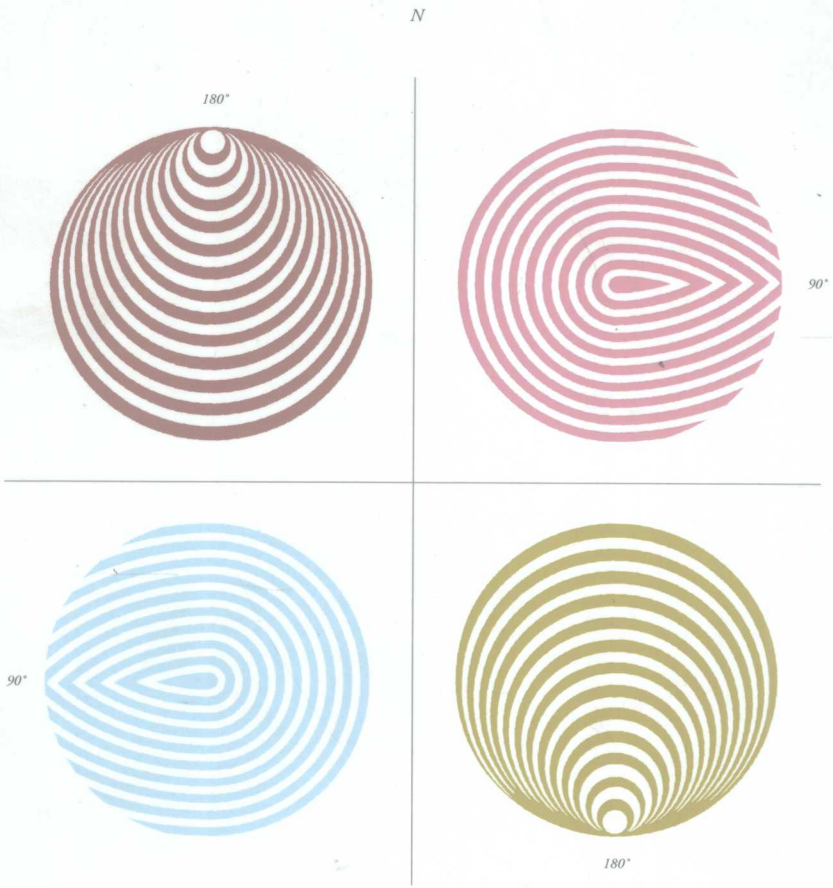
"Understanding the thought processes of other cultures may very well rn out to be critical to the survival of Western civilization. . . . *The Geography of Thought* is a wake-up call." —*Providence Journal-Bulletin*



THE GEOGRAPHY OF THOUGHT

How Asians and Westerners Think Differently. . . and Why

RICHARD E. NISBETT

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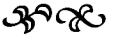

RICHARD E. NISBETT

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Praise for
The Geography of Thought

"Nisbett boldly . . . challenges the assumption that all people everywhere think the same way."

—*Booklist*

"This outstanding book makes key contributions to education, science, health, business, politics, language, and religion."

—*Library Journal*

"I have long been following Richard Nisbett's groundbreaking work on culture and cognition. After so many fascinating experiments, challenging hypotheses, and passionate debates, it was time for Nisbett to share his ideas and findings with a wider public. *The Geography of Thought* does so superbly!"

—Dan Sperber, author of *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach*

"An important, research-based challenge to the assumption, widespread among cognitive scientists, that thinking the world over is fundamentally the same."

—Howard Gardner, Harvard University, author of *Frames of Mind: Theories of Multiple Intelligences*

"This is another landmark book by Richard E. Nisbett. Nisbett shows conclusively that laboratory experiments limited to American college students or even individuals from the Western Hemisphere simply cannot provide an adequate understanding of how people, in general, think. The book shows that understanding of how individuals in Eastern cultures think is not just nice, but necessary, if we wish to solve the problems we confront in the world today. We ignore the lessons of this book at our peril."

—Robert J. Sternberg, IBM Professor of Psychology and Education; Director, Center for the Psychology of Abilities, Competencies, and Expertise (PACE Center), Yale University; President, American Psychological Association

"Cultural psychology has come of age and Richard Nisbett's book will surely become one of the canonical texts of this provocative discipline. *The Geography of Thought* challenges a fundamental premise of the Western Enlightenment—the idea that modes of thought are, ought to be, or will become the same wherever you go—east or west, north or south—in the world."

