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## CULTURE AFFECTS HOW PEOPLE THINK

Take a look at **Figure 19.1**. What do you notice more: the cows or the backgrounds?



**FIGURE 19.1** Picture used in Chua (2005) research

The way you answer might depend on where you grew up—the West (US, UK, Europe) or East Asia. In his book *The Geography of Thought*, Richard Nisbett discusses research that shows that how we think is influenced and shaped by culture.

People from different geographical regions and cultures respond differently to information, photos, and context. If you are preparing a presentation that is for multiple cultures and geographical regions, then you may need to have slightly different presentations for different cultures.

### EAST = RELATIONSHIPS; WEST = INDIVIDUALISTIC

If you show people from the West a picture, they focus on a main or dominant foreground object, while people from East Asia pay more attention to context and background. East Asian people who grow up in the West show the Western pattern, not the Asian pattern, thereby implying that it's culture, not genetics, that accounts for the differences.

The theory is that in East Asia, cultural norms emphasize relationships and groups. East Asians, therefore, grow up learning to pay more attention to context. Western society is more individualistic, so Westerners grow up learning to pay attention to focal objects.

Chua et al. (2005) and Lu Zihui (2008) used the pictures in Figure 19.1 with eye tracking to measure eye movement. Both studies showed that the East Asian participants spent more time with central vision on the backgrounds and that the Western participants spent more time with central vision on the foreground.

### CULTURAL DIFFERENCES SHOW UP IN BRAIN SCANS

Sharon Begley recently wrote an article in *Newsweek* on neuroscience research that also confirms the cultural effects. In it, she states, “When shown complex, busy scenes, Asian-Americans and non-Asian-Americans recruited different brain regions. The Asians showed more activity in areas that process figure-ground relations—holistic context—while the Americans showed more activity in regions that recognize objects.”

#### Takeaways

- \* People from different geographical regions and cultures respond differently to information and photos.
- \* In East Asia people notice and remember the background and context more than people in the West do.
- \* Consider using different presentations for different cultures.