



Ai Weiwei, *Bang*, 2010-2013, 886 antique stools, installation view

I walked through and around [Ai Weiwei](#)'s 2013 *Bang* organic sculpture when it was exhibited in Vancouver last year. The unified sculpture emerges from the connection of 886 three-legged wooden stools, all of which were made by traditional Chinese craftsmen.

Walking through the internal spaces created by the piece, the individual stools quickly lose their object distinction while the primacy of their relationship to the overall structure is established. There is also an awareness that appreciation can only be achieved by exploring it from its created internal spaces i.e. becoming part of it. It was evident that the gallery had to adjust the exhibition space, rooms, and other works of art, to display *Bang*. In that necessary adjustment to accommodate the sculpture, western and eastern cultural differences become apparent. The traditional western display of the *Objet d'art* for passive appreciation by a clearly distinct viewer can be contrasted with the eastern integration of both art and viewer to create an identifiable relationship.

[Richard Nisbett, Incheol Choi, Kaiping Peng and Ara Norenzayan](#) propose that exposure to eastern and western cultural and social systems yields not only different ways of knowing the world, but also yields different cognitive thought systems. They see eastern systems driving a relationship-based perception which they contrast with an object-centricity of western societies. This view has the uncomfortable conclusion that neither our metaphysical understanding nor its consequent tacit epistemology are universal,

but instead malleable. To support their view, they carried out several studies including the testing of categorisation with eastern and western social groups. The eastern participants often rejected logically motivated outcomes in favour of typicality and plausibility, consistent with their experience of the world. The experimental studies highlighted significant differences in 'to what' and 'how' visual attention was directed. By measuring eye movements, quantifying eye saccades and combining the data with self-reported descriptions of visual scenes, they concluded that the attention of western participants was drawn to the individual objects in a scene rather than the entire scene and the relationships of its constituent elements seen by their eastern counterparts.

This can all be seen as highly interesting as an ethnography study. The researchers' strong arguments for connecting object attention with personal agency are indeed worthwhile, while the categorisation data highlights the serious deficiencies in disciplines that use categorisation as a tool to understanding cognition. Even propositions that social systems like those of ancient China, which by sheer size, agrarian dependency and feudal organisation would be inclined to lean on harmony and agreement, are highly plausible. However, there is a wider implication being made in the paper i.e. that western logic is not a core universal cognitive process, but rather is cognitive content, originating in the the social and cultural systems of ancient Greece. In anticipation of a logic-criticality argument for technical progress, the authors list the numerous advances made by ancient China, '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 paddlewheel boat, quantitative cartography, immunization techniques, astronomical observations of novae, seismographs, and acoustics', as examples of the many technological achievements that were in place in China before Ancient Greece. The literature supports Nisbett's contention that these advances were not a result of scientific theory but instead were indicative of a heuristic system that was advanced by practicality and empiricism. For many Greek philosophers, Plato included, concrete perception and direct experiential knowledge was viewed as unreliable and always rejected when it conflicted with their reasoned logical position. This sometimes impeded their progress. Logan, as quoted by Nisbett, highlights that the Greek rejection of the concept of zero was due to the reasoned impossibility of nonbeing – to them it was logically self-contradictory! Understanding of zero, infinity and infinitesimals eventually came to the west via an eastern trail.

It is counterintuitive that a thought process like logic with its heavy cognitive load is the thought system of choice when heuristics are available. There is little value in

eliminating possibilities on the basis of noncontradiction and abstracted reasoning if direct experience and dialectical reasoning provides a quick, practical answer.

However, the efficacy of non-abstracted reasoning is clearly diminished when direct perception is unavailable. The learned techniques and application of abstract reasoning tools like logic have historically delivered for science in these instances.

Given the demonstrated different manifestations of thought systems for eastern and western participants in Nisbett's experiments, his thesis that 'metaphysics, epistemology and cognitive process exist in mutually dependent and reinforcing systems of thought' is reasonable, as is his conclusion that a division of cognitive process and cognitive content may be arbitrary. The case can be made that both noncontradictory logic and contradictory dialectical constancy are learned cognitive content that provide tools for discovery rather than being discovered tools of innate cognitive process.

The increasing appreciation of works by Ai Weiwei in what Nisbett defines as the west can be attributed to many reasons, not least the political and historical commentary that is associated with them. But in their ability to force western eyes on relationship saliency rather than object saliency, they may add weight to the argument that although there are cross-cultural differences in cognitive systems, they are not fixed.