—Richard A. Shweder, anthropologist and William Claude Reavis Professor of Human Development at the University of Chicago

"The cultural differences in cognition, demonstrated in this groundbreaking work, are far more profound and wide-ranging than anybody in the field could have possibly imagined just a decade ago. The findings are surprising for universalists, remarkable for culturalists, and, regardless, they are most thought-provoking for all students of human cognition."

—Shinobu Kitayama, Faculty of Integrated Human Studies, Kyoto University

For Matthew
Young man going east

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INTRODUCTION

A few years back, a brilliant student from China began to work with me on questions of social psychology and reasoning. One day early in our acquaintance, he said, "You know, the difference between you and me is that I think the world is a circle, and you think it's a line." Unfazed by what must have been a startled expression on my face, he expounded on that theme. "The Chinese believe in constant change, but with things always moving back to some prior state. They pay attention to a wide range of events; they search for relationships between things; and they think you can't understand the part without understanding the whole. Westerners live in a simpler, more deterministic world; they focus on salient objects or people instead of the larger picture; and they think they can control events because they know the rules that govern the behavior of objects."

I was skeptical but intrigued. I had been a lifelong universalist concerning the nature of human thought. Marching in step with the long Western line, from the British empiricist philosophers such as Hume, Locke, and Mill to modern-day cognitive scientists, I believed that all human

groups perceive and reason in the same way. The shared assumptions of this tradition can be summarized with a few principles.

- Everyone has the same basic cognitive processes. Maori herders, !Kung hunter-gatherers, and dot-com entrepreneurs all rely on the same tools for perception, memory, causal analysis, categorization, and inference.
- When people in one culture differ from those in another in their beliefs, it can't be because they have different cognitive processes, but because they are exposed to different aspects of the world, or because they have been taught different things.
- "Higher order" processes of reasoning rest on the formal rules of logic: for example, the prohibition against contradiction—a proposition can't be both true and false.
- Reasoning is separate from what is reasoned about. The same process can be used to think about utterly different things and a given thing can be reasoned about using any number of different procedures.

A dozen years before meeting my student I had coauthored with Lee Ross a book with a title that made my sympathies clear—*Human Inference.* Not Western inference (and certainly not American college student inference!), but *human* inference. The book characterized what I took to be the inferential rules that people everywhere

use to understand the world, including some rules that I believed were flawed and capable of producing erroneous judgments.

On the other hand, shortly before I met my new Chinese student, I had just completed a series of studies examining whether people's reasoning could be improved by teaching them new rules for thinking. Given my assumptions about universality and hard wiring, I had initially assumed the work would show that it is difficult, if not impossible, to change the patterns of reasoning I had been studying—even with immersion in long courses of study in fields such as statistics and economics. But to my surprise, I found substantial training effects. For example, people who have taken a few statistics courses avoid lots of errors in daily life: They're more likely to see that the "sophomore slump" in baseball could be due to statistical regression to the mean rather than to some mystical curse, and more likely to realize that an interview should be regarded as a small sample of a person's behavior and, therefore, that a wise hiring decision should be based on the larger sample of information in the application folder. Economists, it turns out, think differently about all sorts of things than the rest of us do—from deciding whether to remain at a boring movie to reasoning about foreign policy. Moreover, I found it was possible to train people in brief sessions and change not only their thinking habits, but their actual behavior when we tested them surreptitiously outside the laboratory.

So I was willing to give the student—whose name is Kaiping Peng and who now teaches at the University of California at Berkeley—an attentive hearing. If it's possi-

ble to produce marked changes in the way adults think, it certainly seemed possible that indoctrination into distinctive habits of thought from birth could result in very large *cultural* differences in habits of thought.

I began reading comparative literature on the nature of thought by philosophers, historians, and anthropologists—both Eastern and Western—and found that Peng had been a faithful reporter. Whereas psychologists have assumed universality, many scholars in other fields believe that Westerners (primarily Europeans, Americans, and citizens of the British Commonwealth) and East Asians (principally the people of China, Korea, and Japan) have maintained very different systems of thought for thousands of years. Moreover, these scholars are in substantial agreement about the nature of these differences. For example, most who have addressed the question hold that European thought rests on the assumption that the behavior of objects—physical, animal, and human—can be understood in terms of straightforward rules. Westerners have a strong interest in categorization, which helps them to know what rules to apply to the objects in question, and formal logic plays a role in problem solving. East Asians, in contrast, attend to objects in their broad context. The world seems more complex to Asians than to Westerners, and understanding events always requires consideration of a host of factors that operate in relation to one another in no simple, deterministic way. Formal logic plays little role in problem solving. In fact, the person who is too concerned with logic may be considered immature.

