



## The Cultural Imperative

Global Trends in the 21st Century

by Richard D. Lewis  
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### Take-Aways

- Culture determines history.
- Culture shapes personal and organizational behavior.
- Genetic and economic determinism are dead.
- Religion is a potent force in culture and shows no sign of fading.
- One may categorize cultures as linear-active, multi-active or reactive.
- Cultural black holes preclude any understanding or inquiry; every culture has one, from the American dream to the Chinese Middle Kingdom.
- All people are not basically alike.
- Cultural dominance has moved from east to west; it is now Asia's turn to rise.
- China's culture endured despite communism and will survive capitalism.
- Western values will endure, though they may not dominate the world absolutely, as they now appear to do. This appearance is misleading.

### Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>

## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) What factors determine culture; and 2) The impact culture has on national, organizational and personal characteristics.

### Recommendation

Those who extrapolate trends and predict the future say that economic, political and even genetic factors will determine the future of the world. But, in fact, culture makes the world go around, according to Richard D. Lewis, a well-traveled scholar who reflects here on the origins and implications of human cultures. Culture has deep roots in history, religion and language, so it will probably be a more potent factor in shaping the future than many observers grant. Now it is fashionable to say that cultures are coalescing into one global culture. This author strenuously opposes that easy assumption. He also offers a deeper look at Islamic culture in a post-Sept. 11 addendum. Overall, his intriguing arguments might have been much more involving if a good editor had pared away some of his more facile references and observations. At times, the book seems to serve up a tad too many stereotypes and clichés. Yet *getAbstract.com* also finds that it offers some fascinating, thought-provoking suggestions, and recommends it for a rainy weekend at the beach or for airplane reading.

## Abstract

### Culture Creates Defining National Attributes

The era of the 1950s brought bad news for students of culture. During that decade, various theories of determinism derived from logical positivism established their rule over the study of social science in U.S. universities. However, cultural studies rely on forms of evidence and information that do not quite fit the data-driven tradition of positivism. Today's trend is going the other way; deterministic theories — especially those of genetic and economic determinism — have not fared well recently. The collapse of Communism put Marxist notions in rather a bad light. And, modern advances in the study of genetics show the primitiveness and inadequacy of genetic determinism.

The withdrawal of great colonial powers from their once-vast empires revealed an unsuspected truth about colonialism — namely, that it was not, in fact, wholly responsible for low levels of wealth and development in countries where it held sway, especially on the continent of Africa. African countries produced staggering amounts of what qualifies as treasure by any measure — gold, silver, diamonds — and also cash crops such as cocoa. Southeast Asian countries, by contrast, produced relatively low-value commodities such as, in Malaysia, for instance, rubber or tin. Yet several decades after colonialism receded, look at the difference in wealth between the two regions. What accounts for that, if not culture? Most African countries had no written language and no tradition of complex, literate civilization, whereas most Asian countries had both.

Culture is to blame for many of the defining attributes of nations. Consider, for example: American materialism, Japanese “face,” Swiss punctuality or German authoritarianism. These and many other characteristics have cultural origins and practical implications.

“Culture has been succinctly defined as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one category of people from another.”

“The entirely disparate worldviews of linear-actives and multi-actives pose a problem of great magnitude as we begin a new century of international trade and aspire to globalization.”

“For every aspect of culture shock, there is an antidote which might be called a culture shock absorber.”

“The work ethic is a central tenet of Protestantism, bringing with it a code of behavior that supports the concept.”

“Shintoists possess an inner depth.”

## Roots and Paths

Culture is the answer to these questions:

- Why do British children learn a history that begins in 1066? What about the hundreds of millennia of human endeavor that took place on the islands of Great Britain before the Norman Conquest?
- Why do Americans talk about continental settlement that began with the voyage of *The Mayflower*? What about the native Americans who had settled the land for eons?
- Why don't Australians count aborigine dreamtime in their chronicles?
- Why do most Western people count time from the birth of Christ?

Culture has roots deep in the past. Indeed, it began when ape-like hominids in Africa hunted and lived in groups. Human evolution established cultural patterns of cooperation, of gratitude for assistance, of respect for authority, of wanting to fit in, of different roles for different genders, of resourcefulness, inventiveness and even aesthetics.

All cultures have these things in common, but all cultures are clearly not the same. When the first humans came out of Africa, they took different paths. Some found their way to Ireland, others to the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, still others went toward China. Eventually, the latter crossed the Bering Strait and spread through North and South America, only meeting their distant, long-lost cousins again when they came as conquistadors and explorers.

The climate where early people settled inevitably shaped their cultures. One is not inclined to linger long out of doors composing verses or philosophizing in a Lapp winter. One does not adopt a vegetarian diet in the arctic, or gorge on thick, long-simmered meat stews in the tropics. Cold weather seems conducive to work, warm weather to leisure. Africans stand on the street talking endlessly, holding hands; Swedes do not. Weather can influence how people use their eyes — Arabs make eye contact; Norwegians tend to glance down or away or narrow their eyes. Could it be because cold winds in Norway hurt the eyes of the first humans to settle there?

Dress is part of culture. In the north, attire keeps the cold out but does not ordinarily impress one with its flair. In the south, more attention goes to appearance and the grace of style.

## Religion

God is dead, Nietzsche said, before they buried him. But God and gods are clearly very much alive. Religion is profoundly a part of the world today, most violently in the Middle East, but also elsewhere. For example, Hindu nationalism is a force to reckon with in the subcontinent.

