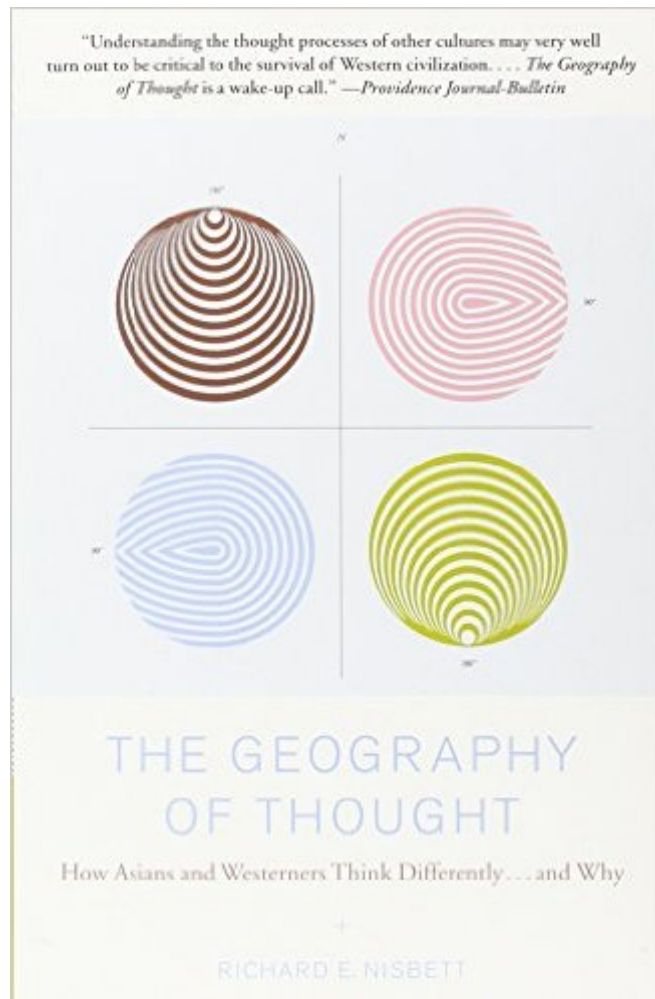


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The Geography Of Thought: How Asians And Westerners Think Differently...and Why



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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, he is 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.

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.

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