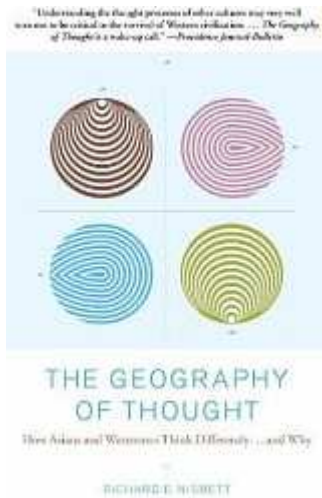


The Geography of Thought - How Asians and Westerners Think.....and Why



by Richard E. Nisbett

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“East and West may contribute to a blended world where social and cognitive aspects of both regions are represented but transformed- like the individual ingredients in a stew that are recognizable but are altered as they alter the whole. It may not be too much to hope that this stew will contain the best of each culture.” These are the words that psychologist Richard E. Nisbett ends his book *The Geography of Thought* with, a naive perspective on the convergence of social practices, values, beliefs and scientific themes. A convergence where differences in thought processes would also begin to evaporate. The difference from other convergence theories is that Nisbett talks about a blended world where the best of the East and West comes together. Albeit an utopian vision of the world where he sees the future of the world lies in working collaboratively and equally across cultures. This obviously is a starting point for us to understand why he undertook this study.

In *The Geography of Thought* Nisbett has brilliantly presented the cognitive differences between Westerners(USA) and East Asians(China, Korea and Japan). He shows us that people not only think differently but also see the world differently. This he attributes to the differing ecologies, social structures, philosophies and educational systems that date back to ancient Greece and China. He proposes that if the relation between social factors and thought processes is correct- and if the social differences between East and West today resemble those of ancient times- then we can make some

very dramatic predictions about cognitive differences between East Asians and Westerners. In this book he tries to find the implications of thought in modern world by looking at the differences, among others, in:

- ✓ Attention and Perception: with East Asians attending more to environments and westerners attending more to objects.
- ✓ Basic assumptions on the composition of the world, with Easterners seeing substances where Westerners sees objects.
- ✓ Beliefs about controllability of the environment, with westerners believing in controllability more than Easterners
- ✓ Tacit assumptions about stability vs change, with Westerners seeing stability where Easterners see change
- ✓ Use of logic, where Westerners being more inclined to use logical rules to understand events than Easterners.
- ✓ Application of dialectical approaches, with Easterners being more inclined to seek the middle way when confronted with apparent contradiction and Westerners being more inclined to insist on the correctness of one belief versus another.

What I find most interesting in this book is the historical perspective in Chapter 1, The Syllogism and The Tao. Here Nisbett's proposes that the origin of all modern western thinking comes from ancient Greece, from the times of Aristotle. And the thought of modern Chinese thinking comes from the times of Confucius. He presents an interesting pattern on how the meaning of happiness, collectivism, the use of science and medicine etc comparatively differed in those days as they do today. As Nisbett has a scientific approach he goes on showing these differences by proof of studies and tests. I personally prefer this approach to an opinion based book or study.

I did however find the book to become a bit cumbersome due to too many repetitions or repeats of the same information. I also miss some key information and perspectives in his approach as he has not raised some other very central questions on cultural differences between Westerners and East Asians for example like on long term orientation that is very characteristic in East Asian cultures versus a short term orientation in the west and particularly USA.

This book is ideally suited for someone who has no or very little knowledge of the fact that people around in the world think differently and that the world does not think universally. This book is an eye opener and does provide some deeper insight into why and how Koreans, Japanese and Chinese differ in their thinking patterns versus Americans and Westerners. The book does not present the reader with a suitable model of working across cultures but does provide an in depth knowhow on the thinking patterns. If the purpose of the reader is to work cross-culturally between East Asia and the USA, I would advise using this book as a reference only and in combination with a suitable model.

About the Author: Robert E. Nisbett, Ph.D., has taught psychology at Yale University and currently teaches at the University of Michigan, where is the Theodore M. Newcomb Distinguished University Professor. He has received the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award of the American Psychological Society, and, in 2002, a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. He is the author and editor of several university press titles. He lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan.