

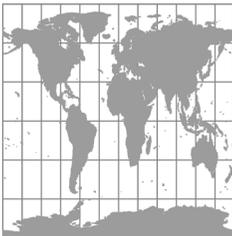
Book Review

The Girl at the Baggage Claim: Explaining the East-West Culture Gap. Gish Jen, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2017. 310 pp. images, drawings, index, bibliography, appendices, notes. ISBN: 978-1-101-91782-1 \$26.95.

Dawn M. Drake
Associate Professor of Geography
Department of History and Geography
Missouri Western State University
Saint Joseph, MO 64507
E-mail: ddrake4@missouriwestern.edu

The Girl at the Baggage Claim is an examination of cultural differences in how humans view the world. Jen creates two categories of personalities – the big pit and the flexi-self. Big pits are associated with western cultures and more self-centered and individualistic behaviors that focus on advancing one's own causes ahead of others'. Flexi-selves, on the other hand, are more closely associated with eastern cultures, including Eastern Europe, and interdependent behaviors aimed at the betterment of the group, even if it is at the expense of the individual. The author provides a series of tests to help readers determine where they fall on the spectrum between the big pit and the flexi-self. Jen, a second generation Chinese-American, presents a unique take the issues, straddling the cultural divide between east and west her entire life. Using cultural psychology as a backdrop for the author's own experiences, *The Girl at the Baggage Claim* is a useful read for those interested in cultural geography or Asian society.

Jen's goal in *The Girl at the Baggage Claim* is to demystify the culture gap between east and west. She hopes to explain what makes Asian cultures unique and why Americans are so culture-phobic, fearing what does not seem "normal" in the west. While conceptions of self varies from east to west, Jen wants the reader to understand that what confounds westerners about eastern culture need not do so. To help close the gap, the author tackles common archetypes of flexi-selves (such as copycats and cheaters), as well as the most



arrogant parts of big pit culture, hoping to help everyone understand why the behaviors are viewed as acceptable in different parts of the world.

The book is divided into four parts to take the reader on a systematic journey through a variety of cultures. In Part One, Jen explores the ways in which we all edit are interpretations of our own culture as well as others. For big pits, this manifests itself as controlling the image presented to the world. Not only do big pits want to control their own image, but they also edit the world to make other events understandable from the big pit perspective. Protests in Tiananmen Square provide an excellent example. For westerners the iconic photo is a single big pit man standing in front of a tank, but that is an edit of the real image of what happened that day. The reality is more flexi-self in nature, with the man speaking with a soldier in the tank to come to a common understanding. Flexi-self cultures have heroes, but not in the individualistic way that big pits are comfortable. Coverage of a worldwide event will vary greatly between western and eastern news outlets, largely due to cultural perceptions. In big pit cultures, a crime story will focus on the individual dispositions and behaviors that led to a person committing a crime, whereas flexi-self cultures will focus on situational and environmental factors that led to the crime. In big pit cultures, the Big Bad Wolf is a mean character. In flexi-self cultures, he attacks the pigs because he is hungry and has no other options.

Part One continues, helping readers understand other human behaviors from both the big pit and flexi-self perspective. For big pits, copycat behavior is disturbing because it says we are not unique and can easily be mimicked. For flexi-selves, copying artwork or innovation is a form of flattery. There is no stigma to those behaviors for flexi-self cultures because it is not about the individual innovator. It is about the greater good of society and transmitting culture. It is part of the differences in thinking patterns where big pits think and reason from a single focus,

while flexi-selves are more holistic in their thinking, looking at the larger picture.

In Part Two the author examines flexi-self cultures in more detail, defining the behaviors and explaining that interdependent flexi-selves are not necessarily conformers so much as they are fitting into a role in society. It is not a mindset confined to eastern cultures. Certain western behaviors can be seen as being more interdependent in nature, such as JFK's famous "Ask not what your country can do for you..." speech. Being a flexi-self also impacts ways in which people learn. The author clearly explains the differences in eastern and western education systems, hoping to increase understanding between the two pedagogies. Throughout the chapters in Part Two, the author lays out a picture of the flexi-self culture that is then compared to the big pit culture in Part Three.

Part Three examines the big pit culture in detail. In this section the author explains why big pit cultures are not, in fact, the norm in the world. The fact that psychologists often generalize big pit behaviors as "normal" creates issues for those who do not fit the mold. Americans, who are the basis for many behavioral experiments that are applied globally, are in fact the most abnormal big pits of all. Most big pits also demonstrate elements of the flexi-self and that needs to be better embraced in western cultures. Throughout the section, Jen not only outlines the behaviors of big pits, but explains how they are counter-intuitive to what happens in most of the rest of the world. Extreme big pit behaviors are in fact not the norm, but the outlier.

In Part Four, the author concludes by explaining the mixing of big pit and flexi-self cultures. For people who find themselves falling toward the middle of the spectrum, not quite a big pit or a flexi-self, life is complicated. Patterns of speaking and thinking become muddled. A flexi-self wants to write about themselves in the third person, if they do it at all, whereas big pits write in the first person. Flexi-selves focus on the routine, while big pits focus on exceptional events in life. If you fall somewhere in between, it

is hard to reconcile these differences. In Part Four, Jen also explains why big pits might willingly become more of a flexi-self, such as in team sports. Additionally, it is possible for flexi-selves to become big pits in order to thrive and survive, such as in college admissions, which cater more to the big pit persona. This type of flexibility in personality is called ambi-dependence. Ambi-selves are increasingly common in the globalized world as cultures interact more and more. The majority of people reading *The Girl at the Baggage Claim* will be able to see both the flexi-self and the big pit in their own behaviors, making the last section on ambi-selves the most relatable section of the book.

Throughout the book Jen uses a combination of data, diagrams, and anecdotes to elucidate the differences between big pits and flexi-selves. The examples range from current events to historic examples, demonstrating both flexi-self and big pit behaviors in context. Through a series of relatable real world stories, Jen helps readers from all cultures and walks of life understand the perspective of other cultures and see examples of cultures crossing lines to be more ambi-dependent. Because Jen lived in both the flexi-self and the big pit world, her observations are poignant and help illustrate the ideas she presents in a largely unbiased way. She also backs her observations with relevant literature. *The Girl at the Baggage Claim* is a masterfully written and relatable book that can help people from all backgrounds learn not only about themselves, but their relationship to others as well. It is an excellent read for anyone with interests in cultural or behavioral geography.