Chapter 1
The Syllogism and the Tao

More than a billion people in the world today claim intellectual inheritance from ancient Greece. More than two billion are the heirs of ancient Chinese traditions of thought. The philosophies and achievements of the Greeks and Chinese of 2,500 years ago were remarkably different, as were the social structures and conceptions of themselves. And, as I hope to show in this chapter, the intellectual aspects of each society make sense in light of their social characteristics.

The Ancient Greeks and Agency

There is an ancient theater at Epidaurus in Greece that holds fourteen thousand people. Built into a hillside, the theater has a spectacular view of mountains and pine trees. Its acoustics are such that it is possible to hear a piece of paper being crumpled on the stage from any location in the theater. Greeks of the classical period, from the sixth to the third century B.C., traveled for long periods under difficult conditions to attend plays and poetry readings at Epidaurus from dawn till dusk for several days in a row.

To us today, people’s love of the theater and their willingness to endure some hardship to indulge it may not seem terribly odd. But among the great civilizations of the day, including Persia, India, and the Middle East, as well as China, it is possible to imagine only the Greeks feeling free enough, being confident enough in their ability to control their own lives, to go on a long journey for the sole purpose of aesthetic enjoyment. The Greeks’ contemporaries lived in more or less autocratic societies in which the king’s will was law and to defy it was to court death. It would not have been in a ruler’s interest to allow his subjects to wander about the countryside even if his subjects’ ties to the land and the routines of agriculture had allowed them to imagine going on a long journey for purposes of recreation.

Equally astonishing, even to us today, is that the entire Greek nation laid down its tools—including its arms if city-states were at war with one another—to participate in the Olympics as athletes or audience.

The Greeks, more than any other ancient peoples, and in fact more than most people on the planet today, had a remarkable sense of personal agency—the sense that they were in charge of their own lives and free to act as they chose. One definition of happiness for the Greeks was that it consisted of being able to exercise their powers in pursuit of excellence in a life free from constraints.

A strong sense of individual identity accompanied the Greek sense of personal agency. ‘Whether it is the Greeks or the Hebrews who invented individualism is a matter of some controversy, but there is no doubt that the Greeks viewed themselves as unique individuals, with distinctive attributes and goals. This would have been true at least by the time of Homer in the eighth or ninth century B.C. Both gods and humans in the Odyssey and the Iliad have personalities that are fully formed and individuated. Moreover, the differences among individuals were of substantial interest to Greek philosophers.

The Greek sense of agency fueled a tradition of debate. Homer makes it clear that a man is defined almost as much by his ability to debate as by his prowess as a warrior. A commoner could challenge even a king and not only live to tell the tale, but occasionally sway an audience to his side. Debates occurred in the marketplace, the political assembly, and even in military settings. Uniquely among ancient civilizations, great matters of state, as well as the most ordinary questions, were often decided by public, rhetorical combat rather than by authoritarian fiat. Tyrannies were not common in Greece and, when they arose, were frequently replaced by oligarchies or, beginning in the fifth century B.C., by democracies. The constitutions of some cities had mechanisms to prevent officials from becoming tyrants. For example, the city of Drerus on Crete prohibited a man from holding the office of kosmos (magistrate) until ten years had gone by since the last time he held the office.

As striking as the Greeks’ freedom and individuality is their sense of curiosity about the world. Aristotle thought that curiosity was the uniquely defining property of human beings. St. Luke said of the Athenians of a later era: “They spend their time in nothing else but to tell or to hear some new thing.”
The Greeks, far more than their contemporaries, speculated about the nature of the world they found themselves in and created models of it. They constructed these models by categorizing objects and events and generating rules about them that were sufficiently precise for systematic description and explanation. This characterized their advances in—some have said invention of—the fields of physics, astronomy, axiomatic geometry, formal logic, rational philosophy, natural history, and ethnography. (The word “ethnocentric” is of Greek origin. The term resulted from the Greeks’ recognition that their belief that their way of life was superior to that of the Persians might be based on mere prejudice. They decided it was not.)

Whereas many great contemporary civilizations, as well as the earlier Mesopotamian and Egyptian and the later Mayan civilizations, made systematic observations in all scientific domains, only the Greeks attempted to explain their observations in terms of underlying principles. Exploring these principles was a source of pleasure for the Greeks. Our word “school” comes from the Greek scholë, meaning “leisure.” Leisure meant for the Greeks, among other things, the freedom to pursue knowledge. The merchants of Athens were happy to send their sons to school so that they could indulge their curiosity.

The Ancient Chinese and Harmony

While a special occasion for the ancient Greek might mean attendance at plays and poetry readings, a special occasion for the Chinese of the same period would be an opportunity to visit with friends and family. There was a practice called chuan men, literally “make doors a chain.” Visits, which were intended to show respect for the hosts, were especially common during the major holidays. Those who were visited early were perceived as more important than those who were visited later.

The Chinese counterpart to Greek agency was harmony. Every Chinese was first and foremost a member of a collective, or rather of several collectives—the clan, the village, and especially the family. The individual was not, as for the Greeks, an encapsulated unit who maintained a unique identity across social settings. Instead, as philosopher Henry Rosemont has written: “…For the early Confucians, there can be no me in isolation, to be considered abstractly: I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others. Taken collectively, they weave, for each of us, a unique pattern of personal identity, such that if some of my roles change, the others will of necessity change also, literally making me a different person.”

The Chinese were concerned less with issues of control of others or the environment than with self-control, so as to minimize friction with others in the family and village and to make it easier to obey the requirements of the state, administered by magistrates. The ideal of happiness was not, as for the Greeks, a life allowing the free exercise of distinctive talents, but the satisfactions of a plain country life shared within a harmonious social network. Whereas Greek vases and wine goblets show pictures of battles, athletic contests, and bacchanalian parties, ancient Chinese scrolls and porcelains depict scenes of family activities and rural pleasures.

The Chinese would not have felt themselves to be the helpless pawns of superiors and family members. On the contrary, there would have been a sense of collective agency. The chief moral system of China—Confucianism—was essentially an elaboration of the obligations that obtained between emperor and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and between friend and friend. Chinese society made the individual feel very much a part of a large, complex, and generally benign social organism where clear mutual obligations served as a guide to ethical conduct. Carrying out prescribed roles—in an organized, hierarchical system—was the essence of Chinese daily life. There was no counterpart to the Greek sense of personal liberty. Individual rights in China were one’s “share” of the rights of the community as a whole, not a license to do as one pleased.

Within the social group, any form of confrontation, such as debate, was discouraged. Though there was a time, called the period of the “hundred schools” of 600 to 200 B.C., during which polite debate occurred, at least among philosophers, anything resembling public disagreement was discouraged. As
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the British philosopher of science Geoffrey Lloyd has written, “In philosophy, in medicine, and elsewhere there is criticism of other points of view...[but] the Chinese generally conceded far more readily than did the Greeks, that other opinions had something to be said for them...”

Their monophonic music reflected the Chinese concern with unity. Singers would all sing the same melody and musical instruments played the same notes at the same time. Not surprisingly, it was the Greeks who invented polyphonic music, where different instruments, and different voices, take different parts.

Chinese social harmony should not be confused with conformity. On the contrary, Confucius praised the desire of the gentleman to harmonize and distinguished it from the petty person’s need for conformity. The Zuo zhuan, a classic Confucian text, makes the distinction in a metaphor about cooking. A good cook blends the flavors and creates something harmonious and delicious. No flavor is completely submerged, and the savory taste is due to the blended but distinctive contributions of each flavor.

The Chinese approach to understanding the natural world was as different from that of the Greeks as their understanding of themselves. Early in their study of the heavens, the Chinese believed that cosmic events such as comets and eclipses could predict important occurrences on earth, such as the birth of conquerors. But when they discovered the regularities in these events, so far from building models of them, they lost interest in them.

The lack of wonder among the Chinese is especially remarkable in light of the fact that Chinese civilization far outdistanced Greek civilization technologically. The Chinese have been credited with the original or independent invention of irrigation systems, ink, porcelain, the magnetic compass, stirrups, the wheelbarrow, deep drilling, the Pascal triangle, pound locks on canals, fore-and-aft sailing, watertight compartments, the sternpost rudder, the paddle-wheel boat, quantitative cartography, immunization techniques, astronomical observations of novae, seismographs, and acoustics. Many of these technological achievements were in place at a time when Greece had virtually none.

But, as philosopher Hajime Nakamura notes, the Chinese advances reflected a genius for practicality, not a penchant for scientific theory and investigation. And as philosopher and sinologist Donald Munro has written, “In Confucianism there was no thought of knowing that did not entail some consequence for action.”

Essence or Evanescence?

Philosophy in Greece and China

The philosophies of Greece and China reflected their distinctive social practices. The Greeks were concerned with understanding the fundamental nature of the world, though in ways that were different in different eras. The philosophers of Ionia (including western Turkey, Sicily, and southern Italy) of the sixth century B.C. were thoroughly empirical in orientation, building their theories on a base of sense observation. But the fifth century saw a move toward abstraction and distrust of the senses. Plato thought that ideas—the forms—had a genuine reality and that the world could be understood through logical approaches to their meaning, without reference to the world of the senses. If the senses seemed to contradict conclusions reached from first principles and logic, it was the senses that had to be ignored.

Though Aristotle did not grant reality to the forms, he thought of attributes as having a reality distinct from their concrete embodiments in objects. For him it was meaningful to speak not just of a solid object, but of attributes in the abstract—solidity, whiteness, etc.—and to have theories about these abstractions. The central, basic, sine qua non properties of an object constituted its “essence,” which was unchanging by definition, since if the essence of an object changed it was no longer the object but something else. The properties of an object that could change without changing the object’s essence were “accidental” properties. For example, the author is sadly lacking in musical talent, but if he suddenly were to have musical talent, you would still think he was the same person. Musical talent, then, is an accidental property, and change in it does not constitute change in the person’s essence. Greek
philosophy thus differed greatly from Chinese in that it was deeply concerned with the question of which properties made an object what it was, and which were alterable without changing the nature of the object.

The Greek language itself encouraged a focus on attributes and on turning attributes into abstractions. As in other Indo-European languages, every adjective can be granted noun status by adding the English equivalent of “ness” as a suffix: “white” becomes “whiteness”; “kind” becomes “kindness.” A routine habit of Greek philosophers was to analyze the attributes of an object—person, place, thing, or animal—and categorize the object on the basis of its abstracted attributes. They would then attempt to understand the object’s nature, and the cause of its actions, on the basis of rules governing the categories. So the attributes of a comet would be noted and the object would then be categorized at various levels of abstraction—this comet, a comet, a heavenly body, a moving object. Rules at various levels of abstraction would be generated as hypotheses and the behavior of the comet explained in terms of rules that seemed to work at a given level of abstraction.

