

## **“How Americans Think”**

### **Address to the Peking University School of International Studies**

**Jeffrey S. Lehman**

**April 10, 2007**

I am honored to have the opportunity to speak with you this evening at this wonderful school. I would like to thank Dean Wang for having invited me to be here. And I can think of no better place for me to begin a conversation on this topic, “How Americans Think.”

It is interesting to me that when I speak with other Americans they often assume that they think just like everyone else. They assume that people are pretty much the same everywhere, and so they think in pretty much the same ways.

That is probably what I believed for the first twenty years of my life. But then, during my junior year in college, I lived and studied in Paris, France.

During that year I lived with a French family and attended French universities. I walked in Paris, ate French food, and became fluent in the French language. Though I was still an American, I began to understand how French people live and think about life and work and food and art and language and poetry and ideas. And it was different from what I had grown up with.

And when I returned home, I felt as though I had been given a second set of eyes. Now when I looked at something specific, such as the way that bread is made and sold, I felt that I could see it in two ways – the way it is understood in America and the way it is understood in France.

So my personal experience gave me reason to be open to the idea that different cultures might encourage their children to grow up thinking in

different ways. That there might be a characteristically French way of thinking and a characteristically Chinese way of thinking. And that it could make sense to talk about how Americans think.

Of course, there are obvious reasons to be careful about talking in this way. America may look like a small country relative to China, but it still has almost 300 million people who are very different from one another in many ways. All generalizations are going to be very rough. They will often be wrong. To take just one example, American men and American women think very differently about many things.

So we must be cautious in talking about how Americans think. Not all Americans think like Americans think. But many do. And I hope that by having a conversation about what it means to describe an approach as typically American, we can all learn something about cultures and cultural misunderstanding.

So what can we say about how Americans think? I would like to speak abstract thought, values, and behaviors. And I would like to begin by talking about abstract thought – the way that people from different cultures try to analyze and understand the world around them. A few years ago a very famous psychologist named Professor Richard Nisbett wrote a book entitled, *The Geography of Thought*. In it, Professor Nisbett reviews a wide array of experiments by cognitive psychologists that test whether Westerners – especially Americans, Canadians, and the British – perceive and evaluate the world differently from Asians. And he concludes that these experiments generally point in the same direction. They suggest that Westerners are trained from the time they are young children to think about the world differently from Asians.

What characterizes this Western way of thinking? I expect that most of you have had significant exposure to Westerners, and so Professor Nisbett's conclusions will not surprise you.

Professor Nisbett reports that Westerners, from the time they are babies, are trained to think about objects in isolation from their surroundings. They are trained to look at objects and focus on the properties of those objects that do not change over time. Finally, they are trained fur-

ther to categorize objects into classes according to those more-or-less permanent properties.

For example, an experiment was done in which a group of mothers with babies were each given a new toy to play with. The Western mothers tended to talk with their babies mostly about the toy's shape, its size, its color, and what it could do. They spent much less time than the Asian mothers did talking about who might use the toy in different situations, and how it could be shared with others.

Professor Nisbett observes that this focus on objects and their properties is supplemented by two other kinds of training. One has to do with the idea of causation. Western children are trained to look at a sequence of events and try to develop a simple model of causation. Let me give an example that Professor Nisbett does not use but that fits with his description. Suppose a child sees a movie where a big boy hits a little boy and the little boy cries. In the West the child is encouraged to say that the action of the big boy caused the reaction by the little boy. And the child is encouraged to develop a simple general rule: whenever one person hits another person, the one who is hit will cry.

The other kind of training has to do with the idea of contradiction. Western children are trained to understand the world according to rules of logic whereby a contradiction is a sign that something is wrong. Systems of belief that do not include contradictions are thought to be better – more true – than systems of belief that have contradictions within them.

So what I said a moment ago about the value of seeing things with more than one set of eyes – seeing with American eyes and French eyes and Chinese eyes, even when what they see seems contradictory – that is a difficult thing for Westerners to learn to do. It is a quality that tends to be developed more during advanced education, rather than as children.

