



## How Culture Affects Design: Eastern and Western

**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Cansın İlayda Çetin**

*University of Texas at San Antonio, School of Architecture + Planning, San Antonio, USA.  
ilaydacetin@hotmail.com*

### Abstract

Research on cultural differences from various perspectives, including linguistics, cultural patterns, models of cultures, and cognitive style, has contributed to cross-cultural design. Culture is a way of life, whereas design implies planning to develop products for ease of living. Culture and design can't be separated and are moving collectively from ancient human civilizations to the current world. Over the past several decades, there has been a growing interest in how culture is shaping the design research and the making of things. Culture includes a shared set of values, which comprises human behavior, material culture and social conditions which encourages the designers to build products with sensitivity to people's lived experience. It is a known fact that, culture completely changes the way our brains process information. Hence, various cultures design things very differently. In this article, it is discussed how the culture influences the design of both in the prospect of Eastern and Western culture. Also, the purpose of this paper is to gain some insights from a leading scholar of the cross-cultural cognitive social psychology field on how cultural differences are viewed, understood, and dealt with, and thus to contribute to enrich the way cultural differences are framed in cross-cultural management research.

**Keywords:** culture, cross-cultural differences, within-culture differences, reasoning, independence/interdependence, holistic/analytic cognition

### Öz

Dil bilimi, kültürel kalıplar, kültür modelleri ve bilişsel tarz dahil olmak üzere çeşitli perspektiflerden kültürel farklılıklar üzerine yapılan araştırmalar, kültürlerarası tasarıma katkıda bulunmuştur. Kültür bir yaşam biçimidir; tasarım ise yaşamı kolaylaştıracak ürünler geliştirmeyi planlamayı ifade eder. Kültür ve tasarım birbirinden ayrılmaz ve kolektif olarak eski insan uygarlıklarından günümüz dünyasına doğru ilerlemektedir. Geçtiğimiz birkaç on yılda kültürün tasarım araştırmasını ve bir şeylerin yapımını nasıl şekillendirdiğine dair artan bir ilgi vardır. Kültür, tasarımcıları insanların yaşamış deneyimlerine duyarlı ürünler üretmeye teşvik eden, insan davranışını, maddi kültürü ve sosyal koşulları kapsayan ortak bir değerler dizisini içerir. Kültürün beynimizin bilgiyi işleme biçimini tamamen değiştirdiği bilinen bir gerçektir. Bu nedenle, çeşitli kültürler her şeyi çok farklı şekilde tasarlar. Bu makalede Doğu ve Batı kültürü perspektifinde kültürün tasarımı nasıl etkilediği tartışılmaktadır. Ayrıca bu makalenin amacı, kültürler arası bilişsel sosyal psikoloji alanının önde gelen bir araştırmacısından, kültürel farklılıkların nasıl görüldüğü, anlaşıldığı ve ele alındığı konusunda bazı görüşler edinmek ve böylece kültürel farklılıkların çerçevelenme biçimini zenginleştirmeye katkıda bulunmaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** kültür, kültürler arası farklılıklar, kültür içi farklılıklar, akıl yürütme, bağımsızlık/karşılıklı bağımlılık, bütünsel/analitik biliş

### HYPOTHESES

Cultural differences between Eastern and Western thought, communication, and interaction serve as an increasing influence in the design. Westerners use an analytic cognitive style, which involves a tendency to detach an object from its field and to focus on categories. For example, East Asians use a holistic cognitive style, which involves a tendency to see the field as a whole and to focus on the relationships of objects to the field. If it is considered as viewing a webpage is similar to viewing an image, then East Asians and Westerners may show different viewing patterns and perceptions while observing. Thus, this research proposes a new approach to enhancing the usability of design by taking into consideration



the culturally different cognitive styles of Easterners and Westerners. In a nutshell, the main thesis is: culture influences the design of both in the prospect of Eastern and Western culture. This thesis can be examined through several hypotheses:

**H1:** Eastern design is deeply rooted in tradition, spirituality, and the philosophical. Nature plays a pivotal role, and elements are often minimalistic, prioritising function over form. On the flip side, Western design champions innovation, creativity, and individualism.

**H2:** Easterners are holistically-minded people and Westerners are analytically-minded people who show different viewing patterns when observing things. This hypothesis can be examined through several subhypotheses:

**SH:** Holistically-minded people show a tendency to spread their fixations over the page, whereas analytically-minded people tend to concentrate their fixations while viewing the page.

**SH:** Holistically-minded people follow a non-linear reading pattern, whereas analytically-minded people follow a linear reading pattern.

### DEFINITION OF CULTURE

The definition of culture is diverse. Literally, culture is the behaviour peculiar to Homo sapiens, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behavior. Thus, culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, and ceremonies, among other elements (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/culture>).