But still more basic to Greek philosophy is its background scheme, which regarded the object in isolation as the proper focus of attention and analysis. Most Greeks regarded matter as particulate and separate—formed into discrete objects—just as humans were seen as separate from one another and construed as distinct wholes. Once the object is taken as the starting point, then many things follow automatically: The attributes of the object are salient; the attributes become the basis of categorization of the object; the categories become the basis of rule construction; and events are then understood as the result of objects behaving in accordance with rules. By “objects” I mean both nonhuman and human objects, but in fact the nature of the physical world was of great concern to Greek philosophers. Human relations and ethical conduct were important to the Greeks but did not have the consuming interest that they did for the Chinese.

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A peculiar but important aspect of Greek philosophy is the notion that the world is fundamentally static and unchanging. To be sure, the sixth-century philosopher Heraclitus and other early philosophers were concerned with change. (“A man never steps in the same river twice because the man is different and the river is different.”) But by the fifth century change was out and stability was in. Parmenides “proved,” in a few easy steps, that change was impossible: To say of a thing that it does not exist is a contradiction. Nonbeing is self-contradictory and so non-being can’t exist. If nonbeing can’t exist, then nothing can change because, if thing 1 were to change to thing 2, then thing 1 would not be! Parmenides created an option for Greek philosophers: They could trust either logic or their senses. From Plato on, they often went with logic.

Zeno, the pupil of Parmenides, established in a similar way that motion was impossible. He did this in two demonstrations. One is his famous demonstration with the arrow. In order for an arrow to reach a target, it first has to go halfway toward the target, then halfway between that and the target, and then halfway between that and the target, etc. But of course half of a half of a half...still leaves the arrow short of the target. Ergo, visual evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, movement can’t occur. The other “proof” was even simpler. Either a thing is in its place or it is not. If it is in its place, then it cannot move. It is impossible for a thing not to be in its place; therefore nothing moves. As communications theorist Robert Logan has written, the Greeks “became slaves to the linear, either-or orientation of their logic.”

Not all Greek philosophers were logic-choppers out to prove change impossible, but there is a static quality even to the reasoning of Aristotle. He believed, for example, that all celestial bodies were immutable, perfect spheres and though motion occurs and events happen, the essences of things do not change. Moreover, Aristotle’s physics is highly linear. Changes in rate of motion, let alone cyclical motion, play little role in Aristotle’s physics. (It is partly for this reason that Aristotle’s physics was so remarkably misguided. Gordon Kane, a physicist friend of mine, has identified a large number of physical propositions in Aristotle’s writings. He maintains that the great majority of them are wrong. This is especially puzzling because Aristotle’s Ionian predecessors got many of them right.)
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The Chinese orientation toward life was shaped by the blending of three different philosophies: Taoism, Confucianism, and, much later, Buddhism. Each philosophy emphasized harmony and largely discouraged abstract speculation.

There is an ancient Chinese story, still known to most East Asians today, about an old farmer whose only horse ran away. Knowing that the horse was the mainstay of his livelihood, his neighbors came to commiserate with him. “Who knows what’s bad or good?” said the old man, refusing their sympathy. And indeed, a few days later his horse returned, bringing with it a wild horse. The old man’s friends came to congratulate him. Rejecting their congratulations, the old man said, “Who knows what’s bad or good?” And, as it happened, a few days later when the old man’s son was attempting to ride the wild horse, he was thrown from it and his leg was broken. The friends came to express their sadness about the son’s misfortune. “Who knows what’s bad or good?” said the old man. A few weeks passed, and the army came to the village to conscript all the able-bodied men to fight a war against the neighboring province, but the old man’s son was not fit to serve and was spared.

The story, which goes on as long as the patience of the audience permits, expresses a fundamental of the Eastern stance toward life. The world is constantly changing and is full of contradictions. To understand and appreciate one state of affairs requires the existence of its opposite; what seems to be true now may be the opposite of what it seems to be (cf. Communist-era Premier Chou En-lai’s response when asked whether he thought the consequences of the French Revolution had been beneficial: “It’s too early to tell”).

Yin (the feminine and dark and passive) alternates with yang (the masculine and light and active). Indeed, yin and yang only exist because of each other, and when the world is in a yin state, this is a sure sign that it is about to be in a yang state. The sign of the Tao, which means “the Way” to exist with nature and with one’s fellow humans, consists of two forces in the form of a white and a black swirl. But the black swirl contains a white dot and the white swirl contains a black dot. And “the truest yang is the yang that is in the yin.” The principle of yin-yang is the expression of the relationship that exists between opposing but interpenetrating forces that may complete one another, make each comprehensible, or create the conditions for altering one into the other.

From the I Ching: “...For misery, happiness is leaning against it; for happiness, misery is hiding in it. Who knows whether it is misery or happiness? There is no certainty. The righteous suddenly becomes the vicious, the good suddenly becomes the bad” (I Ching, xxx).

From the Tao Te Ching: “The heavy is the root of the light...The unmoved is the source of all movement” (Chapter 26).

Returning—moving in endless cycles—is the basic pattern of movement of the Tao.

To shrink something
You need to expand it first
To weaken something
You need to strengthen it first
To abolish something
You need to flourish it first
To take something
You need to give it first (Tao Te Ching, Chapter 36)

Aside from Taoism’s teachings about opposition, contradiction, change, and cycles, it stood for a deep appreciation of nature, the rural life, and simplicity. It was the religion of wonder, magic, and fancy, and it gave meaning to the universe through its account of the links between nature and human affairs.

Taoism is the source of much of the philosophy behind the healing arts of China. Physiology was explained on a symbolic level by the yin-yang principle and by the Five Elements (earth, fire, water,
metal, and wood), which also provided the explanations behind magic, incantations, and aphrodisiacs. The ubiquitous word was ch‘i, meaning variously “breath,” “air,” or “spirit.”

Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 B.C., was less a religious leader than an ethical philosopher. His concern was with the proper relations among people, which in his system were hierarchical and strictly spelled out. Each member of each of the important relationship pairs (husband-wife, etc.) had clear obligations toward the other.

Confucianism has been called the religion of common sense. Its adherents are urged to uphold the Doctrine of the Golden Mean—to be excessive in nothing and to assume that between two propositions, and between two contending individuals, there is truth on both sides. But in reality, Confucianism, like Taoism, is less concerned with finding the truth than with finding the Tao—the Way—to live in the world.

Confucianism stresses economic well-being and education. The individual works not for self-benefits but for the entire family. Indeed, the concept of self-advancement, as opposed to family advancement, is foreign to cultures that are steeped in the Confucian orientation. A promising young man was expected to study for the government examinations with the hope of becoming a magistrate. If he did, his whole family benefited economically from his position. Unlike most of the world until very modern times, there was substantial social and economic mobility in China. Everyone who lived long enough would see families rise far higher than their origins and others sink far lower. Perhaps partly for this reason, Confucians have always believed, far more than the intellectual descendants of Aristotle, in the malleability of human nature.

Confucianism blended smoothly with Taoism. In particular, the deep appreciation of the contradictions and changes in human life, and the need to see things whole, that are integral to the notion of a yin-yang universe are also part of Confucian philosophy. But the dominant themes of nature and the rural life are much more associated with Taoism than with Confucianism, and the importance of the family and educational and economic advancement are more integral to Confucianism. These thematic differences are reflected in paintings on porcelains and scrolls. Characteristic Tao-inspired themes would include a picture of a fisherman, a woodcutter, or a lone individual sitting under trees. Confucian-inspired themes would center on the family, with pictures of many people of different ages engaging in shared activities. Different individuals in ancient China, and for that matter in contemporary China, would likely emphasize one of the orientations more than the other. This might depend in part on station in life. There is an adage holding that every Chinese is a Confucianist when he is successful and a Taoist when he is a failure.

Buddhism came to China from India hundreds of years after the classical period we are discussing. The Chinese readily absorbed congenial aspects of Buddhism, including what had been missing in Chinese philosophy, notably an epistemology, or theory of knowledge. All three orientations shared concerns about harmony, holism, and the mutual influence of everything on almost everything else. These orientations help explain why Chinese philosophy not only lacked a conception of individual rights but, it sometimes seems (at least after Buddhism began to exert an influence), an acknowledgment of individual minds. A twelfth-century neo-Confucian wrote, “The universe is my mind and my mind is the universe. Sages appeared tens of thousands of generations ago. They shared this mind; they shared this principle. Sages will appear tens of thousands of generations to come. They will share this mind; they will share this principle.”

The holism common to the three orientations suggested that every event is related to every other event. A key idea is the notion of resonance. If you pluck a string on an instrument, you produce a resonance in another string. Man, heaven, and earth create resonances in each other. If the emperor does something wrong, it throws the universe out of kilter.

The concern with abstraction characteristic of ancient Greek philosophy has no counterpart in Chinese philosophy. Chinese philosophers quite explicitly favored the most concrete sense impressions in understanding the world. In fact, the Chinese language itself is remarkably concrete. There is no word
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for “size,” for example. If you want to fit someone for shoes, you ask them for the “big- small” of their feet. There is no suffix equivalent to “ness” in Chinese. So there is no “whiteness”—only the white of the swan and the white of the snow. The Chinese are disinclined to use precisely defined terms or categories in any arena, but instead use expressive, metaphoric language.

In Chinese literary criticism there are different methods of writing called “the method of watching a fire across the river” (detachment of style), “the method of dragonflies skimming across the water surface” (lightness of touch), “the method of painting a dragon and dotting its eyes” (bringing out the salient points).

For the Chinese, the background scheme for the nature of the world was that it was a mass of substances rather than a collection of discrete objects. Looking at a piece of wood, the Chinese philosopher saw a seamless whole composed of a single substance, or perhaps of interpenetrating substances of several kinds. The Greek philosopher would have seen an object composed of particles. Whether the world was composed of atoms or of continuous substances was debated in Greece, but the issue never arose in China. It was continuous substances, period. Philosopher of science Joseph Needham has observed: “Their universe was a continuous medium or matrix within which interactions of things took place, not by the clash of atoms, but by radiating influences.”

So the philosophies of China and Greece were as different as their respective social life and self-conceptions. And the philosophical differences are reflective of the social ones, in several respects.

