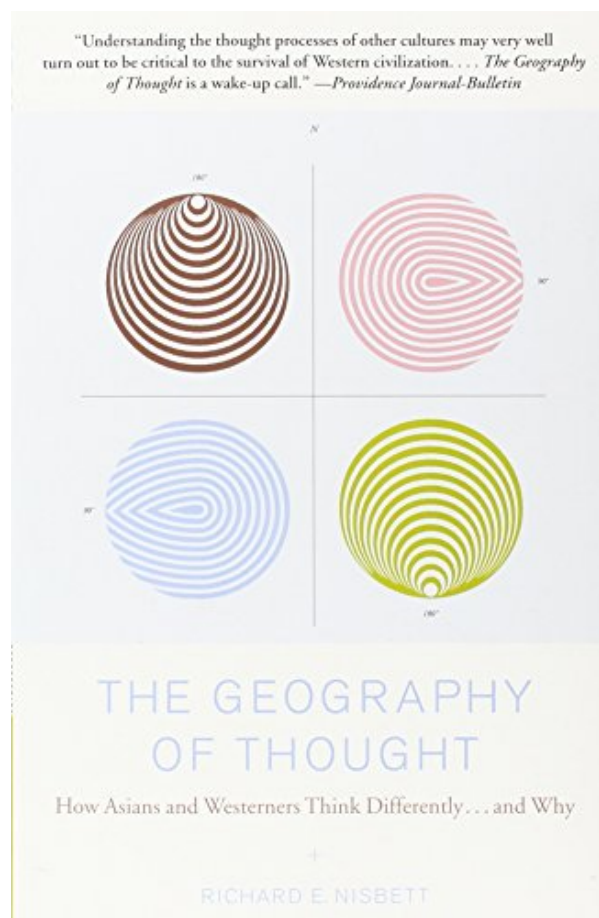


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How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... and Why

RICHARD E. NISBETT

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From Publishers Weekly

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A “landmark book” (Robert J. Sternberg, president of the American Psychological Association) by one of the world's preeminent psychologists that proves human behavior is not “hard-wired” but a function of culture.

Everyone knows that while different cultures think about the world differently, they use the same equipment for doing their thinking. But what if everyone is wrong?

The Geography of Thought documents Richard Nisbett's groundbreaking international research in cultural psychology and shows that people actually think about—and even see—the world differently because of differing ecologies, social structures, philosophies, and educational systems that date back to ancient Greece and China. As a result, East Asian thought is “holistic”—drawn to the perceptual field as a whole and to relations among objects and events within that field. By contrast, Westerners focus on salient objects or people, use attributes to assign them to categories, and apply rules of formal logic to understand their behavior.

From feng shui to metaphysics, from comparative linguistics to economic history, a gulf separates the children of Aristotle from the descendants of Confucius. At a moment in history when the need for cross-cultural understanding and collaboration have never been more important, The Geography of Thought offers both a map to that gulf and a blueprint for a bridge that will span it.

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Most helpful customer reviews

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My review of *The Geography of Thought*

By Robert G Yokoyama

This is a very insightful book with lots of information. It is well written and researched. There are many differences between the way Westerners and Easterners think. Some of the points may seem obvious, but they are still interesting to read about. Children who grow up in the East learn verbs faster. In contrast, children in the West pick up nouns faster. This is because Easterners learn the relationships between objects with action words first. Westerners generally just learn what the object is first. Conflict resolution is handled

very differently too. The goal in Eastern conflict resolution is to reduce hostility and to reach a compromise. The goal in resolving conflict in the West is having satisfaction that justice was carried out with a clear winner and loser. However as the author suggests Westerners have to begun to embrace a lot of Eastern ideas. There is a greater emphasis in achieving harmony in a person's life in Eastern cultures. Asian people are more self critical of themselves as a result. In contrast, the goal of a Westerner is to achieve a sense of uniqueness and superiority. I also learned that students who study history in the West focus on the implications or outcomes of events first. Asian students study the causes of historical events first. Teacher training and evaluation is a process that never ends in Eastern countries unlike the West where it is short. The Geography of Thought is a very short book, but it should not be read rapidly because of the depth and quantity of information. I have a greater insight and appreciation for the way people think now. I enjoyed it very much.