Besides, Geert Hofstede, Dutch author, social psychologist and sociologist of Jewish origin, who has works on national and corporate intercultural interactions defines culture as a sort of 'software of the mind'. According to him, every person carries patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting. These are partly unique and partly shared with others. The unique part belongs to the individual's personality level. The common part belongs to the collective level.

Also as discussed at Strate School of Design forum; culture is a set of values that are shared amongst a community. These values are customs, art, social behavior, rituals, norms, knowledge, and habits of individuals in a society, essentially they are a way of life (Hofstede, 2001).

There are a wide number of cultures across the globe that have different associations with color, symbols, language, typography, forms and structures, materials among other things. And because the power culture holds on how a society interprets how they view the various elements of design, culture has been known to influence design for decades. Culture has the power to influence both tangible, i.e. physical aspects and intangible, i.e. software/digital aspects of design.

These shared sets of values and human experience that form a culture are what inspires and encourages designers to ideate, create and design products and visual communication with more sensitivity to people's lived experiences. In today's modern design world, a lot of visual design identity of brands is inspired by the culture around them (Influence of culture on design, 2022).

### CULTURE AS AN INFLUENCE

As discussed in Rose, Pauwels and Honold's articles; culture has been a widely studied topic in the disciplines of sociology and psychology. Its importance, however, has been understood also in fields related to the development and use of products, for instance, intercultural product development or intercultural usability engineering. These fields, however, focus on product properties and on user interfaces, not on the design process itself.



The literature review has shown that though culture has been a topic of concern in research, the findings hardly provide insight into how culture may affect the activities and approach of designers in a design process. There is a need for an in-depth study, so as to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of culture and to develop support for designers working in intercultural design processes. A few design elements that are influenced by culture more than other are basically color, symbols and languages (Influence of culture on design, 2022).

### **Color: Cultural Influences Related to Color**

Cultural influence connected to color has the ability to affect the perception of a brand. Since they are one of the elements that is a rather eye-catching and visually appealing part of the design, they are registered more deeply with humans. Also, the meaning behind a color can shift from one country to another, one culture to another. For this reason, knowing who you are trying to reach becomes imperative to make the apt choice of colors (Honold, 2000; Pauwels, 2001; Röse, 2002).

Some very specific colors are also known as universal signs for safety codes, traffic lights, emergency stop buttons, exit signs and warning symbols. Certain products in this regard have always had a color associated with them – School buses have yellow as their designated color, fire extinguishers have red assigned to them and more recently the color green has been associated with our cultural shift towards a more sustainable lifestyle. Warmth, coldness, activity and passivity of colors vary according to their type, value and saturation. It has many psychological effects such as lightness, stimulating, relaxing, joy and sadness. It has been proven by experiments today. Various cultures and belief systems. Meditation techniques with colors were used to benefit from the effects of colors on living things. A connection was established between colors, which are a form of energy, and notes. Therefore, the designer must have a good knowledge of color perception and the psychology of color. It will strengthen the meaning or image intended to be given (Gautam and Blessing, 2007).

Moreover, dark red and red, considered as a sign of auspicious cultural festivities, prosperity and celebrations in India and one of the most sought-after colors for brides for their wedding outfits, is often associated with death in Africa.

### **Symbols: Cultural Influences Related To Symbols**

Culture, with its structure that is both produced and shared, enables communities to create common value and to be at the same time (Influence of culture on design, 2022).

It is also a means of sharing common meanings. Serving integrity, belonging, reconciliation and internalization. Cultural symbols constitute the micro level and archaic core of the culture that creates it. When the symbols of a culture are blended with another culture, they become similar, reshaped or some cultural symbols assimilate others. Beyond these, there are some symbols that are universal. Cultural Symbols have a very important place in transferring cultural values to future generations unchanged (Özdemir, 2005, p.391-402).

With a number of languages across the world, there are plenty of symbols that have strong cultural contexts, and some are even religious in nature. Symbols are so strongly ingrained in our systems and lived experiences that one look can help us understand what a brand, advertisement or the design stands for. A religious symbol for one community that represents positivity can mean an entirely different context for people in another country due to their past experiences.

For example, Swastika is a strong symbol of Hinduism representing power, prosperity and good fortune, as well as Mars. However Nazi Party has been known to have adopted the rotated Swastika as their party symbol. Due to this, most Europeans are known to associate

Swastika more with the Nazi regime more than with Hinduism (Eğinli and Nazlı, 2018, p. 56).

Symbols are known to take inspiration from nature, flora and fauna, celestial objects among other things. While in some cultures Rats are considered to be holy and are part of zodiac signs and its symbols, in others they hold no such holy place and are rather considered a nuisance and disease spreading animal. From a design perspective, while the community in China may appreciate and consider a visual element of rats as holy in posters or a brand identity, a lot of other countries would never invest in such a product.