Greeks were independent and engaged in verbal contention and debate in an effort to discover what people took to be the truth. They thought of themselves as individuals with distinctive properties, as units separate from others within the society, and in control of their own destinies. Similarly, Greek philosophy started from the individual object—the person, the atom, the house—as the unit of analysis and it dealt with properties of the object. The world was in principle simple and knowable: All one had to do was to understand what an object’s distinctive attributes were so as to identify its relevant categories and then apply the pertinent rule to the categories.

Chinese social life was interdependent and it was not liberty but harmony that was the watchword—the harmony of humans and nature for the Taoists and the harmony of humans with other humans for the Confucians. Similarly, the Way, and not the discovery of truth, was the goal of philosophy. Thought that gave no guidance to action was fruitless. The world was complicated, events were interrelated, and objects (and people) were connected “not as pieces of pie, but as ropes in a net.” The Chinese philosopher would see a family with interrelated members where the Greek saw a collection of persons with attributes that were independent of any connections with others. Complexity and interrelation meant for the Chinese that an attempt to understand the object without appreciation of its context was doomed. Under the best of circumstances, control of outcomes was difficult.

Science and mathematics, as we’ll see next, were fully consistent with both social behavior and philosophical outlook.

Contradiction of Connection?

Science and Mathematics in Greece and China

The greatest of all Greek scientific discoveries was the discovery—or rather, as philosopher Geoffrey Lloyd put it, the invention—of nature itself The Greeks defined nature as the universe minus human beings and their culture. Although this seems to us to be the most obvious sort of distinction, no other civilization came upon it. A plausible account of how the Greeks happened to invent nature is that they came to make a distinction between the external, objective world and the internal, subjective one. And this distinction came about because the Greeks, unlike everyone else, had a clear understanding of subjectivity arising from the tradition of debate. It makes no sense for you to try to persuade me of something unless you believe that there is a reality out there that you apprehend better than I do. You may be able to coerce me into doing what you want and even into saying that I believe what you do. But you will not persuade me until I believe that your subjective interpretation of some state of affairs is superior to mine.
So, in effect, objectivity arose from subjectivity—the recognition that two minds could have different representations of the world and that the world has an existence independent of either representation. This recognition was probably aided for the Greeks because, due to their position as a trading center, they regularly encountered people with utterly different notions about the world. In contrast, Chinese culture was unified early on and it would have been relatively rare to encounter people having radically different metaphysical and religious views.

The Greeks’ discovery of nature made possible the invention of science. China’s failure to develop science can be attributed in part to lack of curiosity, but the absence of a concept of nature would have blocked the development of science in any case. As philosopher Yu-lan Fung observes, “Why” questions are hard to ask if there is no clear recognition that there are mental concepts that somehow correspond to aspects of nature, but which are not identical to them.

The Greeks’ focus on the salient object and its attributes led to their failure to understand the fundamental nature of causality. Aristotle explained that a stone falling through the air is due to the stone having the property of “gravity.” But of course a piece of wood tossed into water floats instead of sinking. This phenomenon Aristotle explained as being due to the wood having the property of “levity”! In both cases the focus is exclusively on the object, with no attention paid to the possibility that some force outside the object might be relevant. But the Chinese saw the world as consisting of continuously interacting substances, so their attempts to understand it caused them to be oriented toward the complexities of the entire “field,” that is, the context or environment as a whole. The notion that events always occur in a field of forces would have been completely intuitive to the Chinese. The Chinese therefore had a kind of recognition of the principle of “action at a distance” two thousand years before Galileo articulated it. They had knowledge of magnetism and acoustic resonance, for example, and believed it was the movement of the moon that caused the tides, a fact that eluded even Galileo.

In the desert of western China are buried bodies of tall, red-haired people, astonishingly well preserved, of Caucasian appearance. They found their way to that part of the world some thousands of years ago. Aside from the way they look, they are different from the peoples who lived in the area in another interesting respect. Many of them show clear signs of having been operated on surgically. In all of Chinese history, surgery has been a great rarity.

The reluctance of the Chinese to perform surgery is completely understandable in light of their views about harmony and relationships. Health was dependent on the balance of forces in the body and the relationships between its parts. And there were, and are for many East Asians today, relationships between every part of the body and almost every other part. To get a feel for this vast web of interconnections, look at a modern acupuncturist’s view of the relations between the surface of the ear and the epidermis and skeleton. An equally complex network describes the relations between the ear and each of the internal organs. The notion that the removal of a malfunctioning or diseased part of the body could be beneficial, without attending to its relations to other parts of the body, would have been too simple-minded for the Chinese to contemplate. In contrast, surgery has been practiced in many different Western societies for thousands of years.

The Chinese tendency to focus on relationships in a complex, interconnected field is exemplified by the practice of feng shui, still continued in the East. When someone wishes to build a building, it is essential to call in a feng shui master. This person takes account of a seemingly limitless number of factors such as altitude, prevailing wind, orientation toward the compass, proximity to various bodies of water, and gives advice on where to locate the structure. This practice has had no real counterpart in the West, but the most modern skyscraper in Hong Kong will have had its feng shui workup before being built.
The Chinese conviction about the fundamental relatedness of all things made it obvious to them that objects are altered by context. Thus any attempt to categorize objects with precision would not have seemed to be of much help in comprehending events. The world was simply too complex and interactive for categories and rules to be helpful for understanding objects or controlling them.

The Chinese were right about the importance of the field to an understanding of the behavior of the object and they were right about complexity, but their lack of interest in categories prevented them from discovering laws that really were capable of explaining classes of events. And for all that the Greeks tended to oversimplify and to be satisfied by pseudo-explanations involving nonexistent properties of objects, they correctly understood that it was necessary to categorize objects in order to be able to apply rules to them. Since rules are useful to the extent that they apply to the widest possible array of objects, there was a constant “upward press” to generalize to high levels of abstraction so that rules would be maximally applicable. This drive toward abstraction was sometimes—though not always—useful.

The Greek faith in categories had scientific payoffs, immediately as well as later, for their intellectual heirs. Only the Greeks made classifications of the natural world sufficiently rigorous to permit a move from the sorts of folk-biological schemes that other peoples constructed to a single classification system that ultimately could result in theories with real explanatory power.

A group of mathematicians associated with Pythagoras is said to have thrown a man overboard because it was discovered that he had revealed the scandal of irrational numbers, such as the square root of 2, which just goes on and on without a predictable pattern: 1.4142135…Whether this story is apocryphal or not, it is certainly the case that most Greek mathematicians did not regard irrational numbers as real numbers at all. The Greeks lived in a world of discrete particles and the continuous and unending nature of irrational numbers was so implausible that mathematicians could not take them seriously.

On the other hand, the Greeks were probably pleased by how it was they came to know that the square root of 2 is irrational, namely via a proof from contradiction. One posits two whole numbers, $n$ and $m$, such that the square root of 2 = $n/m$ and shows that this leads to a contradiction.

The Greeks were focused on, you might even say obsessed by, the concept of contradiction. If one proposition was seen to be in a contradictory relation with another, then one of the propositions had to be rejected. The principle of noncontradiction lies at the base of propositional logic. The general explanation given for why the Greeks, rather than some other people, invented logic, is that a society in which debate plays a prominent role will begin to recognize which arguments are flawed by definition because their structure results in a contradiction. The basic rules of logic, including syllogisms, were worked out by Aristotle. He is said to have invented logic because he was annoyed at hearing bad arguments in the political assembly and in the agora! Notice that logical analysis is a kind of continuation of the Greek tendency to decontextualize. Logic is applied by stripping away the meaning of statements and leaving only their formal structure intact. This makes it easier to see whether an argument is valid or not. Of course, as modern East Asians are fond of pointing out, that sort of decontextualization is not without its dangers. Like the ancient Chinese, they strive to be reasonable, not rational. The injunction to avoid extremes can be as useful a principle as the requirement to avoid contradictions.

Chinese philosopher Mo-tzu made serious strides in the direction of logical thought in the fifth century B.C., but he never formalized his system and logic died an early death in China. Except for that brief interlude, the Chinese lacked not only logic, but even a principle of contradiction. India did have a strong logical tradition, but the Chinese translations of Indian texts were full of errors and misunderstandings. Although the Chinese made substantial advances in algebra and arithmetic, they made little progress in geometry because proofs rely on formal logic, especially the notion of contradiction. (Algebra did not become deductive until Descartes. Our educational system retains the memory trace of their separation by teaching algebra and geometry as separate subjects.)

The Greeks were deeply concerned with foundational arguments in mathematics. Other peoples had
recipes; only the Greeks had derivations. On the other hand, Greek logic and foundational concern may have presented as many obstacles as opportunities. The Greeks never developed the concept of zero, which is required both for algebra and for an Arabic-style place number system. Zero was considered by the Greeks, but rejected on the grounds that it represented a contradiction. Zero equals nonbeing and nonbeing cannot be! An understanding of zero, as well as of infinity and infinitesimals, ultimately had to be imported from the East.

In place of logic, the Chinese developed a type of dialecticism. This is not quite the same as the Hegelian dialectic in which thesis is followed by antithesis, which is resolved by synthesis, and which is “aggressive” in the sense that the ultimate goal of reasoning is to resolve contradiction. The Chinese dialectic instead uses contradiction to understand relations among objects or events, to transcend or integrate apparent oppositions, or even to embrace clashing but instructive viewpoints. In the Chinese intellectual tradition there is no necessary incompatibility between the belief that A is the case and the belief that not-A is the case. On the contrary, in the spirit of the Tao or yin-yang principle, A can actually imply that not-A is also the case, or at any rate soon will be the case. Dialectical thought is in some ways the opposite of logical thought. It seeks not to decontextualize but to see things in their appropriate contexts: Events do not occur in isolation from other events, but are always embedded in a meaningful whole in which the elements are constantly changing and rearranging themselves. To think about an object or event in isolation and apply abstract rules to it is to invite extreme and mistaken conclusions. It is the Middle Way that is the goal of reasoning.

