following terms: Collectivism versus individualism, high-context versus low-context communication, code preference (a cultural preference for verbal or non-verbal communication), flow of communication style, power distance, self-enhancement versus self-effacement, interdependence versus independence, and self-identity.

The core of these differences, collectivism versus individualism (Ting-Toomey, 1999; Huang, 2003), is at the root of their respective cultures, and from these core differences appear their communication styles. The Japanese, like most collectivistic societies, tend to use high-context communication in contrast to Anglo-Americans preference

for low-context communication. This corresponds with what Ramsey (1998) labels "Code Preference", which is a cultural preference for verbal or non-verbal communication. Of course, both Japanese and Anglo-Americans use verbal and non-verbal communication, but the collectivistic Japanese stress non-verbal, while the individualistic Anglo-Americans stress verbal.

One of the first noticeable differences concerning the use of verbal versus non-verbal communication is the use of silence, or lack thereof. Throughout *Seven Samurai*, during tense situations, where problems are confronted or decisions must be made, there are long periods of silence. This is different from *The Magnificent Seven*, where there is a significant lack of "meaningful" silence. Ramsey (1998) notes, "A common perception is that Japanese are more comfortable with silence than are many North Americans" (p. 119). Not only are they comfortable with silence, but it is an important component of their communication process. For example, at the beginning of *Seven Samurai*, we see Kambei Shimada, the eventual leader of the samurai, getting his hair cut by a Buddhist priest near a muddy stream. Many peasants are anxiously watching him, as well as two samurai, who will eventually join Kambei's group to defend the village. Almost nothing is said, but through context and non-verbal communication, the Japanese audience has a growing sense of where this is leading to.

Shortly after the episode with the Buddhist priest, Kambei is confronted by some villagers who ask him to protect their village from bandits. While he is considering their request, he employs silence. During such situations, Kambei always appears as if he is in deep thought, while slowly

rubbing his head. His counterpart in *The Magnificent Seven*, Chris Adams (played by Yul Brynner), although not one to make hasty decisions, does not use silence in this fashion. Of the seven samurai, only Kikuchiyo (played by Toshio Mifune, considered by many to be one of the greatest actors of Japanese cinema) is not born to the samurai class, but to the peasant class. He is the most violent and noisiest of the samurai, and also the least mature according to Japanese cultural values. He is also the most individualistic.

Another point concerning non-verbal communication is that the characters in *Seven Samurai* appear to smile and laugh more than the characters in *The Magnificent Seven*. In fact, the Japanese as a whole, seem to laugh and smile (and cry) more than Americans, and often for very different reasons. The Japanese smile appears to be much more versatile than the American one. Seward (1984) writes, "The Japanese, like us, smile when they are pleased, when they are happy But they also smile when they are embarrassed and when they are sad ... when they are perplexed and when they are angry" (p. 132). Two of the younger samurai even cry. The gunmen of *The Magnificent Seven* laugh and smile less than the samurai, and never shed tears.

Another noticeable difference between these two movies is the flow of communication styles. For example, after arriving in the village, the samurai are confronted with numerous issues, including how to set up a defense for the village, how to attack the bandits to reduce their numbers, and how to deal with some dissent within the ranks of the villagers. Usually the samurai gather in a circle and four or five of the samurai state their thoughts concerning the situation. After one

samurai makes a statement (usually followed by a period of silence), another samurai makes his, adding to or "diplomatically" taking away from the previous statement in the process. Even when they are emotional, these conversations seem orderly and controlled.

In *Polite Fictions in Collision: Why Japanese and Americans Seem Rude to Each Other* (N. Sakamoto & S. Sakamoto, 2004), the authors make the analogy of "Conversational Tennis" versus "Conversational Bowling". They state, "A western-style conversation between two people is like a game of tennis. If I introduce a topic, a conversational ball, I expect you to hit it back" (p. 54). In the western-style conversation, vigorous verbal action makes the game enjoyable and exciting. This is quite different to the Japanese style of conversation, which is "like bowling. You wait for your turn and you always know your place in line" (p. 55). This is why the conversations between the samurai seem more controlled (and lengthier) than the conversations of the gunmen. Of course, part of this is due to the respect that the younger samurai show the older, which is what we would expect in a hierarchical society like Japan (Longmire, 1992; Ting-Toomey, 1999; Huang, 2003). This brings us to the issue of power distance.