### **Language: Cultural Influences Connected to Language**

Language is a tool to communicate with other people and plays a significant role in the design process. While symbols, icons and colors define part of your design, language communicates the story. This is where typography, font style, size and shape also come into picture. Whether it is a packaging design on a product, a visual communication seen digitally or in person via posters, the language which is used for the audience is important. In a country like India, designing packing for a FMCG product involves working with various types of native languages, styled and visually designed in ways that are more appealing to the natives and easy to comprehend, read and make decisions.

When metaphors are translated in different languages, they lose purpose and their charm and are often lost in translation. This is where a designer works with elements of typography to make the communication appear appealing, with relevant information highlighted while making an impact for the brand in consumer's mind.

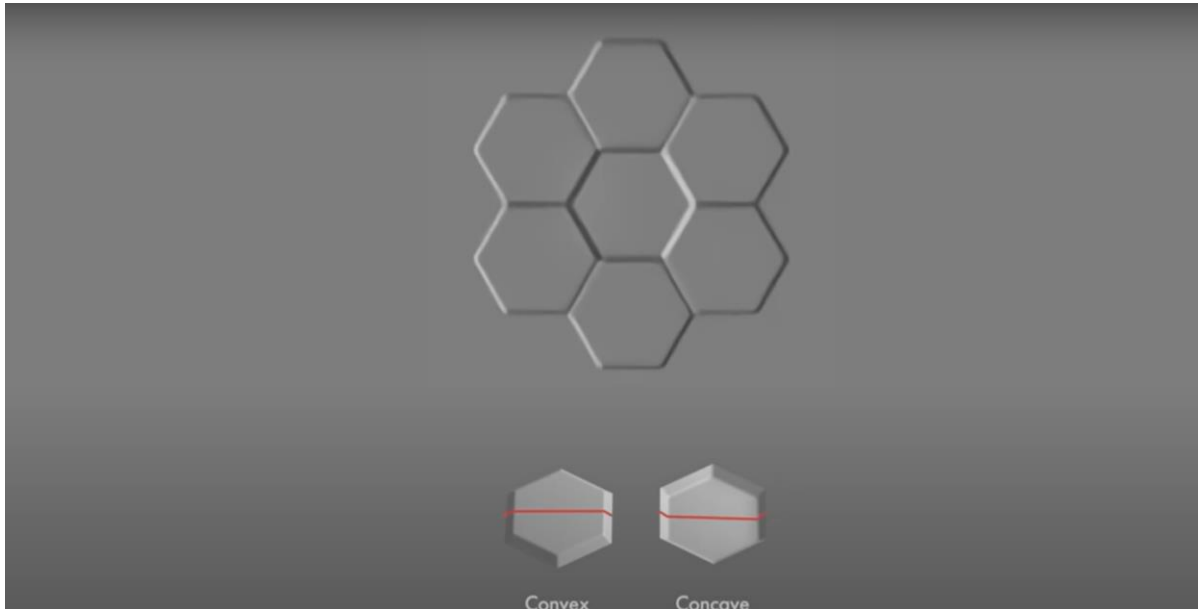
Some shopping streets in small towns and cities of Europe are seen to have one common aspect – a similar primary typeface for all their logos and brand identity elements. A strong reason for such similarity may be because European culture has been strongly influenced by large movements in art from classic, medieval, Renaissance, Neoclassical, Romanticism to Modern art. Each movement gave different colors, type styles, symbols and more to the public to work with and some areas seemed to have retained a part of such art movements and inspirations (Little, 2016)

### **INDIVIDUAL DESIGN APPROACHES ABOUT EASTERN & WESTERN DESIGN**

Differences in cognitive style are magnified when East Asians and Westerners are compared. Nisbett's (2001) recent research on cultural cognition provides a theoretical framework for cross-cultural study. Through observation of how people from diverse cultures view images, he has defined two different cognitive styles: holistic and analytic. Nisbett (2001, 2002, 2003) combines cultural and cognitive perspectives that enrich the understanding of cultural influence in web usability research, thus creating a new approach in this field (Holocaust Encyclopedia, 2017).