Why should the ancient Greeks and Chinese have differed so much in their habits of thought or, at any rate, why should this be true of the intelligentsia, who are the only ancient peoples whose mental life is known to us at all? And why should there be such “resonance” between the social forms and self-understandings on the one hand and the philosophical assumptions and scientific approaches on the other? Answers to these questions have implications for understanding the differences between Eastern and Western thought that exist today.
Chapter 2
The Social Origins of Mind

I once asked a Chinese philosopher why he thought the East and the West had developed such different habits of thought. “Because you had Aristotle and we had Confucius,” he replied. He was joking—mostly. Although Aristotle and Confucius had enormous impact on the intellectual, social, and political histories of the peoples who followed, they were less the progenitors of their respective cultures than the products. And they couldn’t have had the impact they did if they hadn’t reflected the societies they lived in. In fact, a kind of “proof” of this is that Greece did have its philosophers, like Heraclitus, who were more nearly Eastern in spirit than Western, and China had its philosophers, like Mo-tzu, who shared many of the concerns of Western philosophers. But despite receiving a good deal of attention from contemporaries, the maverick philosophies died on the vine, and it is the Aristotelian tradition that continues in the West and the Confucian that continues in the East.

Scholars who have addressed the question of why ancient China and Greece differed so much have come up with several plausible reasons.

Greece differed from all contemporary civilizations in the development of personal freedom, individuality, and objective thought. These qualities seem partly explainable by the political system that was unique to Greece, namely the city-state and its politics, especially the assembly, in which people had to persuade one another by dint of rational argument. The city-state was also important because it was possible for intellectual rebels to leave one location and go to another, thereby maintaining a condition of relatively free inquiry. Indeed, members of the intelligentsia who were personae non gratae in a given city-state would sometimes be sought out by other city-states for the prestige they would bring. Socrates’ followers begged him to leave Athens and go somewhere else rather than allow the death sentence against him to be carried out. He would have been welcomed elsewhere and there would have been no stomach for pursuit of him by his fellow citizens.

Another factor sometimes invoked to explain Greece’s uniqueness is that its maritime location made trading a lucrative occupation, which meant that there was a substantial mercantile class who could afford to have their sons educated. That the merchants would have wished to have their sons educated requires explanation in itself, of course, especially because, unlike in China, education was not a route to power and wealth. The drive toward education was apparently the result of curiosity and a belief in the value of knowledge for its own sake. The curiosity characteristic of the Greeks may in turn be explained in part by the location of the Greeks at a crossroads of the world. They were constantly encountering novel and perplexing people, customs, and beliefs. For any Greek living near the coasts (and that would have been the great majority), encountering people representing other ethnicities, religions, and polities would have been common. Athens itself would have been rather like the bar in Star Wars.

An obvious consequence of the different practices and beliefs swirling around the Greeks would have been the necessity of dealing with contradiction. They would have been constantly confronting situations where one person was asserting that A was the case and another was contending that not-A was the case. Contradiction coming from the opinions of outsiders, as well as freely expressed contradiction among insiders’ views in the assembly and the marketplace, might have forced the development of cognitive procedures, including formal logic, to deal with the dissonance.

In contrast, even today 95 percent of the Chinese population belongs to the same Han ethnic group. Nearly all of the country’s more than fifty minority ethnic groups are in the western part of the country. A Chinese person living in the rest of the country would rarely have encountered anyone having significantly different beliefs or practices. The ethnic homogeneity of China seems at least partly explicable in terms of the centralized political control. In addition, the face-to-face village life of China would have pressed in the direction of harmony and agreed-upon norms for behavior. Seeing little difference of opinion, and finding disagreement sanctioned from above or from peers where it did exist, the Chinese would have had little use for procedures to decide which of two propositions was correct.
Instead, finding means to resolve disagreements would have been the goal. Hence, the push to find the Middle Way.

**Homeostatic Socio-Cognitive Systems**

At base, all of these explanations rest on one fact: The ecologies of ancient Greece and China were drastically different—in ways that led to different economic, political, and social arrangements. The left side of the illustration that follows shows an account of the differences between Greek and Chinese thought that makes sense to me. It is essentially a distillation of the views of many people who have tackled the question of the origin of mentalities. The right side of the illustration is the same account, but drawn by a Chinese American student, who told me she felt that a circular presentation made more sense than my linear one!

The account is at base materialistic: That is, it attempts to explain cultural facts in terms of physical ones. This approach is currently out of fashion in some circles partly because it is assumed, mistakenly, that materialistic accounts are deterministic. But materialism need not imply inevitability—just that, other things equal, physical factors can influence to some degree economic factors and consequently cultural ones. The account is not at all materialistic in one sense: The critical factors influencing habits of mind are social and important social facts can be generated and sustained by forces that are not economic in nature.

_Ecology — Economy and Social Structure_ The ecology of China, consisting as it does primarily of relatively fertile plains, low mountains, and navigable rivers, favored agriculture and made centralized control of society relatively easy. Agricultural peoples need to get along with one another—not necessarily to like one another (think of the stereotype of the crusty New England farmer)—but to live together in a reasonably harmonious fashion. This is particularly true for rice farming, characteristic of southern China and Japan, which requires people to cultivate the land in concert with one another. But it is also important wherever irrigation is required, as in the Yellow River Valley of north China, where the Shang dynasty (from the eighteenth to the eleventh century B.C.) and the Chou dynasty (from the eleventh century B.C. to 256 B.C.) were based. In addition to getting along with one’s neighbors, irrigation systems require centralized control and ancient China, like all other ancient agricultural societies, was ruled by despots. Peasants had to get along with their neighbors and were ruled by village elders and a regional magistrate who was the representative of the king (and after the unification of China, of the emperor). The ordinary Chinese therefore lived in a complicated world of social constraints.

The ecology of Greece, on the other hand, consisting as it does mostly of mountains descending to the sea, favored hunting, herding, fishing, and trade (and—let’s be frank—piracy). These are occupations that require relatively little cooperation with others. In fact, with the exception of trade, these economic activities do not strictly require living in the same stable community with other people. Settled agriculture came to Greece almost two thousand years later than to China, and it quickly became commercial, as opposed to merely subsistence, in many areas. The soil and climate of Greece were congenial to wine and olive oil production and, by the sixth century B.C., many farmers were more nearly businessmen than peasants. The Greeks were therefore able to act on their own to a greater extent than were the Chinese. Not feeling it necessary to maintain harmony with their fellows at any cost, the Greeks were in the habit of arguing with one another in the marketplace and debating one another in the political assembly.

**Social Structure and Social Practice — Attention and Folk Metaphysics** The Chinese had to look
outward toward their peers and upward toward authorities in the conduct of their economic, social, and political lives. Their relations with others provided both the chief constraint in their lives and the primary source of opportunities. The habit of looking toward the social world could have carried over to a tendency to look to the field in general; and the need to attend to social relations could have extended to an inclination to attend to relations of all kinds. As social psychologists Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama put it, “If one perceives oneself as embedded within a larger context of which one is an interdependent part, it is likely that other objects or events will be perceived in a similar way.” “Folk metaphysics”—beliefs about the nature of the social and physical world—would therefore both have been generated by one fact: the Chinese were attending closely to the social world. The sense that the self was linked in a network of relationships and social obligations might have made it natural to view the world in general as continuous and composed of substances rather than discrete and consisting of distinct objects. Causality would be seen as being located in the field or in the relation between the object and the field. Attention to the field would encourage recognition of complexity and change, as well as of contradiction among its many and varied elements.

But the Greeks had the luxury of attending to objects, including other people and their own goals with respect to them, without being overly constrained by their relations with other people. A Greek could plan a harvest, arrange for a relocation of his herd of sheep, or investigate whether it would be profitable to sell some new commodity, consulting little or not at all with others. This might have made it natural for the Greeks to focus on the attributes of objects with a view toward categorizing them and finding the rules that would allow prediction and control of their behavior. Causality would be seen as due to properties of the object or as the result of one’s own actions in relation to the object. Such a view of causality could have encouraged the Greek assumptions of stability and permanence as well as an assumption that change in the object was under their control.

So the folk metaphysics of the two societies could have arisen directly from the targets of attention: the environment or field in the case of the Chinese and the object in the case of the Greeks. The scientific metaphysics of each society would have been just a reflection of the folk views.

**Folk Metaphysics — Tacit Epistemology and Cognitive Processes** Folk metaphysics can be expected to influence tacit epistemology, or beliefs about how to get new knowledge. If the world is a place where relations among objects and events are crucial in determining outcomes, then it will seem important to be able to observe all the important elements in the field, to see relations among objects and to see the relation between the parts and the whole. Processes of attention, perception, and reasoning will develop that focus on detecting the important events and discerning the complex relationships among them. If, on the other hand, the world is a place where the behavior of objects is governed by rules and categories, then it should seem crucial to be able to isolate the object from its context, to infer what categories the object is a member of, and to infer how rules apply to those categories. Processes would then develop to serve those functions.

Finally, social practices can influence thinking habits directly. Dialectics and logic can both be seen as cognitive tools developed to deal with social conflict. We would not expect that people whose social existence is based on harmony would develop a tradition of confrontation or debate. On the contrary, when confronted with a conflict of views, they might be oriented toward resolving the contradiction, transcending it, or finding a “Middle Way”—in short, to approach matters dialectically. In contrast, people who are free to argue might be expected to develop rules for the conduct of debate, including the principle of noncontradiction and formal logic. It is an easy step from logic to science, as physicist and historian of science Alan Cromer has observed: “Science, in this view, is an extension of rhetoric. It was invented in Greece, and only in Greece, because the Greek institution of the public assembly attached great prestige to debating skill…A geometric proof is…the ultimate rhetorical form.”

An important implication of this view of the causes of Greek and Chinese mental differences is the implied homeostasis. So long as economic forces operate to maintain different social structures, different social practices and child training will result in people focusing on different things in the
environment. Focusing on different things will produce different understandings about the nature of the world. Different worldviews will in turn reinforce differential attention and social practices. The different worldviews will also prompt differences in perception and reasoning processes—which will tend to reinforce worldviews.

There is no reason to assume that the sequence ending in cognitive processes must begin with ecology. There can be many different economic reasons that might make some societies or groups more attentive to their fellow humans and many reasons that could make them more attentive to objects and their own goals with respect to them. For example, modern businesses and bureaucracies, and certainly entrepreneur-run businesses, do not necessarily require attention to a wide range of peers and a large number of supervisors. Instead, they require people to focus on a relatively narrow set of goals and to pursue them independently. Performance may actually be better if other people are largely ignored rather than attended to closely. The sequence need not even begin with economics. There can be many different reasons that could prompt attention to other people: for example, membership is a tightly knit religious community having strict rules for conduct. Similarly, many factors could cause people to focus primarily on objects and their goals with respect to them.