Hofstede (2010) defines power distance as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (p. 61). Small power distance stresses that older people are generally neither feared nor respected, where as large power distance stresses the opposite. It is generally accepted that Americans tend to favor small power distance and

the Japanese tend to favor large power distance, and this difference is apparent throughout both movies. For example, the degree of respect that is shown Kambei by the other samurai is not shown to Chris by the other gunmen. Amongst the gunmen, there is an atmosphere of equality, even if in actuality they are not equal. The youngest gunman, Chico, openly challenges the older gunmen in a way that Katsushiro, the youngest samurai, would not dare to.

The Japanese preference for large power distance can also be seen in the interaction between the samurai and the villagers. The Japanese villagers show the samurai much more respect than the Mexican villagers show the gunmen in *The Magnificent Seven*, and they are more obedient. Also, the samurai seem to take almost a parental sense of responsibility for the villagers. None of the samurai ever consider abandoning the villagers, once they agree to protect them, but some of the gunmen in *The Magnificent Seven* do. This also shows the collectivistic nature of Japanese society, where people feel more obligation to the group than in individualistic North America (Ting-Toomey, 1999; Huang & Roland, 2003). Within the group of samurai itself, there is more of an air of hierarchy than within the group of gunmen. The older samurai clearly take responsibility for the welfare of the younger samurai, including mentoring them, which is what Kambei does in his various altercations with Kikuchiyo.

Next we will consider self-enhancement versus self-effacement, which is another communication style difference that is observable throughout the two movies. Anglo-Americans often favor a self-enhancement communication style in contrast to the Japanese preference for a self-effacement com-

munication style. According to Ting-Toomey (1999), "The self-enhancement verbal style emphasizes the importance of boasting about one's accomplishments and abilities. The self-effacement verbal style ... emphasizes the importance of humbling oneself via ... the use of self-deprecation concerning one's effort or performance" (p.107). The only samurai that ever brags is the passionate and reckless Kikuchiyo. After Kikuchiyo returns to the village from sneaking off to capture a matchlock gun from the bandits, Kambei scolds him for leaving his post, which threatened the welfare of the villagers and other samurai. Kikuchiyo indignantly retorts. "Why are you angry? You should be praising me!" Kambei answers, in measured and controlled anger, "There is nothing heroic about selfishly grabbing for glory. Listen to me. War is not fought alone!" Kambei is not simply scolding him for acting independently, but teaching him the Japanese moral value of putting the interest of the group before oneself (Ting-Toomey, 1999; Huang & Roland, 2003).

Kambei Shimada represents the mature, wise, and skillful samurai. He is always humble and self-effacing. Early in the movie, the young samurai Katushiro, after seeing Kambei dress as a Buddhist monk to save a peasant child captured by a thief, runs up to Kambei on a dirty road and throws himself down before him. He desperately implores Kambei (a very experienced samurai in his early fifties) to allow Katushiro to be his disciple. Kambei laughs and says that he is no one special, without a home or liege lord. Yes, he has seen lots of battles, but they were all on the losing side, so Katushiro should forget the whole idea. Except for the brash Kikuchiyo, all of the samurai in Kambei's group are self-effacing in speech, even

though in their relations with each other and the villagers, and their prowess in combat, they are obviously highly trained, competent, honorable warriors. Interestingly, none of the gunmen in *The Magnificent Seven* seem to brag, but nor are they self-effacing. This could be rooted in the American necessity to always emphasize equality (Sakamoto, 2004) even when the people involved are not equal.

One result of the Japanese preference for non-verbal, high-context communication is that verbal communication tends to sound vague, not only to westerners, but sometimes to other Japanese. This vagueness is underscored in the difficulty that Japanese often have in giving yes-no answers. My personal daily experience over the past fifteen years of living in Japan has supported what Seward (1984) points out. "A major difficulty with yes and no answers in Japan is that the Japanese are fundamentally against them. They regard vagueness as a virtue" (p. 38). One surprising point about *Seven Samurai* is that, although it could be assumed that the samurai would prefer high-context, circular communication, they are actually quite straightforward.

After arriving in the village, Kambei and the other samurai begin to set up a defense against an expected attack by the bandits. When Kambei explains his plans for defending the village to his unofficial second in command, Gorobei, their question and answer conversation is short and to the point. When talking amongst themselves, the villagers are also surprisingly direct. However, when the villagers talk to the samurai, they are much more indirect and vague. This is probably rooted in the hierarchical nature of Japanese society, especially at this time in history, when class segregation was legally enforced. Seward (1984) explains it

best: "This fondness for evasion may have had its roots in the fact that all during the feudal ages a samurai could lop off the head of any commoner if he acted 'otherwise than expected'" (p. 38).