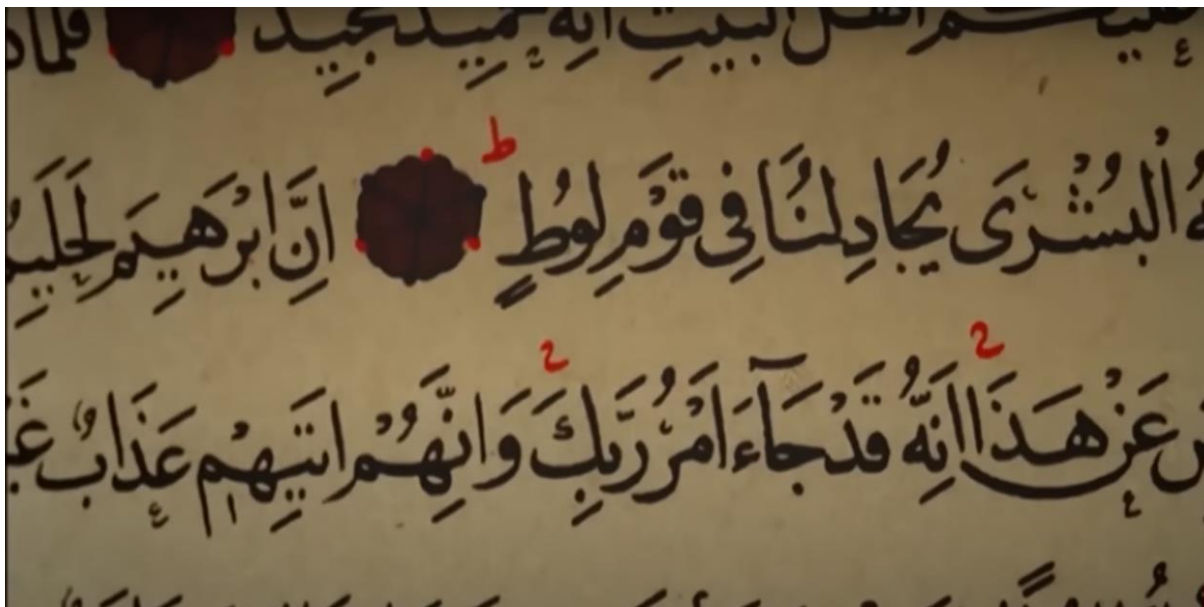
Cultural psychology has demonstrated that East Asians differ systematically from Westerners in cognitive activity, including categorization, causal explanation, and logical versus dialectical inference (Influence of culture on design, 2022). These studies have suggested that people from East Asian cultures (e.g., China, Korea, and Japan) tend to pay greater attention to contextual information than their counterparts in Western cultures (Masuda and Nisbett, 2001, p. 992-934).

Image 1 shows an experiment that asks whether the hexagon in the middle looks concave and indented or convex and protruding outwards.



**Image 1.** Convex or Concave looking Hexagon (Source: Design Theory)

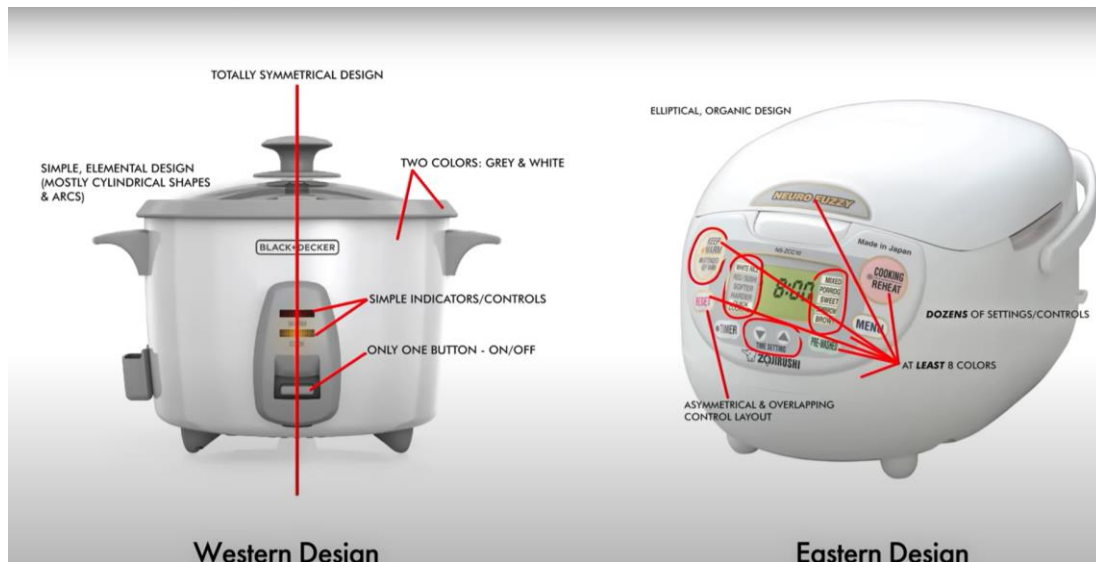
If it is thought to be indented or concave, it is concluded that they come from western culture or another culture that reads from left to right. If it is thought to be protruding or convex, it is thought to come from a culture that reads from right to left, such as Arabic (Image 2).



**Image 2.** Arabic letters (Source: Design Theory)

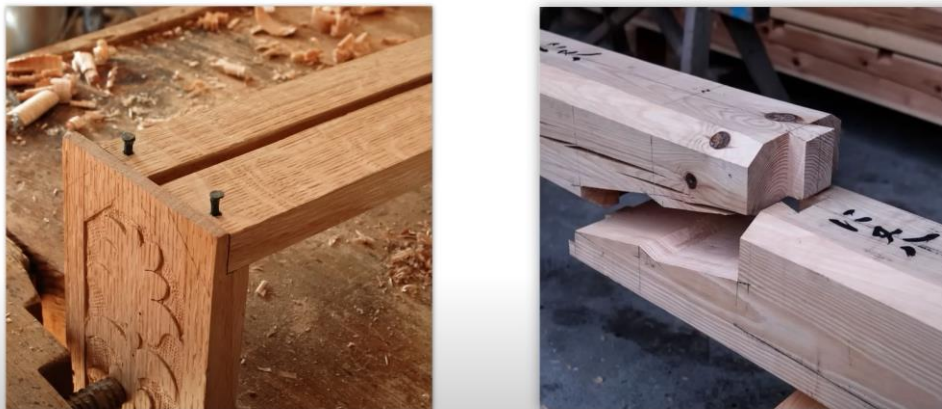
As John Mauriello explains in his “Design Theory” channel, this is just one example of how culture can shape the way you see the world, but it goes way beyond just some quirky little optical illusions. Culture completely changes the way the brains process information and because of those various cultures design things very differently. It is why the Japanese rice cooker on Image 3 looks totally different from this American design (Varnum ME, Grossmann I, Kitayama S, Nisbett RE. 2010 p. 9-13).





**Image 3.** Different styles of Rice cooker (Source: Design Theory)

Same goes for traditional Japanese and European joinery or these movie posters (Image 4-5).

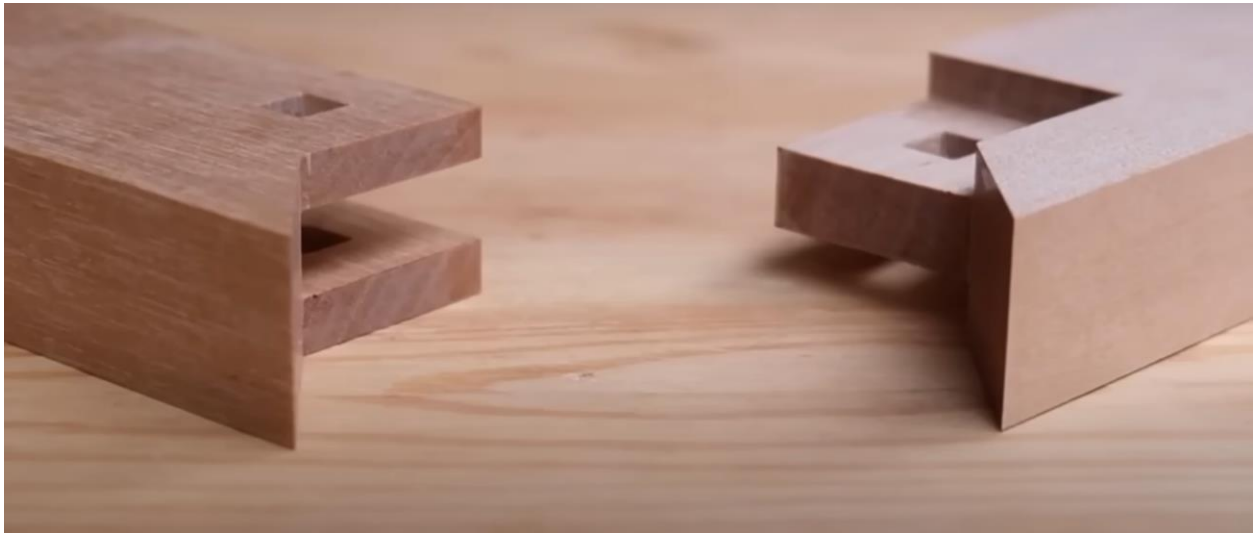


**Image 4.** An example of Western Joinery (left) and Eastern Joinery (right) (Source: Design Theory)



**Image 5.** An example of Eastern poster design (left) and Western poster design (Source: Design Theory)

The list continues to be answered, and Cynthia Zhu who has works about studies in education in University of Toronto offers successful videos explaining why Western and Eastern cultures design websites so differently. To elaborate on the subject in more depth of how culture affects not just website design, but all does that religious philosophy local language geographical quirks and even local laws can dictate the trajectory of culture and design evolution. There is even one Harvard Professor who wrote a 500-page book arguing that Western Culture went in a completely different direction because the church made it illegal to marry your cousins about 1500 years ago. Moreover, it will be discussed more to a deep understanding of how culture informs design decisions. The designed objects that surround you tell a story about culture. On Image 6 there is a Japanese joinery which looks very intricacy and complex (Kitayama et al., 2003. p.201).



**Image 6.** An example of Japanese joinery. (Source: Design Theory)

It will be easier if they nail two pieces of wood together. But considering the cultural background, these Advanced Joinery Techniques actually make a lot of sense in traditional Japan, where all craftsmanship and especially woodworking was almost like a kind of spiritual practice. The Japanese Shinto belief system places spiritual emphasis on nature; especially trees. The use of natural wood to wood joints is an extension of this philosophy where the wood itself and its natural qualities are respected. That is why traditional Japanese Woodworkers did not just simply nail two pieces of wood together (Mauriello, 2023).

