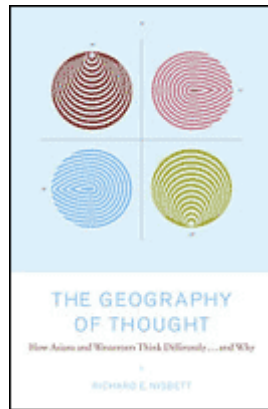


Certain books have a tendency to sneak up on you. This one is an example: a while ago, I heard its author, a psychologist and Distinguished Professor at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, speak about his research on Asian versus Western perceptions. Truth be told: failing to see the essence of the work presented, I was not impressed. Later, though, someone recommended that I read his book *The Geography of Thought*. I did – and came away fascinated!

Richard E. Nisbett's research focuses on differences between people from East Asian cultures, primarily China, Korea, and Japan, on one hand, and Americans on the other. Neither group seems sufficiently representative of "Asians" or "Westerners" as a whole, rendering the book's subtitle, "How Asians and Westerners Think Differently – and Why", a bit ambitious. Nevertheless, the author's way of contrasting the ancient Greeks' abstract logic, which he argues has strongly influenced most "Western" cultures, with the holistic thinking that is characteristic of Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist traditions is most compelling. He presents an excellent overview of attitudes of independence and interdependence, analyzing differences between concepts of individual identity and agency as opposed to group orientation and harmony.



This discussion serves as a foundation for the following chapters, in which Nisbett presents and interprets numerous experiments he and his team have conducted. Some of them test how participants from different cultures process visual information, others focus on objects and the relationships between them, while again others investigate how the individuals process information that is logically contradictory. The results are as stunning as they are eye-opening, hinting at fundamental differences in the ways Americans and East Asians perceive their environment and process information.

In a later chapter, the author discusses key implications of these differences, pointing out how each camp might be able to benefit from the others' ways of perceiving and processing information. In one practical application, he describes how intelligence testing could change to be truly independent of such cultural influences.

The Geography of Thought is valuable for its many insights and suggestions. Nisbett aims too high in trying to construct a broader theory about East-versus-West differences in the book's epilogue, titled "The End of Psychology or the Clash of Mentalities." This 10-page attempt to reconcile Fukuyama's and Huntington's theses about the future of the world appears far too simplistic and superficial to do much good. Nevertheless, while not presenting anything that's fundamentally new, this book offers some entertaining and thought-provoking reading.

Leadership Crossroads™ 6122 Bryan Parkway, Dallas, TX 75206
469-233-3538 fax 214-764-6655
info@leadershipcrossroads.com www.leadershipcrossroads.com

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Lothar Katz is the founder of Leadership Crossroads. He has a wealth of experience in achieving productive cooperation across cultures and driving business success on a global scale.

A seasoned former executive of a Fortune 500 company, he regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. These included many parts of Asia, e.g., China, India, and Japan. Mr. Katz is the author of "Negotiating International Business – The Negotiator's Reference Guide to 50 Countries Around the World".