As a psychologist, I found these assertions to be revolutionary in their implications. If the scholars in the humani-

ties and other social sciences were right, then the cognitive scientists were wrong: Human cognition is not everywhere the same. Without putting it in so many words, the humanities and social science scholars were making extremely important claims about the nature of thought. First, that members of different cultures differ in their "metaphysics," or fundamental beliefs about the nature of the world. Second, that the characteristic thought processes of different groups differ greatly. Third, that the thought processes are of a piece with beliefs about the nature of the world: People use the cognitive tools that seem to make sense—given the sense they make of the world.

Just as remarkably, the social structures and sense of self that are characteristic of Easterners and Westerners seem to fit hand in glove with their respective belief systems and cognitive processes. The collective or interdependent nature of Asian society is consistent with Asians' broad, contextual view of the world and their belief that events are highly complex and determined by many factors. The individualistic or independent nature of Western society seems consistent with the Western focus on particular objects in isolation from their context and with Westerners' belief that they can know the rules governing objects and therefore can control the objects' behavior.

If people really do differ profoundly in their systems of thought—their worldviews and cognitive processes—then differences in people's attitudes and beliefs, and even their values and preferences, might not be a matter merely of different inputs and teachings, but rather an inevitable consequence of using different tools to understand the world. And if that's true, then efforts to improve interna-

tional understanding may be less likely to pay off than one might hope.

My student's chance comment, together with my interest in cultural psychology and the resulting reading program he had encouraged, launched me on a new course of research. I began a series of comparative studies, working with students at the University of Michigan and eventually with colleagues at Beijing University, Kyoto University, Seoul National University, and the Chinese Institute of Psychology. The research shows that there are indeed dramatic differences in the nature of Asian and European thought processes. The evidence lends support to the claims of nonpsychologist scholars and extends those claims to many surprising new mental phenomena. In addition, surveys and observational research document differences in social practices that dovetail with the differences in habits of thought. The new research has provided us, as prior evidence could not, with enough information so that we can build a theory about the nature of these differences, including how they might have come about, what their implications are for perceiving and reasoning in everyday life, and how they affect relations between people from different cultures.

The research allows us to answer many questions about social relations and thought that have long puzzled educators, historians, psychologists, and philosophers of science. Neither common stereotypical views about East-West differences nor the more sophisticated views of scholars can answer these questions or deal with the new findings. The puzzles and new observations range across many different domains. For example:

Science and Mathematics Why would the ancient Chinese have excelled at algebra and arithmetic but not geometry, which was the forte of the Greeks? Why do modern Asians excel at math and science but produce less in the way of revolutionary science than Westerners?

Attention and Perception Why are East Asians better able to see relationships among events than Westerners are? Why do East Asians find it relatively difficult to disentangle an object from its surroundings?

Causal Inference Why are Westerners so likely to overlook the influence of context on the behavior of objects and even of people? Why are Easterners more susceptible to the "hindsight bias," which allows them to believe that they "knew it all along"?

Organization of Knowledge Why do Western infants learn nouns at a much more rapid rate than verbs, whereas Eastern infants learn verbs at a more rapid rate than nouns? Why do East Asians group objects and events based on how they relate to one another, whereas Westerners are more likely to rely on categories?

Reasoning Why are Westerners more likely to apply formal logic when reasoning about everyday events, and why does their insistence on logic sometimes cause them to make errors? Why are Easterners so willing to entertain apparently contradictory propositions and how can this sometimes be helpful in getting at the truth?

Where to look for the causes of such vastly different systems of thought? Do they lie in biology? Language? Economics? Social systems? What keeps them going today? Social practices? Education? Inertia? And where are we headed with the differences? Will they still be here fifty or five hundred years from now?

My research has led me to the conviction that two utterly different approaches to the world have maintained themselves for thousands of years. These approaches include profoundly different social relations, views about the nature of the world, and characteristic thought processes. 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 worldviews 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 educational strategies for different peoples.

Perhaps most important of all, the book has implications for how East and West can get along better through mutual understanding of mental differences. Many people in Eastern countries believe with some justice that the past five hundred years of Western military, political, and economic dominance have made the West intellectually and morally arrogant. This book will have achieved its purpose for Western readers if it causes them to consider the possibility that another valid approach to thinking about the world exists and that it can serve as a mirror