Another common theme in Japanese Shintoism and Buddhism is the acceptance that nothing is permanent. Eventually the wooden joints will rot away and need to be replaced or repaired. That is why the traditional joints are often designed to be taken apart and reassembled. This relates to the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi which appreciates the beauty in imperfection and aging well-designed wooden joins age more gracefully and they are easier to replace but design and culture is also heavily driven by geography and climate. Japan is prone to earthquakes and wooden buildings with this kind of joinery can flex and bend a bit better than two pieces of wood simply nail together. Besides, Japan has a humid climate and wood tends to expand and contract with changes in humidity. Moisture can actually seep in through the hole that nail creates and deeper in into the wood causing it to rot sooner. Being an isolated island nation Japanese Woodworkers also didn't always have access to metal and when they did the metal usually had impurities and was low quality geography climate and resource availability. Those all played a major role in how this joinery was designed but it gets even wilder when we realize that our culture can often dictate the way our brain processes information (Mauriello, 2023).

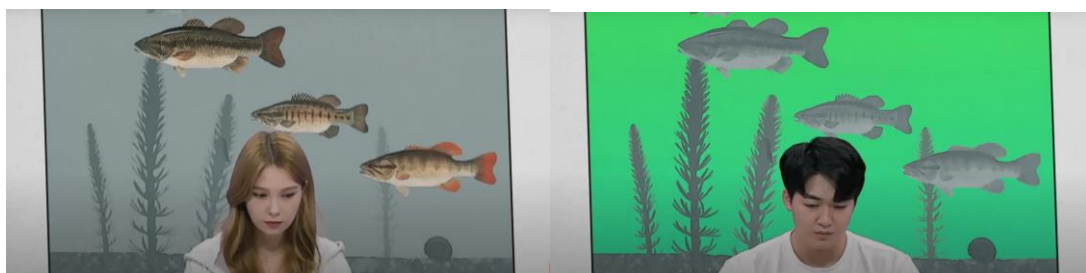
Moreover, even the language we speak can literally change how we see the world. Eastern and Western people see the world in a totally different way. What is meant by Western cultures is Northwest Europe and the countries that are separated from them. Also, Eastern cultures meant by mostly about East Asia.

To exemplify, Masuda and Nisbett (2001) revealed perceptual differences between East Asians and Westerners through an experiment in which underwater scenes were shown to Japanese and American participants. They asked Japanese and American subjects to analyze and underwater scene like on Image 7 and describe what they see (Graham, 2021).



**Image 7.** The underwater scene for experiment. (Source: Masuda Taka)

The American test subjects would say something like "I saw three big fish to the right they were white and green with pink fins". The Japanese participants would start with context they'd say that "it looks like a pond there were rocks and shells and plants on the bottom and then there were three big fish to the right eye".



**Image 8.** Intercultural focus (Source: Design Theory)

Tracking technology revealed that the Americans were searching for the main object or focal point and Eastern cultures were taking in the overall vibe (Image 8). They look at the context first and then look at the focal points. It is even more information dense than it looks, that is because many East Asian languages use compact characters that allow for more information to fit in less space. When compared with Western languages as it is delved deeper into intricacies of eastern and western cultures (Zhou et al., 2009).

Apart from that, in design it is crucial to remember that the lens through which we view the world can significantly shape our understanding and perceptions. This brings us to the role of the media and how in a world teeming with sensationalism. It is becoming challenging to discern the full unbiased picture. It is akin to observing a complex design but only acknowledging one element of it that is where Ground News comes in their app



and website consolidates. Media from across the globe allow readers to compare coverage and gain a comprehensive perspective on what is being reported. It is an invaluable tool for seeing how different cultures and political leanings interpret events right down to the language used in headlines which can often frame our interpretation of issues for every story. Ground News offers a visual breakdown of the reporting outlets revealing their political biases factual reliability ownership and the countries covering the story. It is a tool that empowers you to stay informed on breaking news. Design trends and cultural shifts without falling parade and media bias embrace a broader perspective and enrich your understanding by visiting Ground News design (Masuda and Nisbett, 2001, p. 992-934).

As for more cultural design elements to discuss, for kuwabara and Smith (2016) the differences in visual processing between East and West happens at a very young age. There is a study comparing drawings and collages done by Japanese children and Canadian children. The Japanese Children place far more detail throughout the frame but the compositions by the Canadian children have more of a central focus. This contrast in traditional East Asian art that has less of a focus creates more of an overall vibe.

Whereas Western art tends to have more of a focal point in another experiment. Asians and Western children were shown three things; a rabbit cat, a cat and a carrot when asked to group them (Image 9).



