

Original Paper

The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on The Socio-Cultural Roots of Japanese Organizations and the Coming Renaissance in Organizational Strategy and Innovation

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Abstract

Starting in the early 1980s a handful of Japanese automakers began buying up American automotive car parts companies, even into Ford's steel manufacturing subsidiary. This was only the beginning, Japanese organizations embarked on a buying spree in everything from US commercial real-estate to Hollywood production studios. Everyone was convinced that "Japan Inc." would buy the whole of America. To put this into perspective, in 1970, 7 out of 10 of the world's largest banks were American and none were Japanese. By 1990, 6 of the top 10 largest banks in the world were Japanese and no American bank made the list. However, within a decade this significant level of development peaked, and by 1991, the country that was arguably at the centre of industry and commerce, retreated globally. The "lost" decade of the 90s became two decades and by some accounts extended to three. Nevertheless, Japan's global influence still remains formidable; it has the third largest economy in the world. This has been achieved by a nation with almost no natural resources to speak of, a nation where global export is the primary economic lifeline and its exported products are considered some of the most technologically advanced in the world with innovation being a cornerstone.

This initial paper of a series of extended research will introduce concepts of learning and knowledge creation, as well as conversion and implementation into innovation and strategic advantage. The links to Japan's socio-cultural factors will be identified, examined, and their relationships manifesting in business organizational cultural factors and influences will be analysed. We will address how these in turn impact organizational processes resulting in corporate strategy. A key aspect is the investigation of the role that Artificial Intelligence (AI) plays within this framework. A qualitative analysis was

performed to measure organizational AI adoption and utilization and direct impact on knowledge sharing. The indirect influence on corporate culture and subsequent organizational strategic advantage is conceptualized. We further consider the role AI can play in four basic strategies of advantage-development within the context of knowledge creation and sharing within the organization, that is, the identification and utilization of key factors for success; the identification of means for exploiting differences in competitive advantage among rivals; the identification of means for upsetting rival industry factors so that openings can be created; and the identification of innovation opportunities and pathways themselves.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence, Knowledge Creation, Sharing, Conversion; Strategic Innovation, Japanese Organizational Business Culture

1. The Social-Cultural Origins of Japan's Knowledge & Learning

It can be said that a big factor in Japan's economic success has been from the organizational knowledge creation skills and expertise found in many Japanese companies. "*Organizational knowledge creation*" specifically refers to the ability of a company not only to create new knowledge but to disseminate it throughout the organization, as well as incorporate this knowledge into its products, services, and overall corporate systems. The result is that this brings about the incremental and continuous innovation for which many Japanese companies are known for in the world.

The "Japanese" approach to knowledge and corporate management practice, as well as everyday life in general, is a highly integral approach, combining Shinto, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Western Scientific Materialism. The Japanese value & ethic system itself stems from these five areas, greatly influencing corporate culture and thought to this day. Shinto is the indigenous religion of Japan. It emphasizes harmony of all living and natural elements. Confucianism was imported to Japan from China 2,500 years ago and is more of a social code rather than a religion. Confucianism identifies types of relationships with distinctly clear patterns of behaviour that govern each. This is easily transferable to the Japanese corporation in the form of the seniority system. Like Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism also were brought to Japan from China. Japanese society developed its own mixture of these two concepts - Zen Buddhism, which emphasizes focus, discipline, and concentration.

An additional basis for modern day Japanese values and behaviour is the notion of "*wet-rice farming*." The introduction of wet-rice farming to Japan from China sometime between 1,000 to 300 BC created a lifestyle that instilled the Japanese with a high level of patience, perseverance, diligence, cooperation, and highly-relational group dependence. Wet-rice farming is a fairly complicated process that cannot be accomplished alone. Maintaining such systems is virtually impossible for one individual or even one family, and requires those qualities mentioned above (De Mente, 1994). The fact that Japan is an isolated country of which the majority of the terrain is very rugged and natural resources are relatively

scarce, only adds to the difficulty. In Japan the saying goes “eating rice from the same pot” (同じ鍋からご飯を食べる) meaning: we, the Japanese, are all in it together. This group thinking plays an important role in knowledge creation and utilization. It is the idea that the group is far more important than the individual which enables many Japanese companies to create and disseminate much information to all in the company instead of keeping information compartmentalized, as is done in many Western organizations.

From the above descriptions we can say that for the Japanese, knowledge means: (1) wisdom that is acquired from the perspective of the **whole** personality; (2) knowledge that develops from **relationships**; and (3) knowledge through **flexibility**. Furthermore, while most Western views of human relationships are atomistic and mechanistic, the Japanese view is collective and organic (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). It is within this context that the Japanese emphasize subjective knowledge and intuitive intelligence. Thus, the main distinction between Western and Japanese thought on knowledge is one of the scientific vs. the humanistic approach.

In the 1920s and 1930s a group of management academics at Harvard headed by George Mayo conducted experiments concluding: “.....social factors such as morale, a sense of belonging, and interpersonal skills needed to understand human behaviour significantly improved productivity.” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Mayo went on to develop a new management theory of “human relations” which argued that human beings are social animals who should be understood and treated within the context of the social group. Mayo’s theory touches upon the Japanese way of management and group culture. What is the implication of this system for managers? It is this sense of belonging to the Company-group, or more importantly, being part of the company family. Once a new recruit is accepted into the company, the company becomes an extension of their family. These ideas of groupism, belonging, and family are fundamentally the strongest elements, not only in Japanese corporate life, but in the psyche of Japan as a country and as a people. Managers realize this strong sense of belonging in their everyday dealings with their employees. This creates a sense of stability within the company. Employees feel a great sense of belonging to a group and will work together effectively in many areas of the company including the creation and sharing of knowledge for the good of the entire group. As we will see this origin of psyche will be a key factor in utilization of AI.

2. The Key: Knowledge Conversion

Western management traditions are rooted in explicit knowledge, clear-cut, formal, and systematic. Japanese management however has a different understanding. Explicit knowledge is recognized but far more important is Tacit Knowledge - highly personal and difficult to formalize thus making it difficult to communicate and share with others; it includes subjective insights, intuitions, hunches and is rooted in the individual’s experience, ideals, and values. The theory presented here holds that tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge are *not* mutually exclusive and the Japanese approach to knowledge creation is

based on the specific interaction of these two entities. This interaction is referred to as “*the 4 modes of knowledge conversion*,” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. The 4 Modes of Knowledge Conversion

Type	Characteristics	Interaction
<i>Socialization</i>	Sharing experiences	Tacit to Tacit.
<i>Externalization</i>	Concept creation that leads to innovation	Tacit to Explicit
<i>Combination</i>	Concept systemization into formal structures	Explicit to Explicit
<i>Internalization</i>	Learning by doing that transforms into corp. culture	Explicit to Tacit

Among the four modes of knowledge conversion, Externalization holds the key to knowledge creation because it creates new explicit concepts from tacit knowledge; this is a very important factor in sparking innovation. And, it is this type of process which a significant number of Japanese companies utilize based on the socio-cultural origins of their views on knowledge and learning. Nonaka and Takeuchi conceptualized what they referred to as ***The Knowledge Spiral Model*** in their seminal work, ***The Knowledge Creating Company*** (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995); and, according to the authors, there are four conditions required at the organizational level to promote this knowledge spiral. See Table 2 below.

Table 2. The 4 Organizational Conditions required for the Knowledge Spiral Model

Condition	Operational Requirement
<i>Intention</i>	Strategic intention, direction, objectives must be communicated at all levels
<i>Autonomy</i>	Level of employee decision-making must be clearly defined
<i>Fluctuation</i>	Individual initiative creation and progress is incorporated into the system
<i>Redundancy</i>	Knowledge beyond that which is necessary for operational effectiveness

Integrating the four modes of knowledge conversion along with the four conditions required for promoting the so-called knowledge spiral, we can provide a basic construct which serves as the ideal example of the process outlined by the theory. See Figure 1.