Latter-Day Support for the Origin Theory

This economic-social account of cognition happens to fit with some important historical changes in the West. As the West became primarily agricultural in the Middle Ages, it became less individualistic. The European peasant was probably not much different from the Chinese peasant in terms of interdependence or freedom in daily life or in a rationalist approach to reasoning. And in terms of intellectual and cultural achievement, Europe had become a backwater. While Arab emirs discussed Plato and Aristotle and Chinese magistrates displayed their proficiency in all the arts, European nobles sat gnawing joints of beef in damp castles.

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, though, developments in European agriculture (notably the invention of the horse collar, which made possible the horse-drawn plow) created enough excess wealth that new trading centers, much like the old Greek city-states, appeared. The Italian city-states, and later the northern city-states, were to a very substantial degree autonomous and for the most part not subject to the authority of despots. Many of them also had a somewhat democratic, or at least oligarchic, character. And of course rebirth of the city-state form with its wealthy merchant class was associated with a renaissance of individualism, personal liberty, rationalism, and science. By the fifteenth century, Europe had awakened from its millennium of torpor and began to rival China in almost every domain—philosophy, mathematics, art, and technology.

An event that took place in the early fifteenth century is revealing about the differences between Europe and China. This was the voyage of the Grand Eunuch, on which hundreds of ships (technologically vastly superior to the Pinta, the Nina, and the Santa Maria) sailed from China to South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Western Africa loaded with wealth and wonders. The voyage achieved its primary goal, which was to convince the nations bordering on the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea that China was superior in virtually every way to their own societies. But the Chinese were quite uninterested in seeing anything that those societies might have produced or known about—including even a giraffe that their African hosts showed them. The Chinese merely contended that the animal was known to them as a qi lin, a creature whose appearance was expected at the time of important events, such as the birth of a great emperor.

This lack of curiosity was characteristic of China. The inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom (China’s name for itself, meaning essentially “the center of the world”) had little interest in the tales brought to them by foreigners. Moreover, there has never been a strong interest in knowledge for its own sake in China. Even modern Chinese philosophers have always been far more interested in the pragmatic application of knowledge than with abstract theorizing for its own sake.

The intellectual advances that characterized Europe at an increasing rate from the fifteenth century to
the present seem to me to require more than an ecological or geopolitical explanation of the sort offered by some recent macrohistories, including Jared Diamond’s brilliant *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. While it is true that despotism and the consequent suppression of opinion and initiative would have been easier to carry off on ecological grounds in China than in Europe, it seems to me to be a mistake to limit accounts of freedom of inquiry and scientific advance in Europe to purely physical factors. Well before the fifteenth century, these values and the mentality that goes with them had been implanted in the European mind. Martin Luther launched his Ninety-Five Theses against the abuses and tyranny of the Church not just because it was easy for him to get away with it geographically, but because the history of Europe had created a new sort of person—one who conceived of individuals as separate from the larger community and who thought in terms imbued with freedom. Galileo and Newton made their discoveries not just because they could not be readily suppressed, but because of their curiosity and critical habits of mind.

Now of course the East is drawing on the Western stockpile of ideas at an ever-increasing rate. What effect these ideas will have on the East, what they will look like after being passed through an Eastern filter, and which modifications may be adopted by the West can be guessed at by looking at differences in the mental habits of contemporaries.

As history, the account I am proposing for why Greece and China diverged as they did is speculative. It is nevertheless a scientific theory—because it leads to predictions that can be tested, and tested moreover in the psychological laboratory.

Twentieth-century psychologists have provided evidence that economic and social factors can affect perceptual habits. Herman Witkin and his colleagues showed that some people are less likely than others to separate an object from its surrounding environment. They called their dimension “field dependence”—referring to the degree to which perception of an object is influenced by the background or environment in which it appears. Witkin and his colleagues measured field dependence in a variety of ways. One of these was the Rod and Frame Test. In this test the participant looks into a long box at the end of which is a rod with a frame around it. The rod and frame can be tilted independently of each other and the participant’s task is to indicate when the rod is completely vertical. The participant is accounted field dependent to the extent that judgments of the rod’s verticality are influenced by the position of the frame. A second way of testing field dependence is to place people in a chair that tilts independently of each other and the participant’s task is to indicate when the rod is completely vertical. The participant is accounted field dependent to the extent that judgments of the verticality of the participant’s own body are influenced by the tilt of the room. A third way, and the easiest to work with, is the Embedded Figures Test. In this test, the job is to locate a simple figure that is embedded in a much more complex figure. The longer it takes people to find the simple figure in its complicated context, the more field dependent they are assumed to be.

An implication of the idea that economic factors can affect cognitive habits is that agricultural peoples should be more field dependent than people who earn their living in ways that rely less on close coordination of their work with others, such as hunting animals and gathering plants. And in fact this is the case. We might also expect that traditional farming peoples would be more field dependent than people living in industrial societies, where personal goals can be pursued without close attention to a network of social roles and obligations. And this is also the case. In fact, hunter-gatherers and people in industrial societies are about equally field dependent.

If the key difference between agricultural peoples on the one hand and hunter-gatherers and modern, independent citizens of modern industrial societies on the other has to do with degree of attention to the social world, then it would be reasonable to expect that subcultures within a given society that differ in degree of social constraint should differ in degree of field dependence, as well. To test this hypothesis, personality psychologist Zachary Dershowitz examined the field dependence of Orthodox Jewish boys, who, he argued, live in families and social settings where role relations are spelled out quite explicitly and social constraints are substantial. He compared their performance with that of secular Jewish boys,
who, he maintained, are subject to more lax social controls, and to that of Protestant boys, who, he believed, were exposed to even looser constraints. As expected, Dershowitz found the Orthodox boys to be more field dependent than the secular Jewish boys, who in turn were more field dependent than the Protestant boys.

There is no reason to assume that field dependence can only be the result of social constraints imposed from the outside. We might expect that interest in other people, whatever its origin, would be associated with field dependence. And in fact relatively field dependent people like to be with other people more than relatively field independent people do. Field dependent people also have better memory for faces and for social words (“visit,” “party”) than relatively field independent people do. And, when given their choice, field dependent people like to sit closer to others than relatively field independent people do.

Implications for Thought in the Modern World

But the implications of the view I am proposing extend far beyond the confines of a particular style of perceiving objects in relation to the environment. If something like my account of 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 rather dramatic predictions about cognitive differences between contemporary East Asians and Westerners. We might expect to find differences in:

- Patterns of attention and perception, with Easterners attending more to environments and Westerners attending more to objects, and Easterners being more likely to detect relationships among events than Westerners.
- Basic assumptions about the composition of the world, with Easterners seeing substances where Westerners see 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.
- Preferred patterns of explanation for events, with Westerners focusing on objects and Easterners casting a broader net to include the environment.
- Habits of organizing the world, with Westerners preferring categories and Easterners being more likely to emphasize relationships.
- Use of formal logical rules, with 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 vs. another.

At any rate, these are the expectations about habits of mind that follow if it is really the case that Easterners and Westerners have fundamentally different ways of seeing themselves and the social world.
Most Westerners, or at any rate most Americans, are confident that the following generalizations apply to pretty much everyone:

- Each individual has a set of characteristic, distinctive attributes. Moreover, people want to be distinctive—different from other individuals in important ways.
- People are largely in control of their own behavior; they feel better when they are in situations in which choice and personal preference determine outcomes.
- People are oriented toward personal goals of success and achievement; they find that relationships and group memberships sometimes get in the way of attaining these goals.
- People strive to feel good about themselves; personal successes and assurances that they have positive qualities are important to their sense of well-being.
- People prefer equality in personal relations or, when relationships are hierarchical, they prefer a superior position.
- People believe the same rules should apply to everyone—individuals should not be singled out for special treatment because of their personal attributes or connections to important people. Justice should be blind.

There are indeed hundreds of millions of such people, but they are to be found primarily in Europe, especially northern Europe, and in the present and former nations of the British Commonwealth, including the United States. The social-psychological characteristics of most of the rest of the world’s people, especially those of East Asia, tend to be different to one degree or another.

**The Non-Western Self**

There is an Asian expression that reflects a cultural prejudice against individuality: “The peg that stands out is pounded down.” In general, East Asians are supposed to be less concerned with personal goals or self-aggrandizement than are Westerners. Group goals and coordinated action are more often the concerns. Maintaining harmonious social relations is likely to take precedence over achieving personal success. Success is often sought as a group goal rather than as a personal badge of merit. Individual distinctiveness is not particularly desirable. For Asians, feeling good about themselves is likely to be tied to the sense that they are in harmony with the wishes of the groups to which they belong and are meeting the group’s expectations. Equality of treatment is not assumed nor is it necessarily regarded as desirable.

The rules that apply to relationships in East Asia are presumed to be local, particular, and well specified by roles rather than universal. An Asian friend told me the most remarkable thing about visiting American households is that everyone is always thanking everyone else: “Thank you for setting the table”; “Thank you for getting the car washed.” In her country everyone has clear obligations in a given context and you don’t thank people for carrying out their obligations. Choice is not a high priority for most of the world’s people. (An East Asian friend once asked me why Americans found it necessary to have a choice among forty breakfast cereals in the supermarket.) And Asians do not necessarily feel their competence as a decision maker is on the line when they do have to make a choice.

Most Americans over a certain age well remember their primer, called *Dick and Jane*. Dick and Jane and their dog, Spot, were quite the active individualists. The first page of an early edition from the 1930s (the primer was widely used until the 1960s) depicts a little boy running across a lawn. The first sentences are “See Dick run. See Dick play. See Dick run and play.” This would seem the most natural sort of basic information to convey about kids—to the Western mentality. But the first page of the Chinese primer of the same era shows a little boy sitting on the shoulders of a bigger boy. “Big brother takes care of little brother. Big brother loves little brother. Little brother loves big brother.” It is not individual action but relationships between people that seem important to convey in a child’s first encounter with the printed word.

Indeed, the Western-style self is virtually a figment of the imagination to the East Asian. As
philosopher Hu Shih writes, “In the Confucian human-centered philosophy man cannot exist alone; all action must be in the form of interaction between man and man.” The person always exists within settings—in particular situations where there are particular people with whom one has relationships of a particular kind—and the notion that there can be attributes or actions that are not conditioned on social circumstances is foreign to the Asian mentality. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall introduced the notion of “low-context” vs. “high-context” societies to capture differences in self-understanding. To the Westerner, it makes sense to speak of a person as having attributes that are independent of circumstances or particular personal relations. This self—this bounded, impermeable free agent—can move from group to group and setting to setting without significant alteration. But for the Easterner (and for many other peoples to one degree or another), the person is connected, fluid, and conditional. As philosopher Donald Munro put it, East Asians understand themselves “in terms of their relation to the whole, such as the family, society, Tao Principle, or Pure Consciousness.” The person participates in a set of relationships that make it possible to act and purely independent behavior is usually not possible or really even desirable.