**Image 9.** A different experiment showing 3 images. (Source: Design Theory)

American kids paired the rabbit and the cat together. Asian children however grouped the rabbit and the carrot together because rabbit eats carrots so what is the deal if the participants match the rabbit with the cat. They are likely using wool-based analytic reasoning placing the rabbit and the cat both in the animal category but if they match the rabbit with a carrot, it reveals a more holistic way of thinking. Emphasizing the functional relationship between rabbits and carrots, rabbit eats carrots with over 3 000 participants from 30 countries (Jack, 2013).

Also in another experiment, a photo of a cow, a cat, and grass is shown and asked which two they would match together. East Asians say "Well, the cow goes with the grass because the cow eats the grass." On the other hand, the Westerner say "Well, the cow goes with the cat because they are both animals." The results clearly indicated that Western populations leaned more towards analytic thinking while the rest of the world especially East Asia showcased more holistic reasoning. People raised in societies with intense relationship connections are predisposed think in holistic terms prioritizing relationships and broader context and this manifest itself in design in very interesting ways. To compare the popular Japanese phone designs from the mid-2000s (Image 10), obviously they flip out, they rotate 90 degrees and they have intricate button layouts little holes for charms. They are blobby designs and it is not just the physical designs (Kuwabara, 2016).

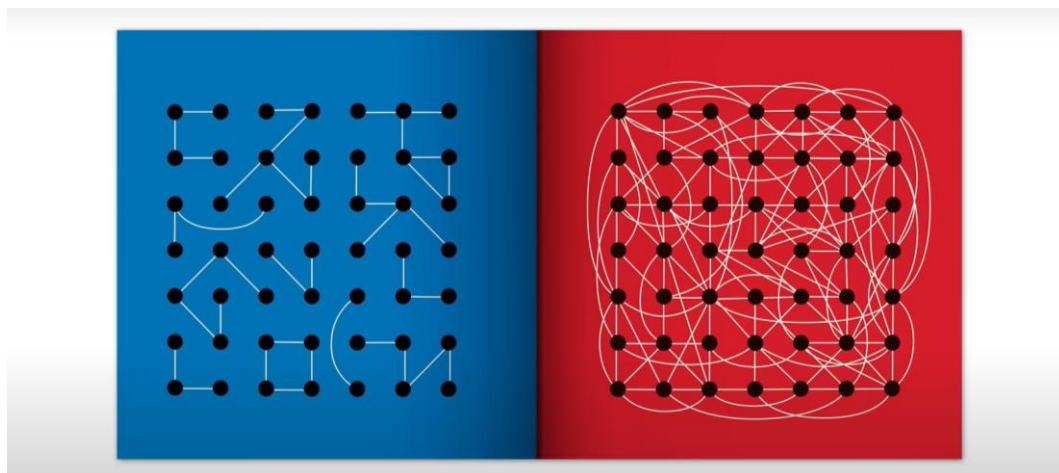


**Image 10.** An example of popular Japanese phone design, 2005. (Source: Design Theory)

More about web design, people browse the internet on this small screen filled with more text and information. However, apparently these sold very well in the Asian market which is absolutely insane. For comparison, this was one of the best-selling designed for the Western market. How all the lines follow the same visual shape and everything's far more organized and clean. Just a couple years after these phones were launched, Apple came around with possibly the most paired down design. Imaginable totally stealing the show in the western market. The iPhone really didn't catch on in Japan until they literally started giving them away for free when you signed up for a new carrier plan. This is actually fairly common now but it was very unusual in the late 2000s (Brown et al., 2014).

### HOLISTIC THINKING

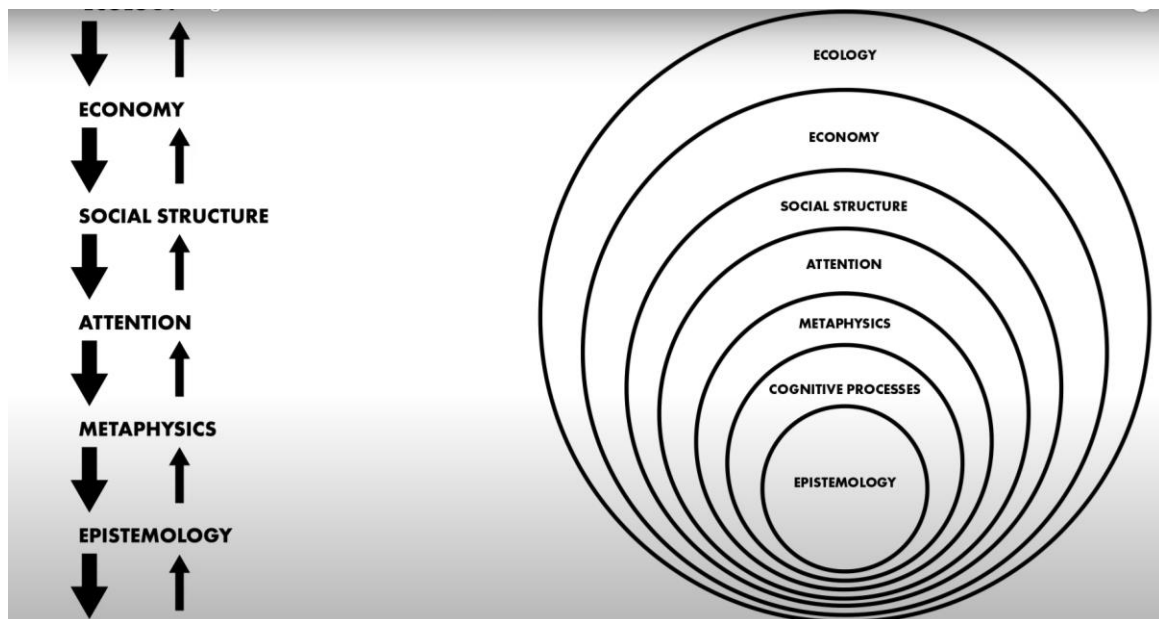
Before getting further into the differences between Eastern and Western cultures, it would be better to clarify that the terms East and West do not even come close to representing. The diversity of culture found within these two regions Japan and China are completely different from each other. Also, even within China, different parts of the country have totally different subcultures. There are many individuals who are holistic thinkers in the west and many analytical thinkers in the East.