Professor Nisbett talks about other qualities as well, but I will stop with these four: a focus on separate objects, classified according to their properties, an emphasis on rules of causation, and a resistance to contradiction.

Professor Nisbett suggests that these four qualities help to explain a difference between the ways that Westerners and Asians approach new, complex situations. A Westerner is likely to break the situation down into separate objects, classify those objects by their properties, select which objects are more important and which are less important, and then see if there is a general rule or model that describes how the more important objects relate to each other. According to Professor Nisbett, an Asian is more likely to focus on the entire scene, and rather than stressing the properties of the individual elements is more likely to stress the relationships among the elements.

So Professor Nisbett gives the example of what happens when Westerners and Asians are shown two pictures of a tiger in the jungle. The pictures are similar, but not identical. The tiger is slightly different in the two pictures, and the jungle is slightly different.

When shown these pictures and asked to describe the differences, Westerners tend to focus almost entirely on the tiger, which they think of as the “most important” object in the picture. They tend not to perceive the changes in the jungle, which they think of as the “background.” Asians tend to focus on changes in the relationship among all the objects in the picture, and tend not to perceive changes in individual elements such as the tiger.

This difference in approach is sometimes described as the difference between reductionist thinking and holistic thinking. Reductionist thinking tries to reduce complex things to their most important parts. Holistic thinking tries to understand the whole as something that is different from the sum of its parts, something that depends as much on the relationships among the parts as it does on the parts themselves.

Now it is easy to exaggerate the importance of these differences. Westerners often think holistically. Asians often think in reductionist terms. Within each culture there are no doubt differences between the ways that men and women think.

Nonetheless, I think it is interesting that this description of how Westerners tend generally to analyze the world also fits very well with a

number of specific values that Americans endorse and a number of specific behaviors that Americans display.

Indeed, it has been noted that in almost all respects American values and behaviors seem to take this so-called Western way of analyzing the world to its most extreme form. American might reasonably be called the most Western of Western cultures. There are many reasons why that might be, but I want to stress two of them that have been singled out by Professor John Harmon McElroy, among other scholars. One reason is that the early Americans – the ones who created the country’s primary political and social institutions – were trying to do so on a frontier, in a rough, raw, wild land. A second is that today’s America – the country that is responsible for carrying those institutions forward – includes a uniquely high percentage of immigrants from a wide diversity of homelands.

In talking about American values and behaviors, I am going to emphasize three different categories of values and behaviors. And I want you to know how I chose them. Back in New York, I have a research assistant named Louise Bruce. Louise is a sophomore in college, and she is unusually smart and unusually well traveled. In fact, she is studying Chinese language at her university and last summer she lived in Beijing.

I asked Louise to write down a list of distinctively American values and behaviors. And she put together a very interesting list. What I have done is to group most of the values and behaviors she described into three categories: individualism, action, and words.

I want to discuss each of these categories and to suggest how, in each case, they can explain why Americans often seem much less interested than people from other countries in things like “harmony,” “relationships,” “respect for people of higher status,” and protecting each others’ “face.”

So let me begin with individualism.

Remember the idea of Westerners being reductionists: people who see the whole as the sum of its parts, and who see the parts as what is important. Now apply that view to a society. In this view, it is the indi-

vidual person that matters, and a society exists to support the individual person.

Americans focus on the individual person. They speak of how much they value personal freedom, personal privacy, and personal property. And they speak about how much they value individual equality. In the words of the political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset, there is an American Creed that embraces “liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.”

What does personal freedom mean? To an American it means that the overall society should not make demands on them unless those demands are necessary to protect other individual persons from being harmed. Long ago deTocqueville noted that this belief even carries forward into Americans’ commitment to religion. American religious institutions are supported voluntarily, not by the state. Most Americans prefer religions that are structured around local congregations rather than hierarchical churches. And as the sociologist Alan Wolfe has noted, most Americans strongly believe with the statement that “there are many different religious truths and we ought to be tolerant of all of them.”

Along with personal freedom, Americans cherish personal privacy. The United States Supreme Court has said that personal privacy – “the right to be left alone” – is something that the government must respect. And it is not just the government. When children are taught what it means to be polite, they are taught to respect other people’s right to privacy.