201 of 255 people found the following review helpful.

Caveat Emptor

By K. T. Ong

Nisbett's book is intended to illustrate the apparent differences in ways of thinking between Westerners and East Asians. While the experiments and their results as documented in the book are interesting and fascinating, in the early portions of the book he makes comparisons between the cultures of ancient Greece and China as an exploration of the historical origins of the mental inclinations of contemporary Westerners and Asians, and along the way he makes several claims about the two cultures which I would seriously question. (Indeed I would go further and ask why only Greece and China should be singled out for comparison, and not the Near East and India as well, considering the vast impact Christianity and Buddhism had on the West and East.)

Nisbett -- somewhat typically of Western authors, be it said -- credits the ancient Greeks with such virtues as a recognition of the uniqueness of the individual, a sense of curiosity, a desire to plumb the underlying reasons and principles of things, and so on, all qualities which he claims are absent or largely absent in China (if not indeed everywhere else in the past). I really don't think these claims stand up to the facts at all. (Don't know if I'm being paranoid, but frankly I seem to pick up faint racist odors coming from this book. And I really do think Nisbett is selecting from the facts.)

A reading of the Analects shows that Confucius was highly sensitive to the differences in personality among his students and tailored his teachings to suit them accordingly. He also demanded a lot of independent thinking from them and got upset when all they did was parrot his words. Contrariwise, scholars like Paul Feyerabend and Bruno Snell have argued that the 'heroes' of Homer's ILIAD cannot be understood as integrated individuals, only as 'systems of loosely connected parts'. Also, the Greeks practised slavery, but the Chinese mostly didn't, according to sinologists Joseph Needham and Derk Bodde. So much for the claim that the Greeks valued the individual and the Chinese didn't.

Nisbett also claims that there was little debate and argumentation between different views in the Chinese tradition. But there have been disagreements aplenty in the history of Chinese thought. Letters of discussion went back and forth between the Sung Dynasty thinkers Chu Hsi and Lu Hsiang-shan. Maurizio Scarpari also spoke of 'a lively and productive debate' on human nature in China 'that has almost lasted twenty-five centuries'.

Chu Hsi, China's most influential thinker for seven centuries, also advocated 'the investigation of things' to uncover their LI (often translated as 'principle') -- what makes them what they are. Who says the Greeks were the only people to search for principles and to be curious to know, and not the Chinese? Not surprisingly, there is no reference to Chu Hsi in Nisbett's book.

Finally, I want to look at what Nisbett said about the ancient remains of a group of people found somewhere in China, being identified as being of Caucasian stock and showing signs of being operated on surgically. Alongside this he muses on the absence of the practice of surgery in the Chinese tradition. What's the intended point? That if those were the remains of Asians, then marks of surgical operation would have been

impossible? Apparently Nisbett didn't know that the world's first book on forensic medicine was Chinese. And surely it is a very long way from the unusual features found on a few corpses to sweeping generalisations about differences between races and cultures.

All in all, the book is interesting, but it makes certain claims that warrant a little suspicion.

251 of 320 people found the following review helpful.

The good, the bad, and the ugly.

By Matt Dioguardi

First the good. Several experiments on human subjects have shown that Asians and Westerners at a very basic level have biases in perception and categorization. Some experiments on human subjects even show that these differences are, surprise, a bit situational. I have lived in Japan for nine years, and I have noticed several of these things myself. So it was rather refreshing to see experimental data that actually objectifies a lot of these differences. I do think people are often unaware of just how different even a simple picture might look to someone from a different culture. As descriptions of these experiments take up a large part of the book, it certainly might be worthwhile to purchase the book merely to read about them. However, one caution I must add is that Nisbett precludes every experiment's reported result with an "as expected" or an "as anticipated." Nisbett seems content to try and find tests that support his views, but one is forced to wonder how hard he tried to falsify them. A subtle but important difference.