Language is closely related to religion. No student of culture should forget the close mutual interdependence of religion and language, especially written language. As Judaism has Hebrew, Islam has Arabic as its sacred language, though only a small minority of the world's Muslims are, in fact, Arabs. The Five Pillars of Islam are:

1. Acknowledge only one God — Allah — and Muhammad as His prophet.
2. Pray five times each day.
3. Give alms.
4. Practice the Ramadan fast.
5. Go to Mecca as a pilgrim.

“Muslims disregard facts if they interfere with honor or integrity.”

“The reticent, factual Finn must grope toward a modus operandi with the loquacious, emotional Italian.”

“The 1917 Revolution established 70-odd years of Communism in Russia but failed to eradicate enduring Russian traits, many of which stubbornly resurfaced after perestroika.”

Islam has influenced the cultures where it is the dominant religion. For example:

- One does not drink alcohol, eat pork or mingle in public with the opposite sex.
- One honors the family and shows great deference to age.
- Business relations depend on human relationships, not on objective considerations.
- Protocol and prestige matter greatly.
- Negotiation and haggling are normative.

Hinduism is the religion of the Indian subcontinent and some proximate areas. It acknowledges one great god and numerous powerful but lesser gods. Generally speaking, Hindus tend toward tolerance, eschew meat, believe in reincarnation and have very colorful and theatrical rituals. The Hindu religion has some interesting effects on culture and business:

- Hindus do not really believe in or easily accept the idea of personal freedom.
- Rituals or ceremonies may make business contacts unavailable at times.
- Hindus are more apt than Muslims to look favorably on people of other creeds.
- Hindus are likely to look for precedents to justify actions.

Judaism is the parent of monotheistic religions. It values faith, family, education, community and charity, among other Old Testament concerns. Jewish congregations fall into four groups:

- Orthodox — Strictly traditional, accept the full authority of the sacred laws as delineated in the Torah and elaborated in the Talmud.
- Reform — Denies some traditional elements. For instance, women can be rabbis.
- Conservative — Steers a middle path between Orthodox and Reform.
- Liberal — Much less traditional than Reform.

Buddhism, which was founded by Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) around 500 B.C., adopted and then modified and adapted several Hindu principles. Buddhism shaped the Chinese world view, together with Confucianism. The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism are:

1. Life is sorrow.
2. Sorrow results from desire.
3. Stopping desire stops sorrow.
4. Follow the eightfold Middle Path, which consists of right understanding, right reason, right speaking, right acting, right living, right working, truth-seeking and meditation.

Buddhist values find expression in business. For example, “right speaking” results in great emphasis on both courtesy and clarity. “Truth seeking” means openness to change when circumstances warrant, as well as a commitment to honesty.

Christianity consists of three major traditions: Roman Catholic, dominant in southern Europe and Latin America; Protestantism, dominant in northern Europe and North America; and Eastern Orthodox, dominant in eastern Europe. Protestants tend to emphasize honesty and law, freedom of religion, women’s equality and earned wealth as a gauge of human worth. Catholics, by contrast, stress hierarchy, family, relationships, philosophy and compassion.

### **How to Analyze Cultures**

Many scholars have attempted to develop methods of categorizing the differences among cultures. There are basically three modes of culture:

“The Chinese consider virtue more important than truth, for they believe there is no absolute, scientific truth.”

1. Linear-Active — Oriented to the job at hand, punctual, organized, agenda-driven, fact-based and governed by letter-of-the-law contracts. Typical linear-active cultures include the Germans, Swiss, British and Americans.
2. Multi-Active — Talkative, impetuous, emotional, delighting in conversation, intolerant of silence, indifferent to schedules and protean in their mutability. Typical multi-active cultures include the Spanish, Italian and French.
3. Reactive — Listeners who are slow to talk, introverted, self-abasing and indirect. Typical reactive cultures include the Chinese, Korean and Japanese.

When members of each group interact with fellow group-members, mutual understanding is no problem. When people cross group boundaries, things get more complicated and challenging. People in these categories frame the world in very different terms, and have great difficulty communicating and understanding each other.

Although the world is, in a sense, shrinking, and although people in each cultural category know more about people in the others than they once did, cultures are not becoming homogenous. Consider Europe, where cultures have been in close contact for centuries, where countries draw on a more or less common artistic and intellectual tradition, and where people often speak each other’s language. Even there, misunderstanding and antagonism persists between Italians and Germans, English and French, and so on. Cultures do not change easily.

The most dangerous threat on the culture front is the “Cultural Black Hole” (CBH). Like cosmological black holes, they suck in all light and emit none. Cultural black holes blind us. Almost every culture has its black holes, including, in the U.S., the American dream; in China, the Middle Kingdom; in France, the belief in French superiority; in England, the class system; in Sweden, the emphasis on consensus and in Russia, pervasive suspicion.

### **The Future of Cultures**

Cultures have determined the history of the world and will determine its future. Those who fear a resurgent China may take solace in China’s cultural record of inward focus. Those who fear Islam’s power can take comfort in the brighter and more humane aspects of the Islamic cultural legacy. Those who worry about the collapse of the West need to look more closely at the cultural sources of Western intellectual and economic achievement. Culture endures, for worse or, more often, for better.

## **About The Author**

Richard D. Lewis, knighted by President Ahtissari of Finland in 1997, is chairman of Richard Lewis Communications, author of the best-selling *When Cultures Collide: Managing Successfully Across Cultures*, former tutor to Empress Michiko of Japan, and a lecturer and consultant with a worldwide client roster.

## **Buzz-Words**

Cultural black hole (CBH) / **D**eterminism / **L**inear-active / **M**ulti-active / **R**eactive