As mentioned earlier, one main difference between collectivist societies (Japan) and individualistic societies (Anglo-America) is the corresponding tendency towards high-context and low-context styles of communication, respectively. According to Hall (1976), "A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (p. 91). There are countless examples of this difference in both movies. For example, early in *Seven Samurai*, Kikuchiyo and Katushiro sees Kambei get his head shaved; dress up like a monk, and save a child from a thief. Obviously Kikuchiyo admires Kambei, but never once tells Kambei of this admiration. The Japanese viewer knows this through context, which includes Kikuchiyo's complex behavior towards Kambei. However, in *The Magnificent Seven*, when an intoxicated Chico (a character loosely based on Kikuchiyo) first confronts Chris, he inadvertently blurts out that he has searched for Chris out of admiration. It is as if Akira Kurosawa expected his Japanese audience to understand the implicit high-context message, where the director of *The Magnificent Seven*, John Sturges, felt that his Anglo-American audience needed a verbally explicit, clear, low-context explanation.

Also, the main characters of *Seven Samurai* appear to be *interdependent*. When the samurai or

the Japanese villagers talk amongst themselves, self-centered behavior is admonished and selflessness respected, as seen in the previous examples of Kambei scolding Kikuchiyo. This contrasts with *The Magnificent Seven* where showing *independence* is respected. There is a scene in *The Magnificent Seven* where Chico has been following the gunmen as they are riding to the Mexican village to defend it. At first, Chris and the five other gunmen refuse to let the young, hot-headed, Chico join them. But, Chico persistently follows them. After being ignored for some time, Chico finally rides ahead of the gunmen and sets up a camp fire with enough cooked fish for all. When Chris sees Chico and his persistence, he smiles, laughs, and waves for Chico to join them. With a wry, cocky grin, Chico waves at Chris for the group to join Chico. Chico is showing his own independence and individuality, and Chris respects him for it.

In all societies, the individual self-identity includes an “I-self” and a “we-self” (Roland, 2003). Individualistic societies emphasize development of the “I-self” over the “we-self”, and collectivistic societies emphasize the development of the “we-self” over the “I-self”. In the “we-self”-focused Japanese society, conformity is valued and individualism frowned upon. Concerning collectivistic Asian cultures, Huang (2003) states, “Conformity governs the interpersonal relations in contrast to the individualism and self-expression of more Eurocentric cultures. As a result of these values, individuals are typically more socially and psychologically dependent on one another” (p. 43). For the samurai, their self-esteem depends more on their relationship with their group and the villagers at large, in contrast to the gunmen, who also value external relationships, but their self-esteem is pri-

marily “I-self” centered. For example, because of Japanese “we-self”-centered conformity, it takes Kikuchiyo considerably more time to earn his place as the seventh samurai, than for Chico to earn his place as the seventh gunman.

Finally, the peasants in the Japanese village tend to employ high-context, non-verbal communication. In contrast, the majority of the characters in *The Magnificent Seven* tend to employ low context, verbal communication. However, the actual seven samurai and seven gunmen seem to employ both methods, given the needs of the situation. This can only lead one to believe that the most effective communicators in both societies adapt their communication methods to the needs of the situation.

This analysis of Japanese and American communication styles, and other culture-related issues, as seen through watching *Seven Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven*, highlighted many differences. It demonstrated a clear difference in preferences for verbal and non-verbal communication, Japanese preferring non-verbal, and Americans preferring verbal. Examples of this include the Japanese deft use of silence, versus the American discomfort with it, and the Japanese smile, which seems to be more versatile than the American one. In communication styles, the Japanese preference for high-context communication contrasted noticeably with the American preference for low-context communication. Japanese self-enhancement versus American self-effacement was also observable. This combination of communication and cultural traits is the basis of Sakamoto’s (2004) analogy of “Conversational Bowling” (Japanese) versus “Conversational Tennis” (Anglo-Americans). The collectivistic nature of Japanese society versus the individualistic nature of American society was also

apparent, including the preference for interdependence (Japan) versus independence (America), and the related concept of the “I-self” versus the “we-self”. Concerning power distance, Japanese society is seen as prioritizing hierarchy and Anglo-American society as prioritizing equality.

By viewing movies from differing cultures and analyzing them within the context of intercultural studies, abstract theory can be given relevant context, and made more experiential in the process (especially through use of the imagination). This creates a more meaningful, effective, and enjoyable learning experience, and can greatly assist in the process of developing intercultural awareness and sensitivity.

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