Now, for the bad. If Nisbett had stuck to his interesting and fascinating experiments on human subjects, this book might have made for some interesting reading. Instead, his aims are much larger. He wants to show that, "Each of these orientations -- the Western and the Eastern -- is a self-reinforcing, homeostatic system. The social practices promote the worldviews: the worldviews dictate the appropriate thought processes; and the thought processes both justify the world views and support the social practices. Understanding these homeostatic systems has implications for grasping the fundamental nature of the mind, for beliefs about how we ought ideally to reason, and for appropriate education strategies for different peoples." There is so much philosophical absurdity packed into this phrase it's hard to unpack it all, but it spills out all over the book making it disconnected and confused at times. What would it mean to understand how we "ideally ought to reason." If we "ideally" knew how to reason we could shut off all debate. Where is Karl Popper when you need him? Think about it. If there is an ideal way to reason, then all future debate is shut off immediately. There's no reason to argue or debate about anything, merely turn the levers and use the "ideal" reasoning principles. Where's Kurt Godel when you need him? Another thing Nisbett might want to ask himself is this, how does he escape his own homeostatic system? After all, if the system determined his beliefs about the system then how do we know they are true at all, and not just products of the system itself?

Given this fundamentally flawed thesis, and his attempt to take some very narrow experiments on human subjects and basically roam sloppily over virtually any area he chooses, ranging from philosophy to history to culture, we get a phantasmagoria of stereotypes and confusions. Nisbett's biases are clear, he favors the Western system, after all, the entire approach of the book is mostly logical and argumentative. Yet, Nisbett wants to alternate between putting on his homeostatic-system-hat-for-Asians and his homeostatic-system-hat-for-Westerners as he compares the two with complete relativistic glee. He states: "Medicine in the West retains the analytic, object-oriented, and interventionist approaches that were common thousands of years ago: Find the offending part or humour and remove or alter it. Medicine in the East is far more holistic and has never until modern times been in the least inclined towards surgery or other heroic interventions." What's he got against Western medicine? He thinks that removing the offending humour is the same as modern surgery? He claims he isn't a relativist, and that's right. He's just confused.

There's a lot going on in Japan, where I live, worthy of interest and study. There is a serious problem, though, with critical thinking in Japan. After all, there is a lot of authoritarianism in Japan, just as there is throughout Asia. People in Japan need to learn to express their opinion and they aren't learning how to do that enough. (For that matter they could do a better job in America as well!). The former Japanese ambassador to the UN Yoshio Hatano once said, "Study should not be memorizing what our teachers teach

us but learning how to think on our own. And what many Japanese need is to be able to clearly express and advocate their own opinions, even if these might be "minority opinions." He said this in reference to the fact that many Japanese can't argue their opinions. Nisbett reduces issues like this to : "Is it a form of "colonialism" to demand that they [Asians] perform verbally and share their thoughts with their classmates?" Give me a break! With Nisbett's confused homeostatic-system-causes-beliefs model he just muddles his way through a host of important ethical issues spreading more confusion than enlightenment.

All in all, I would say Nisbett's problem is too much looking for ideal methods of reasoning and too little Karl Popper. In *Objective Knowledge* Popper states, "An observation always presupposes the existence of some system of expectations." Basically Nisbett's whole program revolves around giving Asians and Westerners vague commands like "observe" or "choose" and then seeing how their expectations or preconceptions influenced them. This is interesting, but it doesn't tell us much we didn't already know. People from different cultures have different preconceptions. According to Popper we all have preconceptions and it's trying to improve them and get a little closer to the truth that is important. Is this a Western approach? Is this an Eastern approach? Is that all that matters?

I do recommend people interested in Asia check out some of these experiments on human subjects, they are interesting and worth reading about. Nevertheless, I can hardly recommend this book in clean and clear conscience. It's just too ugly.

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