Since all action is in concert with others, or at the very least affects others, harmony in relationships becomes a chief goal of social life. I have presented a schematic illustration intended to capture the different types of sense of self in relation to in-group, or close circle of friends and family; the illustration also conveys relative distance between in-group and out-group, or people who are mere acquaintances at most. Easterners feel embedded in their in-groups and distant from their out-groups. They tend to feel they are very similar to in-group members and they are much more trusting of them than of out-group members. Westerners feel relatively detached from their in-groups and tend not to make as great distinctions between in-group and out-group.

Some linguistic facts illustrate the social–psychological gap between East and West. In Chinese there is no word for “individualism.” The closest one can come is the word for “selfishness.” The Chinese character jên—benevolence—means two men. In Japanese, the word “I”—meaning the trans-situational, unconditional, generalized self with all its attributes, goals, abilities, and preferences—is not often used in conversation. Instead, Japanese has many words for “I,” depending on audience and context. When a Japanese woman gives an official speech, she customarily uses Watashi, which is the closest Japanese comes to the trans-situational “I.” When a man refers to himself in relation to his college chums he might say Boku or Ore. When a father talks to his child, he says Otosan (Dad). A young girl might refer to herself by her nickname when talking to a family member: “Tomo is going to school today.” The Japanese often call themselves Jibun, the etymology of which leads to a term meaning “my portion.”

In Korean, the sentence “Could you come to dinner?” requires different words for “you,” which is common in many languages, but also for “dinner,” depending on whether one was inviting a student or a professor. Such practices reflect not mere politeness or self-effacement, but rather the Eastern conviction that one is a different person when interacting with different people.

“Tell me about yourself” seems a straightforward enough question to ask of someone, but the kind of answer you get very much depends on what society you ask it in. North Americans will tell you about their personality traits (“friendly, hard-working”), role categories (“teacher,” “I work for a company that makes microchips”), and activities (“I go camping a lot”). Americans don’t condition their self-descriptions much on context. The Chinese, Japanese, and Korean self, on the other hand, very much depends on context (“I am serious at work”; “I am fun-loving with my friends”). A study asking Japanese and Americans to describe themselves either in particular contexts or without specifying a particular kind of situation showed that Japanese found it very difficult to describe themselves without specifying a particular kind of situation—at work, at home, with friends, etc. Americans, in contrast, tended to be stumped when the investigator specified a context—“I am what I am.” When describing themselves, Asians make reference to social roles (“I am Joan’s friend”) to a much greater extent than Americans do. Another study found that twice as many Japanese as American self-descriptions referred
to other people (“I cook dinner with my sister”).

When North Americans are surveyed about their attributes and preferences, they characteristically overestimate their distinctiveness. On question after question, North Americans report themselves to be more unique than they really are, whereas Asians are much less likely to make this error. Westerners also prefer uniqueness in the environment and in their possessions. Social psychologists Heejung Kim and Hazel Markus asked Koreans and Americans to choose which object in a pictured array of objects they preferred. Americans chose the rarest object, whereas Koreans chose the most common object. Asked to choose a pen as a gift, Americans chose the least common color offered and East Asians the most common.

It’s revealing that the word for self-esteem in Japanese is *serufu esutiumu*. There is no indigenous term that captures the concept of feeling good about oneself. Westerners are more concerned with enhancing themselves in their own and others’ eyes than are Easterners. Americans are much more likely to make spontaneous favorable comments about themselves than are Japanese. When self-appraisal measures are administered to Americans and Canadians, it turns out that, like the children of Lake Wobegon, they are pretty much all above average. Asians rate themselves much lower on most dimensions, not only endorsing fewer positive statements but being more likely to insist that they have negative qualities. It’s not likely that the Asian ratings merely reflect a requirement for greater modesty than exists for North Americans. Asians are in fact under greater compunction to appear modest, but the difference in self-ratings exists even when participants think their answers are completely anonymous.

It isn’t that Asians feel badly about their own attributes. Rather, there is no strong cultural obligation to feel that they are special or unusually talented. The goal for the self in relation to society is not so much to establish superiority or uniqueness, but to achieve harmony within a network of supportive social relationships and to play one’s part in achieving collective ends. These goals require a certain amount of self-criticism—the opposite of tooting one’s own horn. If I am to fit in with the group, I must root out those aspects of myself that annoy others or make their tasks more difficult. In contrast to the Asian practice of teaching children to blend harmoniously with others, some American children go to schools in which each child gets to be a “VIP” for a day. (In my hometown a few years ago the school board actually debated whether the chief goal of the schools should be to impart knowledge or to inculcate self-esteem. I appreciated a cartoon that appeared at about the same time showing a door with the label “Esteem Room.”)

Japanese schoolchildren are taught how to practice self-criticism both in order to improve their relations with others and to become more skilled in solving problems. This stance of perfectionism through self-criticism continues throughout life. Sushi chefs and math teachers are not regarded as coming into their own until they’ve been at their jobs for a decade. Throughout their careers, in fact, Japanese teachers are observed and helped by their peers to become better at their jobs. Contrast this with the American practice of putting teachers’ college graduates into the classroom after a few months of training and then leaving them alone to succeed or not, to the good or ill fortune of a generation of students.

An experiment by Steven Heine and his colleagues captures the difference between the Western push to feel good about the self and the Asian drive for self-improvement. The experimenters asked Canadian and Japanese students to take a bogus “creativity” test and then gave the students “feedback” indicating that they had done very well or very badly. The experimenters then secretly observed how long the participants worked on a similar task. The Canadians worked longer on the task if they had succeeded; the Japanese worked longer if they failed. The Japanese weren’t being masochistic. They simply saw an opportunity for self-improvement and took it. The study has intriguing implications for skill development in both the East and West. Westerners are likely to get very good at a few things they start out doing well to begin with. Easterners seem more likely to become Jacks and Jills of all trades.

**Independence vs. Interdependence**

The broad differentiation between the two types of societies we have been discussing has been a
staple notion of social science since the nineteenth century. The distinction is similar to that made by nineteenth-century German social scientists, notably Ferdinand Tännies, who made a useful distinction for comparing cultures, namely between a Gemeinschaft (a community based on a shared sense of identity) and a Gesellschaft (an institution intended to facilitate action to achieve instrumental goals). A Gemeinschaft is based on relationships that exist for their own sake and rest on a sense of unity and mutuality: for example, relationships among family members, church congregations, or a network of friends. It is based on sympathy, frequent face-to-face interaction, shared experiences, and even shared property. A Gesellschaft is based on interactions that are mostly a means to an end. It frequently involves exchange of goods and labor and is often based on bargaining and contracts. Such social systems allow for personal gain and competitive advantage. Corporations and bureaucracies are examples of Gesellschaft.

No one thinks a given institution or society is exclusively of the Gemeinschaft or Gesellschaft sort. They are merely ideal types. But the distinction is of great analytic importance for much of modern social science, especially for cultural psychology. The Gemeinschaft is often termed a “collectivist” social system and the Gesellschaft is often labeled an “individualist” social system. The terms “interdependent and “independent,” proposed by Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, convey similar notions, and these are the ones I will normally use.

Training for independence or interdependence starts quite literally in the crib. Whereas it is common for American babies to sleep in a bed separate from their parents, or in a separate room, this is rare for East Asian babies—for that matter, babies pretty much everywhere else. Instead, sleeping in the same bed is far more common. The differences are intensified in waking life. Adoring adults from several generations often surround the Chinese baby (even before the one-child policy began producing “little Derors”). The Japanese baby is almost always with its mother. The close association with mother is a condition that some Japanese apparently would like to continue indefinitely. Investigators at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research recently conducted a study requiring a scale comparing the degree to which adult Japanese and American respondents want to be with their mothers. The task proved very difficult, because the Japanese investigators insisted that a reasonable endpoint on the scale would be “I want to be with my mother almost all the time.” The Americans, of course, insisted that this would be uproariously funny to American respondents and would cause them to cease taking the interview seriously.

Independence for Western children is often encouraged in rather explicit ways. Western parents constantly require their children to do things on their own and ask them to make their own choices. “Would you like to go to bed now or would you like to have a snack first?” The Asian parent makes the decision for the child on the assumption that the parent knows best what is good for the child. Parents who work to create an independent child shouldn’t be surprised when the training works so well that their children balk at threats to their freedom of choice. Social psychologists Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper asked American, Chinese, and Japanese children aged seven to nine to solve anagrams, such as, “What word can be made from GREIT?” Some of the children were told to work on a particular category of anagrams; other children were given a choice about which anagrams to solve; and still others were told that the experimenter had spoken to the child’s mom, who would like the child to work on a particular category. The researchers then measured the number of anagrams solved and the time spent working on them. The American children showed the highest level of motivation—spending more time on the task and solving more anagrams—when they were allowed to choose the category. The American children showed the least motivation when it was Mom who chose the category, suggesting that they felt their autonomy had been encroached upon and they had therefore lost some of their intrinsic interest in the task. The Asian children showed the highest level of motivation when Mom chose the category.

An emphasis on relationships encourages a concern with the feelings of others. When American mothers play with their toddlers, they tend to ask questions about objects and supply information about
them. But when Japanese mothers play with their toddlers, their questions are more likely to concern feelings. Japanese mothers are particularly likely to use feeling-related words when their children misbehave: “The farmer feels bad if you did not eat everything your mom cooked for you.” “The toy is crying because you threw it.” “The wall says ‘ouch.’” “Concentrating attention on objects, as American parents tend to do, helps to prepare children for a world in which they are expected to act independently. Focusing on feelings and social relations, as Asian parents tend to do, helps children to anticipate the reactions of other people with whom they will have to coordinate their behavior.

The consequences of this differential focus on the emotional states of others can be seen in adulthood. There is evidence that Asians are more accurately aware of the feelings and attitudes of others than are Westerners. For example, Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks and his colleagues showed to Koreans and Americans evaluations that employers had made on rating scales. The Koreans were better able to infer from the ratings just what the employers felt about their employees than were the Americans, who tended to simply take the ratings at face value. This focus on others’ emotions extends even to perceptions of the animal world. Taka Masuda and I showed underwater video scenes to Japanese and American students and asked them to report what they saw. The Japanese students reported “seeing” more feelings and motivations on the part of fish than did Americans; for example, “The red fish must be angry because its scales were hurt.” Similarly, Kaiping Peng and Phoebe Ellsworth showed Chinese and American students animated pictures of fish moving in various patterns in relation to one another. For example, a group might appear to chase an individual fish or to scoot away when the individual fish approached. The investigators asked the students what both the individual fish and the groups of fish were feeling. The Chinese readily complied with the requests. The Americans had difficulty with both tasks and were literally baffled when asked to report what the group emotions might be.

