

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THOUGHT: HOW ASIANS AND WESTERNERS THINK DIFFERENTLY . . . AND WHY

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This is a short book with a sweeping thesis. In essence, the thesis of *The Geography of Thought* is that many important cognitive processes dominant in East Asian (i.e., Chinese, Japanese and Korean) cultures are substantially different from those processes in Western (i.e., American and European) cultures. This proposition explains a variety of dissimilarities in how people from each culture approach the world and each other, and it is also a partial explanation of the Great Divergence—why the modern world was created by the West, and by nobody else, to the lasting (so far) benefit of the West. While the author, Richard Nisbett, goes to great lengths to not ascribe superiority to one type of cognition over another, his cultural analyses show why the Scientific Revolution and the Industrial Revolution could not have happened in East Asia. Past performance is no guarantee of future results, though, and perhaps the relative value of Western ways of thought has passed its use-by date.

As can be inferred from its title, this book is an exercise in the continuation and reinforcement of a particular stereotype. There is nothing wrong with that; the majority of stereotypes have at least some element of truth, and sometimes a very large degree of truth. That is one reason they tend to have staying power; they are a form of meme. But a problem, or limitation, with this book is that while its conclusions are obviously mostly or all true, the scientific evidence it offers is on the thin side. Nisbett focuses on a variety of psychological studies, mostly involving small groups of college students. Chinese peasants and American ironworkers do not seem very prevalent in his subjects, which suggests that perhaps there is more to the story than Nisbett offers. As a result, the book is interesting, but hardly scientifically determinative or all-encompassing. On the other hand, perhaps it's a mistake to try to pin down the essence of a culture to points on a graph; familiarity with history, and to a lesser extent literature, is a better way to grasp a culture, even if the resulting analysis is not one that can be quantified.

Nisbett goes to significant pains to define “Asian” as East Asian—“China and the countries that were heavily influenced by its culture, most

notably Japan and Korea.” Whatever Japanese and Korean nationalists may like to think, this is a reasonable grouping, and it of course excludes Indian subcontinent cultures (what the English confusingly call “Asian,” at least the English who are being polite), and Pacific cultures like the Philippines and Indonesia. And Nisbett makes the basic point, again inarguable but something those of low intellect find impossible to grasp, that the existence of differences among members of a cultural grouping does not obviate that accurate generalizations can be made, specifically of the “modal” person in a culture, in Raphael Patai’s helpful terminology.

Nisbett begins with what the social science shows, and everybody who is honest knows—that Asians and Westerners differ significantly in many areas. He lists five non-exclusive ones: science and mathematics (Asians excel, but produce far fewer advances); attention and perceptions (Asians and Westerners view most events and objects differently); causal inference (Westerners ignore context; Asians are all about context); organization of knowledge (Westerners focus on categories; Asians on relations among objects and events); and reasoning (Westerners use formal logic; Asians are comfortable with logical fallacies like contradictions). His point is not that one way is necessarily better than the other, in any given instance, but that the ways are very different. I have no idea if the social science actually shows these differences, but looking at negative reviews at the time (this book was published in 2003), none claim that the social science shows anything else, so it seems reasonable to conclude that the experiments that are the backbone of the book produce the results Nisbett says they do.

From this general introduction, Nisbett jumps backward two and half millennia. He endorses the longstanding recognition (not least by the Greeks themselves) that the ancient Greeks had a keen sense of individualism lacked by people in the autocracies of the ancient East, a difference most vividly shown in the conduct of the Greco-Persian Wars. He posits that the ancient Greeks embodied “personal agency—the sense that they were in charge of their own lives and free to act as they chose.” (Of course, this freedom was not at all like the atomized freedom that is the natural end point of Enlightenment thought, but this is a tangent Nisbett doesn’t explore.) This sense of agency led to an individualism where the individual was the same across all social settings, as well as to open and aggressive debate, and curiosity about the world leading to

viewing it as composed of categories with underlying principles—that is, viewing the world through abstractions. Contemporaneous Chinese civilization, on the other hand, embodied “harmony,” where “every Chinese was first and foremost a member of a collective, or rather of several collectives—the clan, the village, and especially the family.” Individualism was foreign to China; the individual was the totality of the roles he had in relation to specific other people. Not that people lacked agency—but they had collective agency, instead of individual agency, which deprioritized debate and curiosity (as well as individual rights), and elevated obligations. This did not (necessarily) mean conformity, but rather a harmonious society, as the goal.

Assuming all this is true (and there is a little bit too much surface skimming and “just-so” of this narrative, even for me, who thinks the basic conclusions are hard to dispute), why do these differences exist? Nisbett ascribes its culture—to “the social origins of mind.” Greeks had city-states, maritime trading, and a geographic location at the crossroads of the world, leading to exposure to a great diversity of people and thoughts. China had an ethnic monoculture (Han), generally centralized political control, and no exposure to diversity. These explanations Nisbett calls “materialistic.” Not deterministic, but based on differences of each culture in the real, material world. At a higher level of abstraction, according to Nisbett, what drives culture is a chain: ecology drives the economy and social structure; which drive attention, metaphysics and epistemology; which drive cognitive processes. Voilà!—huge differences in thought resulting from different starting points, with the modern West as the direct heirs of Greek ways of thought (which is quite a jump to make in a purely conclusory fashion, even if true), and China as essentially unchanged for millennia (not so much of a jump).