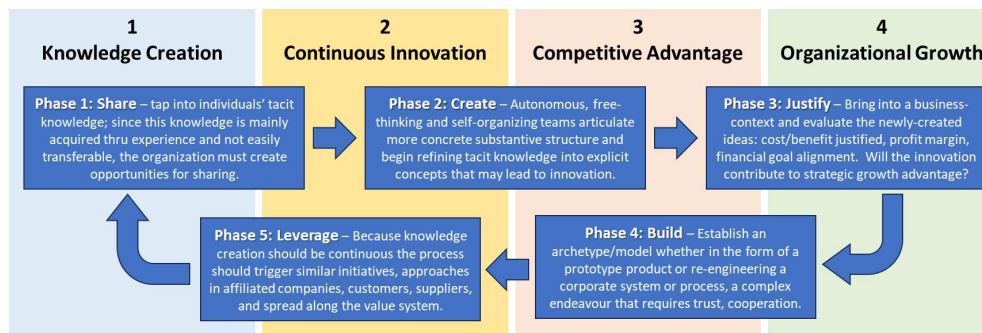


Figure 1. The Knowledge Creation & Innovation Cycle

3. Organizational Structure and Support Mechanisms for Leverage

3.1 Hierarchy

Up to this point we have outlined certain cultural origins of Japanese identity and attempted to integrate these with fundamental concepts of knowledge creation and utilization for innovation/strategic growth. In this section we continue along a two-track approach: (1) extend the cultural aspects to **operational structures** that can be primed for strategic growth; (2) introduce an integrated approach that leverages the concepts within strategic **alignment** which based on our research can serve as a foundation point for the utilization of artificial intelligence within Japanese business resurgence.

Japanese companies are fairly rigidly hierarchical. Although companies promote a sense of equality through equal compensation and wage parity this is true only within each specific (horizontal) level of the organization. At the top of the organizational structure is the kaicho (会長, chairman), followed by the shacho (社長, president). In most companies however the vast majority of the actual work is accomplished by the kacho (課長, mid-level manager). Leaders in Japan are generalists and their main responsibility is to maintain the morale of their workers (Alston, 1990). Japanese often choose their leaders with personal qualities in mind rather than particular skills, experience, or some specific knowledge. This reinforces the socio-cultural factors mentioned. Younger employees are closely observed as they come up the ranks and those selected are likely to be the best listeners and team harmonizers, the ones who work loyally, steadily and quietly and promote these qualities in others (Lanier, 1991). Above all else wa (和, harmony) is of prime importance. Wa is promoted in all situations of daily life. And, Japanese managers concentrate their efforts on motivating all workers, whatever their background and ways of thinking, to work harmoniously together.

A process promoting harmonious organization is Ringi-Seido (稟議制度) a commonly-used formal procedure of management by group consensus. A proposal that originates in one section, is forwarded to all relevant sections, section heads, managers, directors, and ultimately the president of the company (Chen, 1995). Upon receiving this proposal each individual reviews, it, makes comments, and affixes their personal seal to it. They then pass it on to the next individual. If there is significant opposition to the proposal as it stands, it will be revised and the process will be repeated once again. The ultimate

purpose of this system is to eliminate dissension and get general agreement. This system provides for greater participation in the decision-making process within the Japanese company. Essentially any decision adopted through this method has already been agreed upon by the time it is set to be formalized. An added benefit of this system is the fact that many individuals throughout the company gain a wide-range of information and valuable knowledge on certain particular important aspects and company decisions. And, as may be evident this system can form an important link with AI integration. In Japanese corporations, middle managers are at the very centre of knowledge management. Although Japanese companies are very structured and hierarchical, much weight and decision-making take place at the mid-management level where middle managers make specific tactical and operational plans for implementation. This approach directly captures tacit knowledge for the organization in a more efficient manner. In a typical western top-down environment conversion can be lacking and tactical and operational tacit knowledge, for the most part, is compartmentalized and can be lost. In Japanese organizations middle managers are usually the leaders of development teams, self-organized task forces, and other such working-groups. They are at the very centre of knowledge management, positioned at the intersection of both vertical and horizontal flows of information, the true “knowledge engineers” that can, not only, leverage the organization’s knowledge but handle knowledge conversions as well.

3.2 Bridging to Strategy Alignment: 3P Framework

According to Dr. Lawrence Hrebiniak at the Wharton School of Management at the University of Pennsylvania (Hrebiniak, 2013), the most formidable obstacles to effective strategy execution are:

- Inability to manage change effectively and overcome resistance
- Not having guidelines or a model to guide strategy execution efforts
- Poor or inadequate information sharing among individuals or SBUs
- Unclear communication of decision responsibility/accountability
- Lack of sense of ownership among key employees
- Lack of understanding of the important role of organization structure

The direct connection of these to a people or a process problem, and in most cases a problem of both, is obvious. Furthermore, coupling this with a disadvantaged product offering can spell disaster for any organization in practically any industry sector. Here we briefly outline our **3P: People, Process, Product Framework**.

3.2.1 People

Stakeholders (people, including employees) have a direct, and often-times, critically-decisive influence on organizational strategic direction; after all, its ultimately to the benefit of these stakeholders that a strategy be successful in achieving objectives. Thus, stakeholder knowledge, and proactive support, of the strategy is critical for successful implementation/alignment. Furthermore, a key factor in directly identifying and proactively engaging the people of the organization within the strategic alignment framework process is understanding key relationships and structures, both formal and informal, within

not only the SBU, but the overall corporate structure as a whole. This is where we can consider the importance and link of the socio-cultural factors which directly impact organizational structure and which can subsequently benefit from AI.