In my experience, this is an area that causes frequent misunderstanding between Americans and Chinese people. As the anthropologist Edward Hall noted several decades ago, Americans have a strong sense of what they call their personal space. It is a kind of a bubble around them that others are not supposed to enter without permission. They do not like other people to stand too close to them. They do not like other people to look over their shoulders at what they are reading or writing. They do not like other people to ask questions about things they consider private, such as how much they earn for their salary. But as many commen-

tators since have noted, including the psychologist Michael Bond, all of these attitudes can seem very strange to a Chinese person!

Americans see personal property as an aspect of personal privacy. They are trained from early childhood to assume that objects have owners. The owner is free to decide what happens to property that he or she owns. It is possible that they might treat their property in such an extreme way that others would be critical, but that kind of criticism is reserved for the most extreme cases, cases that people would describe as “outrageous.”

The notion of ownership extends beyond tangible objects. If someone invents an idea, Americans believe that the inventor is entitled to the benefit of that idea. It is considered wrong to profit from another person’s invention. Indeed, even if profit is not involved, we are expected to give other people credit when we borrow their ideas. So you will notice that throughout my talk this evening I am giving you the names of professors who have said things that I am reporting to you.

Finally, the focus on the individual person has nurtured within Americans a belief in individual equality. Americans do not think that all people are the same. But they believe that, despite the differences among people, they are all entitled to the same respect, the same opportunities, the same voice in how the society is run.

This idea of individual equality is also a source of frequent misunderstanding between Americans and Chinese people. In Chinese society, it is very important to show respect for rank and position in organizations and in society. It is impolite not to do so. And it is also impolite to make it difficult for others to show respect.

But Americans are taught that it is good not to emphasize your rank or position. In the U.S., it is common for the boss to tell the worker to call him by his first name. And when the boss and the worker come to a door, it is considered polite for the boss to ask the worker to go through first. But when an American boss tries to do the same thing in China, it can be very awkward.

This same idea of equality is often associated with Americans' strong commitment to the rule of law. While Americans tend to favor a relatively small government, they want their government to enforce the rules fairly. They believe that the equality of individuals means that a person who does not have powerful friends should still be able to enjoy the same opportunities as a person who has powerful friends. And they expect the rule of law to protect the weak against the strong.

So that is individualism.

The second category of values and behaviors have to do with action. Americans attach much more importance to what a person does than they do to whether a person comes from a famous or important family, or a famous or important city. It is not enough to be part of an important community; Americans expect each other to do things. Americans assume that, for the most part, individuals are in control. They are able to make decisions about their lives. And therefore they are responsible for the decisions that they make. This is sometimes called "agency." Americans tend to assume that individuals deserve their own successes or their own failures. They resist the notion that successful people have been lucky and unsuccessful people have been unlucky.

Professor McElroy suggests that Americans' belief that everyone must work, whether they come from a rich family or a poor family, traces back to the founding of the country on a frontier, where absolutely everyone had to do hard physical work in order to produce food from the land. In modern American society, that same "work ethic" remains central to how Americans assign respect.

And as Professor Lipset has noted, the work ethic is linked to the American sense of "meritocracy": everyone should have an opportunity to succeed through work. When individuals or groups of individuals have been denied that opportunity, as was the case for African Americans for hundreds of years, it is now seen as having been inconsistent with the American Creed.

But responsibility for action also extends beyond the idea of working to earn a living for oneself. It also extends to the idea that individuals are expected to provide assistance to others.

Now if you know America well, you may think that I am wrong to describe this as an American value. Just a minute ago, I said that Americans tend to believe that people are responsible for their own circumstances. And it is also true that, among the developed nations of the world, America has the least generous system of government support for the poor. And what government assistance there is tends to be given to the so-called “deserving poor” – the elderly, the sick, and the disabled.

But even though Americans do not maintain a very generous public system of assistance to the poor, there is at least one way in which Americans seem to display a strong sense of responsibility for one another.