The relative degree of sensitivity to others’ emotions is reflected in tacit assumptions about the nature of communication. Westerners teach their children to communicate their ideas clearly and to adopt a “transmitter” orientation, that is, the speaker is responsible for uttering sentences that can be clearly understood by the hearer—and understood, in fact, more or less independently of the context. It’s the speaker’s fault if there is a miscommunication. Asians, in contrast, teach their children a “receiver” orientation, meaning that it is the hearer’s responsibility to understand what is being said. If a child’s loud singing annoys an American parent, the parent would be likely just to tell the kid to pipe down. No ambiguity there. The Asian parent would be more likely to say, “How well you sing a song.” At first the child might feel pleased, but it would likely dawn on the child that something else might have been meant and the child would try being quieter or not singing at all.

Westerners—and perhaps especially Americans—are apt to find Asians hard to read because Asians are likely to assume that their point has been made indirectly and with finesse. Meanwhile, the Westerner is in fact very much in the dark. Asians, in turn, are apt to find Westerners—perhaps especially Americans-direct to the point of condescension or even rudeness.

There are many ways of parsing the distinction between relatively independent and relatively interdependent societies, but in illustrating these it may be helpful to focus on four related but somewhat distinct dimensions:

- Insistence on freedom of individual action vs. a preference for collective action.
- Desire for individual distinctiveness vs. a preference for blending harmoniously with the group.
- A preference for egalitarianism and achieved status vs. acceptance of hierarchy and ascribed status.
- A belief that the rules governing proper behavior should be universal vs. a preference for particularistic approaches that take into account the context and the nature of the relationships involved.

These dimensions are merely correlated with one another; and it is possible, for example, for a given society to be quite independent in terms of some dimensions and much less so in terms of others. Social scientists have attempted to measure each of these dimensions, and other associated ones, in a variety of
ways, including value surveys, studies of archived material, and experiments.

Some of the most interesting survey material comes from the study of businesspeople from different cultures. Such surveys provide particularly convincing evidence because so much is held more or less constant, including relative wealth and educational levels. In the classic study of this sort, Geert Hofstede provided even more comparability than that: All of his participants, who came from dozens of different societies, were employees of IBM. He found dramatic cultural differences in values even among Big Blue employees.

Similar data have been collected by Charles Hampden-Turner and Alfons Trompenaars, who are professors at an international business school in Holland. Over a period of several years they gave dozens of questions to middle managers taking seminars they conduct throughout the world. The participants in their seminars—fifteen thousand all told—were from the U.S., Canada, Australia, Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Singapore, and Japan (and a small number from Spain and Korea, as well). Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars presented their students with dilemmas in which independent values were pitted against interdependent values.

To examine the value of individual distinction vs. harmonious relations with the group, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars asked the managers to indicate which of the following types of job they preferred: (a) jobs in which personal initiatives are encouraged and individual initiatives are achieved; versus (b) jobs in which no one is singled out for personal honor, but in which everyone works together.

More than 90 percent of American, Canadian, Australian, British, Dutch, and Swedish respondents endorsed the first choice—the individual freedom alternative—vs. fewer than 50 percent of Japanese and Singaporeans. Preferences of the Germans, Italians, Belgians, and French were intermediate.

The U.S. is sometimes described as a place where, if you claim to amount to much, you should be able to show that you change your area code every five years or so. (This was before the phone company started changing people’s area codes without waiting for them to move.) In some other countries, the relationship with the corporation where one is employed, and the connection with one’s colleagues there, are more highly valued than in the U.S. and presumed to be more or less permanent. To assess this difference among cultures, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars asked their participants to choose between the following expectations: If I apply for a job in a company, (a) I will almost certainly work there for the rest of my life; or (b) I am almost sure the relationship will have a limited duration.

More than 90 percent of Americans, Canadians, Australians, British, and Dutch thought a limited job duration was likely. This was true for only about 40 percent of Japanese (though it would doubtless be substantially higher today after “downsizing” has come even to Japan). The French, Germans, Italians, and Belgians were again intermediate, though closer to the other Europeans than to the Asians.

To examine the relative value placed on achieved vs. ascribed status, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars asked their participants whether or not they shared the following view: Becoming successful and respected is a matter of hard work. It is important for a manager to be older than his subordinates. Older people should be more respected than younger people.

More than 60 percent of American, Canadian, Australian, Swedish, and British respondents rejected the idea of status being based in any way on age. About 60 percent of Japanese, Korean, and Singapore respondents accepted hierarchy based in part on age; French, Italians, Germans, and Belgians were again intermediate, though closer to the other Europeans than to the Asians.

Needless to say, there is great potential for conflict when people from cultures having different orientations must deal with one another. This is particularly true when people who value universal rules deal with people who think each particular situation should be examined on its merits and that different rules might be appropriate for different people. Westerners prefer to live by abstract principles and like to believe these principles are applicable to everyone. To set aside universal rules in order to accommodate particular cases seems immoral to the Westerner. To insist on the same rules for every case can seem at best obtuse and rigid to the Easterner and at worst cruel. Many of Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars’s questions reveal what a marked difference exists among cultures in their preference for
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universally applicable rules vs. special consideration of cases based on their distinctive aspects. One of their questions deals with how to handle the case of an employee whose work for a company, though excellent for fifteen years, has been unsatisfactory for a year. If there is no reason to expect that performance will improve, should the employee be (a) dismissed on the grounds that job performance should remain the grounds for dismissal, regardless of the age of the person and his previous record; or (b) is it wrong to disregard the fifteen years the employee has been working for the company? One has to take into account the company’s responsibility for his life.

More than 75 percent of Americans and Canadians felt the employee should be let go. About 20 percent of Koreans and Singaporeans agreed with that view. About 30 percent of Japanese, French, Italians, and Germans agreed and about 40 percent of British, Australians, Dutch, and Belgians agreed. (Atypically for this question, the British and the Australians were closer to the continental Europeans than to the North Americans.)

As these results show, Westerners’ commitment to universally applied rules influences their understanding of the nature of agreements between individuals and between corporations. By extension, in the Western view, once a contract has been agreed to, it is binding—regardless of circumstances that might make the arrangement much less attractive to one of the parties than it had been initially. But to people from interdependent, high-context cultures, changing circumstances dictate alterations of the agreement.

These very different outlooks regularly produce international misunderstandings. The Japanese-Australian “sugar contract” case in the mid-1970s provides a particularly dramatic example. Japanese sugar refiners contracted with Australian suppliers to provide them with sugar over a period of five years at the price of $160 per ton. But shortly after the contract was signed, the value of sugar on the world market dropped dramatically. The Japanese thereupon asked for a renegotiation of the contract on the grounds that circumstances had changed radically. But to the Australians, the agreement was binding, regardless of circumstances, and they refused to consider any changes.

An important business implication of the differences that exist between independent and interdependent societies is that advertising needs to be modified for particular cultural audiences. Marketing experts Sang-pil Han and Sharon Shavitt analyzed American and Korean advertisements in popular news magazines and women’s magazines. They found that American advertisements emphasize individual benefits and preferences (“Make your way through the crowd”; “Alive with pleasure”), whereas Korean advertisements are more likely to emphasize collective ones (“We have a way of bringing people closer together”; “Ringing out the news of business friendships that really work”). When Han and Shavitt performed experiments, showing people different kinds of advertisements, they found that the individualist advertisements were more effective with Americans and the collectivist ones with Koreans.

Independence vs. interdependence is of course not an either/or matter. Every society—and every individual—is a blend of both. It turns out that it is remarkably easy to bring one or another orientation to the fore. Psychologists Wendi Gardner, Shira Gabriel, and Angela Lee “primed” American college students to think either independently or interdependently. They did this in two different ways. In one experiment, participants were asked to read a story about a general who had to choose a warrior to send to the king. In an “independent” version, the king had to choose the best individual for the job. In an “interdependent” version the general wanted to make a choice that would benefit his family. In another priming method, participants were asked to search for words in a paragraph describing a trip to a city. The words were either independent in nature (e.g., “I,” “mine”) or interdependent (e.g., “we,” “ours”).

After reading the story or searching for words in the paragraph, participants were asked to fill out a value survey that assessed the importance they placed on individualist values (such as freedom and living a varied life) and collectivist values (such as belongingness and respect for elders). They also read a story in which “Lisa” refused to give her friend “Amy” directions to an art store because she was engrossed in reading a book; they were then asked whether Lisa’s behavior was inappropriately selfish.
Students who had been exposed to an independence prime rated individualist values higher and collectivist values lower than did students exposed to an interdependence prime. The independence-primed participants were also more forgiving of the book-engrossed Lisa. Gardner and her colleagues repeated their study adding Hong Kong students to their American sample and also added an unprimed control condition. American students rated individualist values higher than collectivist values—unless they had been exposed to an interdependence prime. Hong Kong students rated collectivist values higher than individualist values—unless they had been exposed to an independence prime.

Of course, Easterners are constantly being “primed” with interdependence cues and Westerners with independence cues. This raises the possibility that even if their upbringing had not made them inclined in one direction or another, the cues that surround them would make people living in interdependent societies behave in generally interdependent ways and those living in independent societies behave in generally independent ways. In fact this is a common report of people who live in the “other” culture for a while. My favorite example concerns a young Canadian psychologist who lived for several years in Japan. He then applied for jobs at North American universities. His adviser was horrified to discover that his letter began with apologies about his unworthiness for the jobs in question. Other evidence shows that self-esteem is highly malleable. Japanese who live in the West for a while show a notable increase in self-esteem, probably because the situations they encountered were in general more esteem-enhancing than those typical in Japan. The social psychological characteristics of people raised in very different cultures are far from completely immutable.