Unfortunately, however, and especially difficult for an international organization taking a diverse group of people with different cultural norms, different background experiences, different beliefs and lenses to the world, and depositing them within a corporate setting, you inherently create friction and stresses within such a system. There is competitiveness, rivalry, and lack of trust, inherent organizational misalignment. This is basically people being people; it's difficult to overcome and it's part of the landscape for any organization. But it is essential for the strategist to, first of all, identify and accept this macro-concept as a given (within any organization), one which directly impacts organizational culture; understand the micro-relationships within this setting that create and fuel organizational subcultures; and utilize the appropriate leadership tools, motivations, and strategic alignment techniques that help change peoples' views of the organization and their work within it, away from simply transactional, and more towards honest engagement, mutual respect, and even towards the concept of warmth, which we define: a projection of feeling of shared goals and values that lead to trust and ultimately alignment and success. It is an area where AI can be effective.

3.2.2 Process

The second critical element in our 3P Framework is business systems, structures and processes. Given that an organization has a pool of talented and motivated individuals that can be part of the strategic alignment initiative, it then boils down to providing resources in the form of effective and efficient systems, the tools and support mechanisms that the people will use to move forward.

Kim Warren of the London Business School writes: *"....when the causes of performance through time are not understood, companies tend to make poor choices about their future. They embark upon plans they cannot achieve, failing to assemble what they need..."* (Warren, 2007). Warren refers to this as the critical path to strategic direction. In order for an organization to properly align it must establish the proper processes & tools in an attempt to facilitate its course down that path. The primary issue for many organizations is not that they do not have the resources to do this. Establishing systems and processes need not be a high resource-intensive endeavour, but one of what we refer to as ***flexible-discipline***. The 400-year-old Japanese organization in which we researched and subsequently modelled our conceptual approach has worked to establish a unique set of operational processes under the 3P framework which have their origins deep within the organization's history which in turn align with the socio-cultural aspects we initially introduced. Supporting business processes must be rigorous, of course, but they must also be dynamic and flexible; they must allow for some deviation. In our research and organizational case study presented overall several subsequent papers, we argue that being flexible in your strategic alignment support processes does not defeat the purpose of a system; in fact, it enhances the system and process to produce improved results within the organization. This rationale, it

should be noted, comes from a team of Japanese systems engineers who actually worked with business professionals on this research. Surprisingly it was the engineers themselves which made the point that flexibility “is good”. It enables continuous process innovation and an entry-way for AI-driven optimization.

3.2.3 Product

Aligning people, establishing a flexible-disciplined approach to the right systems and processes, and making these dynamic and responsive to your strategic efforts, ultimately will lead to the organization establishing innovative, desired products and services and thus organizational advantage and growth. From both strategic and operational points of view (and also affecting tactics), a primary consideration in innovative, market-desirable product development efforts and initiatives that utilize aligned people and processes is: to what extent you approach this endeavour while at the same time protecting existing revenue streams within the organization?

New product initiatives are fraught with suboptimal performance which can be traced back to multiple reasons such as: idea-building and analysis done in relative isolation, lack of multiplicity on the product team, and lack of connectivity between the product development team and the rest of the organization and others. This last point is especially important and can occur in international organizations in which product development takes place at a headquarters location (in our case, Japan) while a Strategic Business Unit (SBU) located in a target market (US and Europe) is required to launch the product as part of strategic growth initiatives. These initiatives which are essentially (new product) project management endeavours may ultimately lead to suboptimal product results if not handled correctly. Here again AI can be leveraged.

4. Artificial Intelligence as a Leverage Multiplier within 3P

4.1 AI and People within the Socio-Cultural Foundation

There is an ongoing discussion today relating to AI; on the one hand there is little doubt of the technological benefits that can be reaped; on the other hand, a good portion of society feels that AI will be a potentially disruptive, even dangerous force. We feel that AI will have the potential to in fact reinvigorate and revitalize existing traditions and practices. Japan has a special kind of relationship with robots. This is due to Japanese philosophical and religious views (Shintoism, Animism) that attribute spiritual value to objects. This, in turn, is suggested to be the foundation of why Japanese citizens more easily accept AI technology (Persson, 2021). Ikkatai’s research suggests that as much as 65% of Japanese feel that development of AI had been a good thing for society. (Ikkatai, 2022). This value is on the higher-end of other nation’s and does set Japan apart.

