

# **Seeing the big picture: Do some cultures think more abstractly than others?**

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## **Abstract**

Do some cultures think more abstractly than others? According to tests of formal logic and rule-based reasoning, Westerners tend to think more abstractly than East Asians. Yet, rule-based reasoning is only one type of abstract thinking. More generally, thinking abstractly involves discerning relationships and seeing the big picture. Here we argue that previous tests of attention, perception, and memory can be interpreted as showing that East Asians tend to think more abstractly than Westerners. To test this hypothesis directly we gave a validated measure of abstract thinking (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) to Chinese and US individuals. Participants chose either abstract or concrete definitions of events. Across six independent national samples (total N=1,798), Chinese participants tended to construe events more abstractly, and US participants more concretely. Within China, more independent (Western-like) groups chose more concrete definitions. Together, these results challenge the generalization that Westerners have a greater propensity for abstract thought.