**Variants of Viewpoint**

The work of Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars makes clear that the West is no monolith concerning issues of independence vs. interdependence. There are also substantial regularities to the differences found in Western countries. In general, the Mediterranean countries plus Belgium and Germany are intermediate between the East Asian countries on the one hand and the countries most heavily influenced by Protestant, Anglo-Saxon culture on the other. There is more regularity even than that. Someone has said, “The Idea moves west,” meaning that the values of individuality, freedom, rationality, and universalism became progressively more dominant and articulated as civilization moved westward from its origins in the Fertile Crescent. The Babylonians codified and universalized the law. The Israelites emphasized individual distinctiveness. The Greeks valued individuality even more and added a commitment to personal freedom, the spirit of debate, and formal logic. The Romans brought a gift for rational organization and something resembling the Chinese genius for technological achievement, and—after a trough lasting almost a millennium—their successors, the Italians, rediscovered these values and built on the accomplishments of Greek and Roman eras. The Protestant Reformation, beginning in Germany and Switzerland and largely bypass-France and Belgium, added individual responsibility and a definition of work as a sacred activity. The Reformation also brought a weakened commitment to the family and other in-groups coupled with a greater willingness to trust out-groups and have dealings with their members.

These values were all intensified in the Calvinist subcultures of Britain, including the Puritans and Presbyterians, whose egalitarian ideology laid the groundwork for the government of the United States. (Thomas Jefferson was merely paraphrasing the Puritan sympathizer John Locke when he wrote, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . . with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty . . .”)

The Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars findings for social values, as well as those of Hofstede, track this East-West ideological journey almost exactly. The further to the West a given country lies, the greater, in general, that country’s endorsement of independent values. Moreover, these differences among European cultures are reflected in their successor subcultures in the United States, a fact documented in immigrant cultural histories by scholars such as economist Thomas Sowell. I once knew a very distinguished and well-placed social scientist, a crusty Scottish-American Presbyterian steeped in Calvinist rectitude. He had a son who was also a social scientist and who had to struggle from time to
time to sustain his career during the 1970s, when jobs were scarce in the U.S. My colleague would
sometimes state proudly that, although it would have been easy for him to do so, he had never
intervened to help his son’s situation. The colleague’s Anglo-Saxon Protestant friends would nod their
approval of the justice of this stance in the face of the personal pain they knew the colleague had
experienced. His Jewish and Catholic colleagues, with their more Continental values, would stare in
shocked disbelief at his lack of family feeling. At a level slightly more scientific than this anecdote: We
generally find that it is the white Protestants among the American participants in our studies who show
the most “Western” patterns of behavior and that Catholics and minority group members, including
African Americans and Hispanics, are shifted somewhat toward Eastern patterns.

There are also major differences among Eastern cultures in all sorts of important social behavior and
values, some of which are related to independence versus interdependence.

I was in China in 1982 at the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. The country seemed extremely
exotic—in both its traditional aspects and its Communist-imposed aspects. (This was well before a
Starbucks was installed in the Forbidden City!) The first Western play to be performed in Beijing since
the revolution was mounted while I was there. It was Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman.* The choice
seemed very strange. I regarded the play as being not merely highly Western in character but distinctly
American. Its central figure is a salesman, “a man out there in the blue riding on a smile and a
shoeshine.” To my astonishment, the play was a tremendous success. But Arthur Miller, who had come
to China to collaborate on production of the play, provided a satisfactory reason for its reception. “The
play is about family,” “and the Chinese invented family.” He might have added that the play is also
about *face,* or the need to have the respect of the community, and the Chinese also invented face.

The Japanese have perhaps as much concern with *face* the Chinese, but probably less involvement
with the immediate family and more commitment to the corporation. There are other marked differences
between the Japanese and Chinese. The sociologist Robert Bellah, the philosopher Hajime Nakamura,
the psychologist Dora Dien, and the social philosopher Lin Yutang, among many others, have detailed
some of these differences. Though social constraints are in general greater on both Chinese and Japanese
than on Westerners, the constraints come primarily from authorities in the case of the Chinese and
chiefly from peers in the case of the Japanese. Control in Chinese classrooms, for example, is achieved
by the teacher, but by classmates in Japan. Dora Dien has written that the “Chinese emphasize particular
dyadic [two-person] relationships while retaining their individuality, whereas the Japanese tend to
submerge themselves in the group.” Though both Chinese and Japanese are required to conform to move
smoothly through their daily lives, the Chinese are said to chafe under the requirements and the Japanese
actually to enjoy them. The Japanese are held to share with the Germans and the Dutch a need for order
in all spheres of their lives; the Chinese share with Mediterraneans a more relaxed approach to life.

It is sometimes argued that one particular type of social relationship is unique to the Japanese. This is
*amae,* a concept discussed at length by the Japanese psychoanalyst Takeo Doi. *Amae* describes a
relationship in which an inferior, a child or employee, for example, is allowed to engage in inappropriate
behavior—to ask for an expensive toy or to request a promotion at a time not justified by company
policy—as an expression of confidence that the relationship is sufficiently close that the superior will be
indulgent. *Amae* facilitates the relationship, enhancing trust between the two parties and cementing
bonds, though these results come at some cost to the autonomy of the inferior.

The very real differences among Eastern cultures and among Western cultures, however, shouldn’t
blind us to the fact that the East and West are in general quite different from each other with respect to a
great many centrally important values and social-psychological attributes.

**Awase And Erabi**

*Styles of Conflict and Negotiation*

Debate is almost as uncommon in modern Asia as in ancient China. In fact, the whole rhetoric of
argumentation that is second nature to Westerners is largely absent in Asia. North Americans begin to
express opinions and justify them as early as the show-and-tell sessions of nursery school (“This is my robot; he’s fun to play with because…”). In contrast, there is not much argumentation or trafficking in opinions in Asian life. A Japanese friend has told me that the concept of a “lively discussion” does not exist in Japan—because of the risk to group harmony. It is this fact that likely undermined an attempt he once made to have an American-style dinner party in Japan, inviting only Japanese guests who expressed a fondness for the institution—from the martinis through the steak to the apple pie. The effort fell flat for want of opinions and people willing to defend them.

The absence of a tradition of debate has particularly dramatic implications for the conduct of political life. Very recently, South Korea installed its first democratic government. Prior to that, it had been illegal to discuss North Korea. Westerners find this hard to comprehend, inasmuch as South Korea has performed one of the world’s most impressive economic miracles of the past 40 years and North Korea is a failed state in every respect. But, due to the absence of a tradition of debate, Koreans have no faith that correct ideas will win in the marketplace of ideas, and previous governments “protected” their citizens by preventing discussion of Communist ideas and North Korean practices.

The tradition of debate goes hand in hand with a certain style of rhetoric in the law and in science. The rhetoric of scientific papers consists of an overview of the ideas to be considered, a description of the relevant basic theories, a specific hypothesis, a statement of the methods and justification of them, a presentation of the evidence produced by the methods, an argument as to why the evidence supports the hypothesis, a refutation of possible counterarguments, a reference back to the basic theory, and a comment on the larger territory of which the article is a part. For Americans, this rhetoric is constructed bit by bit from nursery school through college. By the time they are graduate students, it is second nature. But for the most part, the rhetoric is new to the Asian student and learning it can be a slow and painful process. It is not uncommon for American science professors to be impressed by their hard-working, highly selected Asian students and then to be disappointed by their first major paper—not because of their incomplete command of English, but because of their lack of mastery of the rhetoric common in the professor’s field. In my experience, it is also not uncommon for professors to fail to recognize that it is the lack of the Western rhetoric style they are objecting to, rather than some deeper lack of comprehension of the enterprise they’re engaged in.

The combative, rhetorical form is also absent from Asian law. In Asia the law does not consist, as it does in the West for the most part, of a contest between opponents. More typically, the disputants take their case to a middleman whose goal is not fairness but animosity reduction—by seeking a Middle Way through the claims of the opponents. There is no attempt to derive a resolution to a legal conflict from a universal principle. On the contrary, Asians are likely to consider justice in the abstract, by-the-book Western sense to be rigid and unfeeling.

Negotiation also has a different character in the high-context societies of the East than in the low-context societies of the West. Political scientist Mushakoji Kinhide characterizes the Western erabi (active, agentic) style as being grounded in the belief that “man can freely manipulate his environment for his own purposes. This view implies a behavioral sequence whereby a person sets his objective, develops a plan designed to reach that objective, and then acts to change the environment in accordance with that plan.” To a person having such a style, there’s not much point in concentrating on relationships. It’s the results that count. Proposals and decisions tend to be of the either/or variety because the Westerner knows what he wants and has a clear idea what it is appropriate to give and to take in order to have an acceptable deal. Negotiations should be short and to the point, so as not to waste time reaching the goal.

The Japanese awase (harmonious, fitting-in) style, “rejects the idea that man can manipulate the environment and assumes instead that he adjusts himself to it.” Negotiations are not thought of as “ballistic,” one-shot efforts never to be revisited, and relationships are presumed to be long-term. Either/or choices are avoided. There is a belief that “short-term wisdom may be long-term folly.” A Japanese negotiator may yield more in negotiations for a first deal than a similarly placed Westerner
might, expecting that this will lay the groundwork for future trust and cooperation. Issues are presumed to be complex, subjective, and intertwined, unlike the simplicity, objectivity, and “fragmentability” that the American with the erabi style assumes.

So there are very dramatic social-psychological differences between East Asians as a group and people of European culture as a group. East Asians live in an interdependent world in which the self is part of a larger whole; Westerners live in a world in which the self is a unitary free agent. Easterners value success and achievement in good part because they reflect well on the groups they belong to; Westerners value these things because they are badges of personal merit. Easterners value fitting in and engage in self-criticism to make sure that they do so; Westerners value individuality and strive to make themselves look good. Easterners are highly attuned to the feelings of others and strive for interpersonal harmony; Westerners are more concerned with knowing themselves and are prepared to sacrifice harmony for fairness. Easterners are accepting of hierarchy and group control; Westerners are more likely to prefer equality and scope for personal action. Asians avoid controversy and debate; Westerners have faith in the rhetoric of argumentation in arenas from the law to politics to science.

None of these generalizations apply to all members of their respective groups, of course. Every society has individuals who more nearly resemble those of other, quite different societies than they do those of their own society; and every individual within a given society moves quite a bit between the independent and interdependent poles over the course of a lifetime—over the course of a day, in fact. But the variations between and within societies, as well as within individuals, should not blind us to the fact that there are very real differences, substantial on the average, between East Asians and people of European culture. As nearly as we can tell, these social differences are much the same as the differences that characterized the ancient Chinese and Greeks. And if it was the social circumstances that produced the cognitive differences between ancient Chinese and Greeks, then we might expect to find cognitive differences between modern East Asians and Westerners that map onto the differences between the ancient Chinese and Greeks.