

Summary of The Geography of Thought

©2006 by Dr. John D. Eigenauer

2301 Barrington #3

Bakersfield, CA 93309

661.763.7722

[jeigenauer@yahoo.com](mailto:jeigenauer@yahoo.com)

Approximately 1900 words

## **Background**

Richard Nisbett is a Distinguished University Professor at the University of Michigan. He has researched and written extensively about how people “reason and make inferences about the world.” His book, The Geography of Thought (Simon and Schuster, 2003) is a study of the differences between Eastern and Western thought patterns based upon research and cultural archeology.

# The Geography of Thought

By

Richard E. Nisbett

## **Chapter 1: The Syllogism and the Tao**

The author argues that the Greeks had a highly unusual and unusually developed "sense of personal *agency*". These sense of individualism coincided with an equally developed curiosity. This, in turn, led them to cultivate learning as an important social and leisure activity. This contrasts sharply with the Chinese sense of "*collective agency*", through which individuals nourished their sense of self through social relations, contributing to group goals, and "carrying out prescribed roles." This emphasis on belonging and contributing diminished confrontation, debate, and curiosity.

These two social tendencies were reflected in the two civilizations' main philosophies. The Greeks developed highly linear methods of understanding objects in isolation. This led to explanations of phenomena in terms of properties, such as a stone possessing "gravity" and a piece of wood possessing "levity." A second characteristic of Greek thought is the emphasis on stasis: things do not change because things have properties, and properties cannot vary. Chinese philosophy, on the other hand, emphasized flux, holism, complexity, and resonance. All things were to be understood in terms of their relationship to and embedded-ness in their environments. While the Greeks understood discrete objects in isolation, the Chinese understood objects as part

of and inseparable from a larger environment. These two views led to two philosophical languages: the Greek that emphasized linearity, objectification, and elimination through contradiction, and the Chinese that emphasized circularity, holism, and an acceptance of contradiction (because “contradiction” was seen only as a distinction between “now” and a future state).

## **Chapter 2: The Social Origins of Mind**

The author proposes a theory in the second chapter that socioeconomic and cultural factors “affect cognitive habits.” Specifically, the Greek mind (and hence the Western European mind) developed tendencies toward “personal freedom, individuality, and objective thought” because of an ecology that gave rise to economic and social structures such as shipping, trading, and hunting that enhanced individualism. In turn, these structures enhanced attentional tendencies to notice and describe objects in isolation, which led to an epistemology and a metaphysics that explained objects and their properties in isolation. In contrast, the Chinese ecology led to an agricultural society that emphasized interdependent networks of social relations. This led to attentional tendencies that focused on interconnectedness and relationships among objects, which naturally gave rise to a holistic philosophy that emphasized change and flux.

If the theory is correct, it ought to be testable through experiments that measure “field dependence”—a measurable tendency to see things as being isolated or integrated. Specifically, differences between Western European and

East Asian people ought to manifest themselves in perceptions about objects and environments, objects and substances, the “controllability of the environment”, “stability and change”, categories and relationships, logical rules, and comfort with contradiction.

### **Chapter 3: Living Together vs. Going It Alone**

The author argues that the Eastern concept of “self” is quite different from the corresponding Western concept. Asians’ sense of feeling good often comes from participation in a group, as can be seen by the fact that “In Chinese there is no word for ‘individualism.’ The closest one can come is the word ‘selfishness.’” Not only are Asians less aware of the individual, they also see themselves as being more malleable, describing “themselves” in different ways according to the occasion. Indeed, individuals in Eastern culture take pleasure in being involved in a harmonious “network of supportive social relationships” and in playing “one’s part in achieving collective ends.”

Numerous studies prove that traits typical of independent and interdependent people align themselves with Western and Eastern styles of being. Westerners prefer choices that allow autonomy, while Asians typically prefer those that encourage group preference or guidance from an authority figure. This is true from children to corporate workers to parents. These preferences are paralleled by Western preferences for binding contracts and legalistic resolution to conflicts (presumably because the individual is

responsible for knowing and obeying the law), and for Eastern preference for negotiation and consideration of circumstance.

Studies also indicate that Western and Eastern language differs on these matters as well. Westerners have a highly developed "rhetoric of argumentation", while Asians rarely (if ever) engage in this kind of dialogue. This is true of business, science, education, and law. Consequently, Asians often try to negotiate agreeable solutions in business or law where Westerners might see conflict resolved only in victory. This is equally true in science and education, where Asians might find technological solutions, but will not argue for the correctness of their theories in the same way that Western scientists or education commonly do.

#### **Chapter 4: "Eyes in the Back of Your Head" or "Keep Your Eye on the Ball"?**

The author hypothesizes that if social existence dictates the way that people see the world, then modern East Asian mentalities ought to mirror those of ancient Asia, and modern Western mentalities ought to parallel those of ancient Greece. This should be true, he says, not only of mental outlooks, but of actual perceptual tendencies.