The rest of the book is devoted to fleshing out these basic claims (the differences, not the history) by using a combination of anecdotes and small-scale academic studies. Nisbett covers, among other things, perceptions of “in-groups” and “out-groups”; the Asian distaste for decisions reached through debate; the Western tendency to view substances as separate objects as opposed to the Asian view of continuous materials (leading to a Chinese failure to view nature in a scientific way); and Westerners’ inability, relative to Asians, to quickly grasp the background matter in, and context between items in, images (presumably,

Asians score better on the famous “gorilla walking among people playing basketball” test, though Nisbett doesn’t mention that particular experiment). Perhaps most importantly, he examines how Asians have mostly rejected formal logic of the kind that is the absolute bedrock of Western thought (with the exception of abortive movements in China such as Mohism, swamped by Confucianism and Taoism), in favor of contextual analysis without rigid boundaries. “East Asians, then, are more likely to set logic aside in favor of typicality and plausibility of conclusions. They are also more likely to set logic aside in favor of the desirability of conclusions.” (The same characteristic, to a much more extreme degree, is found in Arab cultures, though Nisbett does not discuss Arabs at any point.) And, at the end, Nisbett concludes, “People hold the beliefs they do because of the way they think and they think the way they do because of the nature of the societies they live in.” (In many ways, including this conclusion, *The Geography of Thought* is a complement to Jonathan Haidt’s incredibly good *The Righteous Mind*, which explored cultural differences in the way morality is perceived, focusing on intuitions as cognition.)

As I read through the book, I wondered whether Nisbett would address the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—that different languages influence the ways their speakers think. And he does, noting the prevalence, relative to Chinese, in Western languages of “generic” nouns, which allow categorization without relying on context, and the lack in Chinese of the English suffix “-ness,” which similarly allows easy abstraction of a concept. Along the same lines, Western languages tend to focus on the agent and most sentences rely on a subject who is doing an act; Eastern languages much less so. Nisbett supports this analysis with studies of bilingual speakers, who respond dramatically differently to certain kinds of testing when tested in different languages, and he offers a cautious endorsement of Sapir-Whorf. Again, not determinative, but interesting and probative.

The critical result of these differences, in practical terms, for the relative success of Western and Asian cultures was that, in China, abstract scientific curiosity was not encouraged—rather, some practical tinkering was socially permitted, though not necessarily encouraged and never systematized, leading to many scientific inventions that were either not used at all (the compass, if the Chinese did indeed invent it) or not used

to their potential (gunpowder). Nisbett claims, and offers support for his claim, that Chinese failure to develop concepts of abstraction necessarily crippled Chinese scientific advancement. Similarly, Chinese rejection of formal logic in favor of the “middle way” of harmonious compromise, pushed by both Taoism and Confucianism, such that Chinese philosophers accept that “A” and “not-A” can sometimes both be true, produces travel down totally different avenues of thought than does abstraction, in both science and in many other areas. The exact opposite forms of thought in the West produced the Scientific Revolution, and then the Industrial Revolution. And the scientific and developmental effects of these differences continue to today. For example, Nisbett points out that, in the 1990s, American scientists earned forty-four Nobel Prizes; Japanese scientists, with fully half the funding, one. Another way to say this is that without the Western ways of thought, we would all be living in the sixteenth century, at best.

So what we really want to know, academics be damned, is which ways of thought are better? Or, put more bluntly, is the thought of China or America better? We Americans reflexively conclude, even if we are too nice or too cowed to say so, that of course Western ways of thought are better. Look on our works, we say, and look at the modern world, made by the West, and only by the West. So far as it goes, that’s true, but what if we look more closely at the modern world? Yes, Western thought made the Scientific Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, but it also morphed into Enlightenment thought, taking the Greek and earlier Western focus on the individual and molding it into the central idol of our times, a turning that has probably sowed the seeds of our destruction. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the Chinese have taken their communitarian harmony, or their tolerance for authoritarianism, depending on how you view it, as well as their non-susceptibility to the siren call of atomizing Enlightenment thought, and married it to Western technology and economic practices, without the hangups and self-hatred that characterize the ruling classes of the West. It’s not going to matter if the Chinese are any good at debate and formal logic if they now have hypersonic missiles mounted on their cruisers, while we today spend our money and time on brainwashing sailors to pretend their new transgender crewmates are really the sex they claim to be today (and to pretend that mixed-sex combat vessels are anything

but the triumph of ideology over common sense). Sure, in the long run the triumph of any non-Western civilization means stagnation, as we revert to the mean of human progress, which has always been glacially slow, at best, without the West. But that's the long run, and in the short and medium term, the Chinese turtle is looking pretty good, if you like to gamble.