In Japan AI is being integrated into the culture faster than anywhere else in the world. Japan has a long history of non-human, inanimate object ritualization which includes computers and robots; for example, in 2015 there were multiple funeral services for obsolete Sony AIBO robotic dogs at the Kōfukuji, a

Nichiren temple in Chiba prefecture (Baffelli, 2021). This was no joke and a clear example of technology being integrated within the social structure of society we discussed at the beginning of the article. Furthermore, Figure 2 below shows an AI, algorithmic-driven robot Buddhist “priest” at the 400-year-old Kodaiji temple in Kyoto. It was developed at a cost of over \$1 million together with renowned robotics professor Hiroshi Ishiguro at Osaka University. According to the temple, “....one day it could acquire unlimited wisdom....”

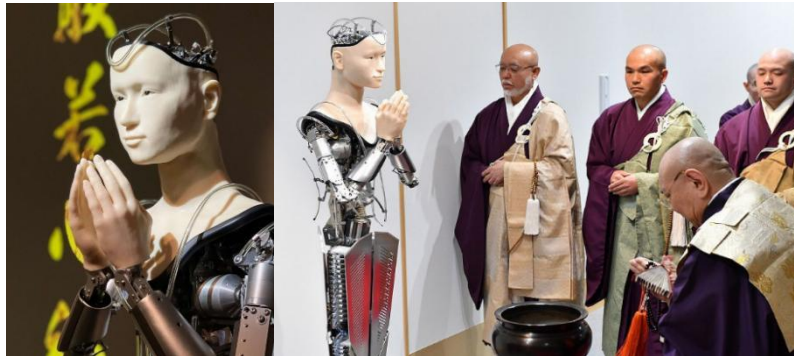


Figure 2. Mindar the AI-driven Robotic Buddhist Priest of Kodaiji Temple in Kyoto

Japanese, who grew up with popular culture representations of robots and AI are more able to relate to these emotionally and see them as potential friends. This observation seems to resonate with commentaries in the media that present Japan as a ‘machine-loving’ nation or as synonymous with the technology of the future (Baffelli, 2021). So too can algorithmic technologies become powerful tools for understanding cultural processes and management of culture according (Goldberg, Srivastava, 2022). Companies that leverage AI can better understand and potentially more effectively manage their teams and thus create competitive advantage. In addition, AI systems can assist with the integration of multicultural employees within Japanese organizations – something that is very important in Japan as the country increasingly seeks out foreign personnel due to a changing/aging workforce. This is something that the author has experience first-hand while working for one of the biggest and oldest companies in Japan. AI tools can learn how project team members communicate for example and, not only streamline this communication with deeper perceptions of meaning, but also predict a sense of belongingness, engagement, and even team performance for local and expat teams working together. Organizations can use AI to assess how tightly-knit a work network is and how can it be leveraged towards performance.

Finally, we address a very unique characteristic of Japanese culture and society – *omotenashi* (御持て成し), *the mindset that focuses on anticipating other people’s needs*. This is a very important aspect of business in Japan, whether that business is heavy industrial manufacturing or the local grocer at the corner of the neighbourhood. *Omotenashi* is a strategic differentiator that has contributed to Japan’s

reputation for very high focus on customer service. With the coming of AI, which we sometimes tend to think as rather cold impersonal service, *omotenashi*, as an embedded cultural foundation will strengthen Japanese business against global rivals.

4.2 AI and Process within the System of Knowledge Creation, Sharing, and Utilization

The first and very key point with respect to AI and a corporate system approach is what Japanese organizations have been successfully pursuing over the past several years – that is embedding such systems within their **business functions** and not seeing them as simply IT project. This is of primary importance and something the author has witnessed throughout dozens of higher-level strategic meetings in Tokyo. The AI effort is owned by top strategic business leaders guided by younger, technologically more savvy business managers from throughout the organization; and thus, the focus remains on **practical business value**.

