BOOK REVIEW

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

Richard E. Nisbett. New York: The Free Press, 2003

Reviewed by **Haiyan Nie**, Brock University

It is a general psychological assumption that the central processing mechanism, which enables people to think, experience, act, and learn, is universal. Mainstream psychologists believe that people across cultures and races have the same basic cognitive processes and rely on the same tools for perception, causal analysis, categorization, and inference. Decontextualized reasoning is the accepted standard process and procedure of reasoning. However, cultural psychology suggests an alternative discipline for interpretation of the fundamentals of the mind. Cultural psychologist Richard Nisbett of the University of Michigan explains such a perspective in his book *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why*. He argues that people in different cultures not only think about different things, but also think differently. In a series of studies carried out in the United States, Japan, China, and Korea, Nisbett and his colleagues found that “there are indeed dramatic differences in the nature of Asian and European thought process” (p.xviii).

The eight chapters that compose *The Geography of Thought* map the habits of thought. The author states that Easterners are more holistic in perceiving the world and Westerners more analytic. Further to the point, the holistic way of thinking lies in East Asians’ broader view, focusing on the context and situation in which an object and a person are involved and the relationships among objects and people. They look at parts in relation to the whole, and believe in constant change. The other side of the coin is that Westerners zero in on a salient object and tend to categorize the object. They believe that they can control events by knowing rules that govern objects. They treat the world as static.

In Chapters One to Three, Nisbett documents the literature through which the cognitive disparities between East and West can be traced. The theme that penetrates through the chapters is ancient Greek agency vs. ancient Chinese harmony. Agency has promoted the individual identity, a sense of debate, and a curiosity about nature of the Greeks, while harmony developed the collective agency, concern with unity and self-control, and lack of wonder of

the Chinese. Two giant figures in ancient philosophy, Aristotle and Confucius, are taken as the examples to explore the philosophical roots of the two approaches to the world. The comparison of social aspects of the two ancient nations leads to the conclusion that the drastically different original physical surroundings, agricultural structure, economic infrastructures, social structures, focus and understanding of the nature of the world, worldviews, and different ways of thinking determine and generate one another, and are dependent on each other as well. The goal of reasoning is the discovery of truth for the Greeks and the Middle Way for the Chinese. The author also investigates how the sense of self differs between East and West. Nisbett points out that Asians are more interdependent, considering self as “a part of a larger whole” (p.76), while Westerners are more independent, thinking of self as “a unitary free agent” (p.76).

Chapters Four to Seven make up the core of the book, with citations from cognitive psychological studies conducted by the author and other researchers. This practical backup sparks readers’ greater interest in the topic and nourishes their thoughts. One of the studies, of responses to animated underwater vignettes, demonstrates Asians’ “wide-angle lens” view and Westerners’ “tunnel vision” (p. 89). Participants in this study—students at Kyoto University and the University of Michigan—were exposed to an underwater scene in which there are one or more bigger and fast-moving focal fish as well as some not-so-fast-moving animals and background objects. Americans and Japanese made about an equal number of references to the focal fish, but the Japanese made more references to the background objects than Americans do. Americans attended more to the focal fish.

The final chapter presents the implications of the findings for psychology, philosophy, and society. Although it adds insights to research in cultural psychology, it may be more instructional for educators, particularly faculty members who are confused about Asian or international students’ writing style. Professors may find that the way Asian or international students develop their arguments and draw conclusions does not follow Western logic. Cognitive differences can be reflected in writing, since it mirrors the way of thinking. Understanding that another approach to argument and logic exists provides a key to making connections between the Eastern and Western academic culture and can promote a more multicultural campus. For Asian or international students, this book offers insights into some problems in their studies and can enhance their academic growth in more structured ways.

Loaded with vivid pictures and fresh thoughts on cognitive differences between East and West, the book ends with the author’s question about the future of the world. With globalization, is divergence or convergence going to

Book Review

be the trend? Nisbett believes in the blended, but transformed, representation of the two. It is interesting to see this more Eastern view (Middle Way) perceived by a Western scholar. This is also the goal of the book, to foster better understanding between East and West that will complement and enrich both.

The Geography of Thought is quite a good read. Its informative and insightful content can remove blocks to cross-cultural understanding and bridge Eastern and Western communication. As a student from Asia, I have a great interest in the cultural differences encountered in my studying and living in the West, but it used to be just the simple comparison of facts. This book opens my mind to a subtler and deeper understanding of both Eastern and Western culture. It replaces my prejudice and resistance toward an alien culture with appreciation and helps me understand more of who I am. “Agency vs. harmony” has activated a link in my heart to a more diversified and harmonious world.