I am talking about the idea of private charity. Private philanthropy is far more important in America than it is in any other country, and it has been for centuries. From hospitals to universities to libraries to museums, the American tradition has been for individuals to contribute to development of civil society. Even when the government is active – as in the case of universities – it has also been considered natural for wealthy individuals to create alternative institutions for the good of the society. And it is not just the wealthy. Each year, more than two thirds of American households give charitable contributions.

So I have talked about individualism and about action. Now I would like to talk about words.

I have been coming to China for almost ten years now. And I am always impressed by the many ways that Americans and Chinese people are similar to one another. I believe that there is a natural friendship between Americans and Chinese people that goes very deep.

But when I think of one way that Americans act that seems the most strange to Chinese people, I think of the importance that Americans attach to words. And here I want to discuss three different ways that Americans give words an unusually high value: Americans believe that the meaning of words should be relatively stable and unchanging, Americans believe in the idea of friendly disagreement, and Americans become very upset if someone does not do what they say they will do.

First, there is Americans' sense that the meaning of words should be stable. Professor Lipset has noted that Americans are much more comfortable than people from other countries with the notion that right and wrong are absolute concepts – that they do not change from one context to another. And it is not just about right and wrong. It applies more generally. Truth is another concept that Americans consider to be absolute, not relative. And Americans like to speak about how words have a “plain meaning” that does not change from day to day, or from place to place.

Second, there is Americans' love for debate and disagreement. Many of the things that I have talked about today – Americans' focus on individual objects rather than relationships, their sense of freedom and equality, and their sense of a stable notion of truth – contribute to a belief that when people speak with one another their primary goal should be to say what they honestly believe. Americans have difficulty with the notion that they should change what they say in order to show respect for someone else's face. They even have difficulty with the notion that they should simply say nothing rather than expressing disagreement.

Of course, many Americans disapprove of impolite or rude forms of disagreement. But most Americans believe that disagreement can be expressed respectfully and politely. Most Americans are confused by the Taoist suggestion that “A good man does not argue; he who argues is not a good man.”

Indeed, Americans often feel the opposite. They feel that a good person does not pretend to agree if he in fact disagrees. And they are confused when they ask a Chinese person a question and the Chinese person does not answer. The Chinese person may be trying to avoid giving offense by saying, “No.” But ironically the American may be more offended that he is not receiving an answer to his question.

And that brings us to my final observation, that Americans believe it is fundamentally immoral for people not to do what they say they will do. Or as Americans say, for people not to be “true to their word.” In many cultures, people expect that agreements will evolve over time, as circumstances change, and relationships change. This can be true for

Americans as well, but much less often. Because they are used to thinking in terms of individual objects with unchanging properties, they are much less likely to see a change in the environment as relevant to the terms of an agreement. So, for example, when the leaders of two organizations make an agreement, Americans are more likely than people from other cultures to expect that the organizations will continue to carry out the agreement even after the leaders have changed.

So that is my story about how Americans think. They tend to analyze the world by emphasizing individual objects and their unchanging properties, understating the importance of relationships and context. They try to construct simple models of how one thing causes another thing to happen. And if they find a model includes a logical contradiction, they will assume it is wrong.

In their values and behavior, Americans stress the personal liberty, personal privacy, personal property, and individual equality. They place greater value on what a person does than they do on who a person is. They believe that individuals are responsible for their own circumstances, and when they see another individual in need they think it is better for one person to choose to help that person rather than to have the society provide help. And they believe in the value of words – making honest statements of belief more important than relationships or stability.

At the end of his book, Professor Nisbett writes about how globalization is increasing the amount of interaction between Westerners and Asians. And he has a very optimistic hope for what that will mean. His hope is that Western culture will change to become more Asian, and that Asian culture will become more Western. He hopes that no matter where you are born, you will learn to look at a picture and see both the individual objects and the relationships among them, to believe both in the importance of individual action and the importance of the broad social context. I find this to be a very attractive vision for the future. I think that if we can all come to see the world with both American eyes and Chinese eyes, to understand how Americans think and how Chinese people think, our understanding will be deeper and we will have an even greater appreciation for all that is beautiful and harmonious in the world.

I am happy to answer any questions or comments you might have. And I would be especially happy if you have a different idea to share, or if you disagree with something I have said.