Additionally, and unlike many organizations in the West, the Advantage of Japanese companies is that they have a very good understanding of their processes, systems, and workflows and these are integrated to the greatest extent (optimized) to focus on improving the customer experience thru employee productivity engagement, collaboration and innovation – all basic characteristics of the socio-cultural aspects of the nation. Thus, the cultural aspect of business is very much supported by the practical systems and process approach that is created and one where AI will be easier to implement and directly and positively affect. Also, data, and information which is turned into knowledgeable action (tactical, operational, strategic) is democratized to a much greater extent than in the west were compartmentalization seems to still be the norm. Japan truly is a sharing culture. Thus, AI is poised to optimize the flow of data for continuous improvement. (Sharma, 2023). Additionally, AI has been successfully utilized to identify trends within large databases within the organization in order to develop software tools for JIT thus optimizing process value system areas not only with the organization but throughout its value chain.

PwC Japan is emphasizing that with AI comes another more fundamental opportunity to streamline even further systems in Japanese organizations to an extent of virtual hyper-optimization so as to leverage more knowledge, more efficiencies more productivity and focus on customers, and strategic expansion. An example can be seen in companies like Fujitsu (Petrenko, 2023) as well as larger industrial projects which we investigated. AI systems are being used to take and analyse information and take necessary actions that maximize project success. In an organizational context, the AI system has been identified as one that leads to improving an organization's ability to use data from previous systems and predict the future decisions in a way that substantially reduced the cost of making predictions. AI can evaluate project results and identifying areas that need improvement as well as use data from past projects to determine which factors have been most successful and recommend actions to be taken in the future (Petrenko, 2023).

4.3 AI and Product Innovation

Innovation seems synonymous with Japanese products, something that has propelled the country to create and maintain the third biggest economy in the world. Today, high-technology exports and GDP per hour are key factors in Japan's growth and level of innovation as a nation. The positive and significant relationship between Japan's economic growth and high-tech exports as innovative technology is deployed is believed to be what drives the economy to grow, helping improve its growth through the years (Bonsay, 2021).

Japanese organizations have utilized AI in significantly innovative ways both in process and product. From the early 1980s when the term “fuzzy logic” was coined to be used to develop washing machines that adjusted themselves, to bread-making machines which were created with the goal of harnessing expert tacit knowledge in order to create a “perfect” bread product every time. Today companies in Japan use AI to scrape online data and information to utilize in both marketing and product development. AI is used to identify objects, music, terminology, people, and other environmental conditions so as to provide textual, visual, and auditory input, as well as context to identified objects. This technology is going into new products that can be hugely beneficial.

The next significant step in Japanese product innovation is the use of AI to analyse historical design and development processes which have been previously largely on paper from the 1970s, 80s and 90s, now in digital form, so as to identify key factors of competitive advantage for past products, correlate these two key factors in consumer desires, and finally extract areas where the organization can leverage resources to establish products (and services) for today's and tomorrow's consumers. This approach gets to the core of Japanese company intimacy with customer requirements and goes beyond to what was previously discussed with *omotenashi*.

5. Conclusion

The environment we are operating today is hyper-dynamic with respect to technology and Artificial Intelligence. Everything is becoming digitized and reimagined, and organizations are questioning the fundamentals of their workflows. AI has undoubtedly become a key player to identify and enable fast decision making and win business over competitors and Japanese companies, with their historical socio-cultural advantage, are set to reap rewards of significant innovation and continued growth.

Historically being at the forefront of technology, Japanese corporations are integrating AI technologies into their operations and strategically navigating through the resultant labour market transformation that is taking place globally. Human-AI collaborative systems are at the forefront. The initiative is an extension of the harmonious relationship, *wa* (和) and cultural foundation of Japanese organizations - the goal to be productivity a potential AI-driven Ringi-Seido (稟議制度) for example, and customer focus *omotenashi* (御持て成し). Extending from the cultural roots, this initial paper in our series presented certain aspects of Japanese knowledge creation and management within organizational

learning. We have seen that this has its foundations in relationships, flexibility, and understanding the bigger picture (全体像を理解する) and work with AI is focused on these key aspects of organizational culture. Finally, these concepts form the all-encompassing approach at the centre of Japan's socio-cultural core – the **relational** view of the world rather than the **atomistic** view so prevalent in the West. This **relational view emphasizes connections** an aspect of which AI is superbly attuned to in optimizing not only from a business sense but well beyond.

After 34 years Tokyo's stock market has once again broken even to reach previous highs not seen since 1989-90 back when Japan was “taking over the world”...with Japanese companies buying up American assets like Columbia Pictures in Hollywood and Rockefeller Center in New York City. Today, according to the Wall Street Journal (2/3/24), Japan actually is looking pretty good. Japanese companies with their adoption of AI are turning to the classic formula for strategic advantage as described by the lauded strategist Kenichi Ohmae (Omae, 1982)...but today it is being done using AI.

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