Many tests bear this hypothesis out. For example, Americans consistently identify objects by their shape, while Asians identify the substance of which something is made and see two objects as being "alike" if they share the same substance, even though they may have different shapes or different functions.

These perceptual tendencies spill over to the workplace, where Americans see companies as composed of discrete parts and workers as having distinct jobs, whereas Asians work is seen as a holistic place in which networks of people work together to reach an end.

This is true more generally as well. Tests demonstrate that even as children, Americans are more object- and fact-oriented than Asians, which allows Asians to be far more aware of environment and social context. As adults, Asians describe things contextually, while Americans describe objects as environment-independent. Consequently, Asians are better at seeing “relationships between events.”

Once result of these perceptual differences is that Americans perceive themselves as being more in control of their environments and their destinies. Not only do they see themselves as more in control, but Americans express a decided need to be in control, whereas Asians express comfort with the fact that many things are beyond their control. This tacit understanding of the individual’s role in controlling his future may explain why Americans consistently saw trends as likely to continue and Asians saw them as signs that they would likely reverse.

### **Chapter 5: “The Bad Seed” or “The Other Boys Made Him Do It”?**

In this chapter, Nisbett theorizes that Asians emphasize context more in their causal explanations than do Americans. Consequently, Americans use theories about individual personalities to explain actions and outcomes, whereas

Asians tend to offer explanations that emphasize environment. This is equally true in simple perceptual tests that indicate that Westerners ascribe more to properties of objects than do Asians, who see environments as influencing objects. "Westerners attend primarily to the focal object or person and Asians attend more broadly to the field. Westerners tend to assume that events are caused by the object and Asians are inclined to assign greater importance to the context." One interesting facet of these tendencies is that Americans tend to isolate objects (or people) in causal chains, while Asians emphasize the complex nature of multiple events in any given situation. This makes American explanations of historical events more simplistic and Asian explanations more complex.

## **Chapter 6: Is The World Made Up of Nouns or Verbs?**

This chapter explores the relationships between language and thought, demonstrating that Asian and Westerner languages reflect the perceptive differences of their respective speakers. Westerners, for example, use categories to classify objects more readily and more frequently than Asians, who prefer to describe objects in terms of relationships. Consequently, Westerners also apply rules to categorization more easily.

This difference starts out in childhood, where studies prove that Western children learn nouns faster than verbs, and Asian children learn verbs faster than Western children. This may in turn be partly attributable to the languages themselves, given that "East Asian languages are highly contextual," with

meaning necessarily being extracted from context, whereas English words are intentionally decontextualized. For example, English sentences focus largely on objects, with the subject often taking primary place, whereas Asian sentences mostly begin with “context and topic.”

This could mean that “the differences in linguistic structure between languages are reflected in people’s habitual thinking processes.” Tests about how people group objects (based upon relationships or characteristics) bear this out, suggesting that thought patterns are affected by both culture and language.

### **Chapter 7: “Ce N’est Pas Logique” or “You’ve Got a Point There”?**

Eastern and Western views of logic have diverged greatly, with the Asian tradition making only slight inroads in logical theory, and never separating logic from context. Consequently, Asians use experience more and logical principles less in judging propositions. This leads to the observation that Asians often seek conflict resolution through some middle ground, while Americans commonly choose one side of an argument. This leads us to believe that Americans are generally uncomfortable with contradiction, while Asians are not—a conclusion confirmed by numerous tests. One such test, for example, shows that Asians are likely to report contradictory emotions when describing a face, while Americans are likely to choose between emotions, such as “happy” or “sad”.

## **Chapter 8: And If the Nature of Thought Is Not Everywhere the Same?**

There are many social ramifications of different Eastern and Western modes of thought. For example, Eastern medicine focuses on prevention and balance, while Western medicine focuses on cure and intervention. Legally, Western rationalism has led to a focus on justice at odds with Eastern ideas about fairness and the complexity of circumstances. Quite naturally, these different views of law result in different views of debate and rhetoric, with Westerners focusing more on linguistic and logical devices that enable pursuit of a single truth. The pursuit of a single truth, in turn, may complicate matters such as international relations, politics in general, contracts, and even human rights; Asians make decisions in all these fields with a focus on cooperative, holistic, flexible solutions.

One could ask which of these two forms of thought is "correct". The answer is that each has benefits and drawbacks. In political and social settings, reductionist solutions may provide a means of conflict resolution that satisfies legalistically, but may diminish social relations; Asian means of conflict resolution enhance social relations and feelings of cooperation. On the other hand, scientific research benefits from binary truth solutions and direct debate and suffers from traditionally Asian tactics that more easily accommodate contradiction.

## **Epilogue: The End of Psychology or the Clash of Mentalities?**

There is debate about whether the world is headed toward integrated Americanism or if continued diversity will be the rule. The evidence, as might be expected, is completely inconclusive, with each side able to produce indications that we are headed one of those directions. More important than this speculation is the concrete finding that people are culturally malleable, their minds and tendencies shifting toward the culture in which they reside.