



Australian Government



NEW COLOMBO PLAN

Connect to Australia's future - study in the region

CULTURAL AWARENESS



Part 4a

Tips and Strategies for the Asian Region



WHAT ARE THE KEY FEATURES OF ASIAN CULTURES?

Photo: Ivan Ika Putra

The peoples and countries of Asia are diverse in ethnic background, traditions, cultures, belief systems and religions. Not only do Asian countries differ in sociocultural traits, but subgroups within countries often differ as well

A SUMMARY OF KEY CULTURAL INFLUENCES

COMMUNICATION

Cultural norms play an important role in communication. The

setting, context and people communicating will dictate what is deemed as appropriate conversation. In conversations, people may refrain from making critical remarks and favour verbal tentativeness to avoid giving offence. Their body language can be characterised by gestures with the head and a lack of eye contact. Some people are unwilling to use the word "no" even when they actually disagree with others.

BELIEF SYSTEMS

Cultural values and norms embedded in language, religion, philosophy, custom, and social organisations, such as family, are important variables affecting behaviour. Sometimes, the contrast belief systems is profound.

SENSE OF DIGNITY

Individualism tends to be less encouraged in Asia than in other countries. Courtesy is very important in Asia. Being polite and respectful to others is considered essential to maintaining good relationships. Speaking softly and smiling warmly will always help to create positive feelings.

Humility is regarded as an admirable trait in Asia for example by deflecting praise and directing the credit for a good job to someone else. However, the reverse applies to deflecting criticism.

No one likes to be embarrassed or lose dignity in front of other people. But what may constitute an offence differs between cultures. In this context, 'face' refers to the social image, reputation, dignity or honour of a person. Causing someone to 'lose face' diminishes their self-respect among peers while 'saving face' maintains their self-respect.

Sources:

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

- VERBAL TECHNIQUES

The verbal communication style of people in the Asian region tends to be polite, indirect and respectful in order to avoid conflict or confrontation. They will speak respectfully to their elders and those they are not close to. People often exchange opinions or viewpoints through negotiation rather than arguing that their perspective is definitively correct. They rely less on words to convey context and are more attentive to the posture, expression and tone of voice.

**PEOPLE OFTEN EXCHANGE OPINIONS
OR VIEWPOINTS THROUGH
NEGOTIATION RATHER THAN
ARGUMENT**

Greetings

In Asia respect is paramount, so in a greeting use the title and/or name as introduced until invited to do otherwise.

Politeness

As a guest in any foreign country, being polite should always take precedence. Senior people and those with titles and guests are given special respect.

Where hierarchical language structures require the expression of respect and acknowledgement of status in almost every communication, the words 'please' and 'thank you' are used less often. The word for 'thank you' might be applied once in a transaction.

Across the Indian Subcontinent and in Central Asia, within families where duties and obligations towards each other are inherent in family roles, the use of 'please' can be suggestive of begging a family member to do something for you, rather than asking.

Getting to the point

A person will tend to start their story or explanation with historical context, the chain of events and their consequences, building up slowly to the main point of their story.

Their listening style will usually match this, so they will tend to focus more towards the end of another person's message as it builds up to the main point, paying less attention to what is said at the beginning.

Select words carefully

People tend to choose words that maintain the relationship and minimise conflict, embarrassment, or loss of face.

Getting to the point

A person will tend to start their story or explanation with historical context, the chain of events and their consequences, building up slowly to the main point of their story.

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Communication Style: Indirectness Vs Directness

In many Asian countries directness is perceived as blunt, rude and uncouth.

Communication Style: Direct Vs Indirect

In many Asian countries a more circular and indirect style of communication is used.

Indirectness is valued and recognised as polite behaviour.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION



- NON-VERBAL TECHNIQUES



One of the key areas where you can be challenged when working across cultures is in relation to culturally different non-verbal behaviour. Non-verbal behaviour is even more significant in high-context/indirect cultures such as in the Asian region.

Non-verbal messages are either communicated intentionally or subconsciously. People in Asia often rely on facial expressions, posture, and hand movements to communicate. If in doubt, be respectful, wait, and watch what others are doing.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS!



Pointing and beckoning

People prefer to point with a fully open hand rather than a finger, and beckon with the palm down.

Touching

Men and women who are not related generally do not touch each other, and men and women who are related will rarely touch in public.

Across the Indian Subcontinent and in Central Asia, men will often be seen holding hands in public.

Personal space

People prefer to stand much closer together. If you step back to create more space, they will probably step towards you to close the gap. The belief is that wide personal space indicates a cool, detached attitude, whereas close personal space indicates the desire to connect and build rapport.

No apology is expected when people bump into each other.

Table and eating manners

The most senior host starts eating first.

In Japan slurping noodles is acceptable but not encouraged in Thailand and parts of China.

In certain parts of India and China burping after a meal can be a sign of appreciation and satiety.

Some Asian countries use chopsticks when eating.

Don't pass food with your chopsticks to another person's chopsticks because this is how the bone ashes are transferred to an urn or bone pot.

In the Philippines, Cambodia, Korea and Thailand finishing all the food on your plate may indicate that your host didn't provide you with enough food and in many cases, your host will continue to serve you each time you clear your plate and drink your entire beverage.

Eye contact

Direct eye contact is avoided when speaking to someone with higher status, and between men and women who are not related.

Heads

In Buddhist countries, the head is considered to be sacred and touching the top of it is highly insulting, even for a child.

In India and Sri Lanka, people shake their head to indicate agreement.

Feet and shoes

Shoes are often removed before entering homes and places of worship. Feet are not to be pointed at people or religious figures.

Nose blowing

Nose blowing is considered disgusting in public, especially at a dinner table in Japan, China or South Korea. You can leave the table and blow your nose in the rest room or in an area where no diners can see or hear you.

In Japan, China or South Korea use tissues (not handkerchiefs) and dispose of them.

Smiling and laughing

In Thailand, people will often smile or laugh to express a wide range of feelings, including embarrassment and apology.

In Japan, women will often cover their mouths when they smile or laugh, and only laugh quietly.

Giving and receiving

In China, Japan and Vietnam, people often give and receive with two hands.

In Korea, people often give with the right hand, while the left hand supports the right forearm.

In India and predominantly Muslim countries, the left hand is not used for giving and receiving, or for eating food.

Vocal volume

In Japan and the Philippines, quiet voices indicate respect and deference.

In the Philippines, a person presenting in an average sized room of approximately 20 people is expected to use a microphone.

Business Cards

Business cards are a 'piece', or 'gift' of self from the person handing it out. You will notice the reverence that is used when offering the card and you should copy this level of respect. You should carefully acknowledge the receipt of the card with both hands and read the card. Place in the pocket of your jacket not anywhere in trousers. Do not write on business cards.

When presenting your business card, hand it over with both hands, holding the corners of the card between the thumb and index finger of each hand. If you have a translated business card, ensure the local language faces upward.

Sources:

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Acknowledgment: This advice was prepared with the assistance of the [SBS Cultural Atlas](#).

Where can I learn more about my host country's culture?



The Cultural Atlas is an educational resource providing comprehensive information on the cultural background of Australia's migrant populations. The aim is to improve social cohesion and promote inclusion in an increasingly culturally diverse society.

<https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/>