**Image 11.** An example to show how complex of different cultures (Source: Design Theory)

Moreover, as culture and markets become more consolidated and globalized, the differences between designs are slowly becoming less pronounced in some product categories but using these broad categories still helps us better understand a global design variations and cross-cultural collaboration (Image 11). The bigger point here is that there are very real psychological and processing differences between different cultures and it has a major impact on which designs will be successful in their respective regions (Nisbett and Masuda, 2003).

Holistic thinking allows East Asians to process more information. As a result, their designs are usually more complex. To illustrate, being born in a certain culture is like always wearing a pair of pink glasses you completely forget that you are looking at everything through a cultural filter until you meet someone else with blue glasses. Also, they try to show you how they see things. Broadly, Westerners think in a linear fashion to us everything is a series of step-by-step casual relationships that can be broke down into smaller and smaller parts. It is kind of like the line showing on Image 12, which was drawn by Richard Nisbet, a psychology professor at University of Michigan, then on the right you have the same diagram (Website Design in Asia vs. The West, 2024).



**Image 12.** Ecological Cognitive Processes-Diagram by Richard Nisbet (Source: Design Theory)

It is made by Nisbets one of Chinese-American students. This is how East Asians tend to see things. It is a series of interrelated pieces that all fit within each other once again. These generalizations don't apply to every single individual in the culture. Our preferences and thought process can even change throughout the day depending on the mood. But on average these differences in thought process between East and West are pretty stark. Western thinking and culture are actually very new and highly unusual compared to other cultures. However, when we ask how the West became so strange, we see that there are many reasons, but these are just some of the important factors mentioned by Richard Nisbet and Joseph Henrik (Mauriello, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

In this article it has been maintained that conventions in a given culture i.e., contextual inclusiveness of East Asian and objective orientation of Western, correspond to a cultural preference for more social information. However, it is possible that the representational preferences mirror the artistic traditions not because of genuinely different ways of seeing the world (and preferring to see it) but merely because people are appealing to their



representational traditions. For example, even though there are significant differences in representational conventions between East Asia and the West, these factors may not have a profound psychological meaning (Masuda et al., 2008).

Richard Nisbett's own journey from a young scientist who describes himself as an extreme universalist, to a mature intellectual who understands and appreciates different thinking style, is itself a concrete example of how differences can lead to the positive. It was summarized three factors that are key to a positive outcome of cultural differences: curiosity and openness to cultural differences; habit of critical thinking; and intense interaction with culturally different others (Lee, 2016).

To sum up, in his lecture series at 'Great Minds', Nisbett gives some examples about how the unconscious mind does a lot of work which we're not aware of and our unconscious mind is fully as rational as our conscious mind. To illustrate, East Asians pay attention to context to a much greater extent than Westerners do. Westerners tend to ignore context and focus on some object. It could be a person that they want to influence or whose behavior they want to understand. Reasoning and perception are holistic in East Asia and they are much more likely to be analytic, focused on attributes of the object or the rules that determine the behaviors of that object. It is often said that East Asians are situation-centered. They are obligated to be sensitive to their environment. Effective behavior in the East depends on being able to fit in with other people, to coordinate your actions with them. Americans, on the other hand, are individual-centered. They expect their environment to be sensitive to them. They expect to be able to control their environment. They can ignore social relationships. Safely to a much greater extent than is possible for Easterners.

In conclusion, from his cognitive social psychology lens, Richard Nisbett views that any cross-cultural contact between different thinking styles is advantageous because differences help address the limitations of one's own thinking style. The insights from cross-cultural cognitive social psychology encourage cross-cultural management researchers to further investigate the positive consequences of cultural differences.

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