



# East Asian Culture in the Workplace: China, Japan, Korea, & Taiwan

“It is not possible to learn everything about every cultural group in the workplace. Among Indians alone one may find some hundreds of cultures. However, it is possible to develop cultural sensitivity to the culturally diverse workforce, both on individual and organizational levels.”

—Raymond Selvaraj, in *The Challenges of Being Different: The Perspective of an Asian Immigrant on Cultural Diversity in the Workplace*, <http://www.nceta.flinders.edu.au/pdf/proceedings2002/selvaraj.pdf>

## The Basics

Cross-cultural communication takes some effort because you cannot rely on shared assumptions, values, and beliefs as much when you are trying to figure out what someone from another culture wants to communicate. Also, although differences in food, clothing, and native language are very obvious, these shared assumptions, values, and beliefs are often hidden and may take some time to discern. The rewards of gaining new perspectives, challenging your problem solving skills, and becoming more flexible, though, make the effort worthwhile. In any cross-cultural communication situation, there are some basics to remember:

- Don't leap to conclusions, and avoid using stereotypes to make judgments.
- Be patient and tolerate ambiguity and complexity.
- Be willing to take risks and make mistakes.
- Be adaptable with your expectations and your work-style.
- Actively pursue learning about the differences between cultures.

## Culture Facts

The cultural information below is based on generalizations about particular Asian cultures. These guidelines may be accurate about the typical behavior of a culture as a whole, but individuals choose to follow or not follow certain cultural norms based on their personalities. Also, culture is always changing, and people living abroad adapt to the culture they are living in to differing degrees. REMEMBER TO FOCUS ON THE INDIVIDUAL!

### What Many Asian Cultures Have in Common

- A Harmony-Oriented Culture: Most Asian cultures value balance, harmony, and order. The establishment and maintenance of personal relationships are of deep significance in Asia. This is related to living in a collectivist culture. It also means that personal modesty is highly valued, and boasting about individual accomplishments may seem rude.
- A Hierarchy-Oriented Culture: Asian cultures often value social stratification and accept differing degrees of power, status, and authority. For this reason, it is important for them to respect older people, or those who have been on the job longer. As part of this, admitting that you do not understand an explanation could be seen as an insult to the one explaining, especially if that person is higher in the social or work hierarchy. Staying silent may be better for maintaining harmony and respecting the hierarchy.
- A Collectivist Culture: Asians tend to identify themselves as part of a larger whole, and they expect or reinforce the subordination of individual interests to those of the group. This also helps to maintain harmony. Receiving an individualized compliment may be embarrassing because the group and not the individual should take credit.

## What Most Asian Cultures Have in Common (continued)

- **A Deductive-Oriented Culture:** Asian cultures tend to emphasize the importance of abstract thinking and the reality of ideas, moral values, and the principles that can be derived from them.
- **Indirect communication style:** On the whole, Asians are indirect and self-controlled in their communication style. They avoid open conflict, discussion of conflicts, and the overt expression of anger. Because of this, using a conflict mediator can be a good solution. Also, some Asians may consider showing much emotion at work to be inappropriate. This does not mean, though, that the feelings are not there. Keep in mind that people with more direct styles will often not even realize when an indirect communicator is trying to tell them that there is a problem.
- **A cooperative rather than competitive view:** Rather than working in competition with one another, Asians tend to prefer working as a group, sharing information or breaking up a task. To maintain harmony, they also may choose to work to gain a consensus before a decision is made, rather than letting the majority rule and getting support for a decision afterwards.
- **Body Language:** Body language is not universal and can be very different from culture to culture. However, for most Asians, direct eye contact may be seen as rude. Also, laughter and smiles can signal embarrassment, discomfort, or confusion.

## Some Country-Specific Cultural Details

### Japanese employees may...

- Prefer a greater distance between people talking than many in the U.S.
- Not care to receive advice except from close friends and family.
- Apologize often to be polite, especially for inconveniencing others.
- Use praise to show kindness and not mean they approve.
- Tolerate longer periods of silence than most in the U.S. When you ask a question, you may want to count to at least 10 in your head before further pursuing an answer.



### Taiwanese employees may...

- Seem shy in groups, but more extroverted one-on-one.
- Find nervous habits such as pen twirling and tapping to be a sign of immaturity.
- Have an English first name.
- Not find it rude to talk about salaries and the cost of purchased items.

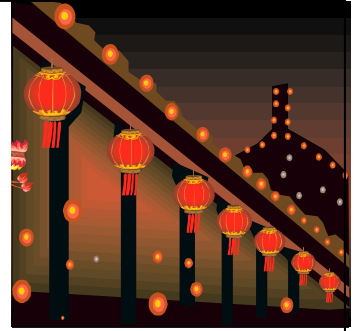
### Korean employees may...

- Avoid discussing politics and religion to reduce conflict.
- Typically bow or shake hands when greeting each other.
- Not look their superiors in the eye, because doing so is considered rude.
- Show respect to their superiors or the elderly by conforming to them and their wishes.
- Often remain silent even if they do not understand. Koreans believe it is better to remain silent than to encourage conflict.



## Chinese employees may...

- Not bow, unlike Koreans or the Japanese.
- Believe loud, opinionated people have nothing of value to say.
- Prefer to avoid talking about governmental policies or Taiwan.
- Not want to lead risky projects or voice controversial opinions. This is partly due to a desire to maintain harmony.
- Highly value written language. They may write using a lot of imagery and metaphors, or find it hard to critique the value of a text. They may have difficulty taking plagiarism seriously since Chinese students may have been rewarded for copying good texts word for word.



## Effective Communication Tips

- Avoid using jargon, slang, idiomatic expressions, contractions, and colloquialisms unless you know the listener will understand their meaning. Rephrase misunderstood statements using different vocabulary, shorter sentences, and different word orders.
- Avoid long sentences, double negatives, and negative wording. Avoid asking questions with negatives in them. These sentence types take longer to process, and they are harder to respond to succinctly.
- Assist others to acquire and improve their language skills. Be open to answering questions, and be a patient listener. Help with corrections when asked or when you notice a pattern of errors. People's intelligence is often unjustly judged based on their language ability, so be kind when trying to help with corrections.
- If the speaker seems to be having trouble understanding you, enunciate more clearly, speak more slowly, or try to use a standard accent.
- Invite feedback on the clarity of your speech. Check for understanding by asking for a summary of what you said, not by asking if the listener understood you.
- Do not expect "yes" to always mean yes. Do not expect to hear "no" as the only way to say *no*.
- Work on building relationships with your employees. This may help you understand more of any indirect communication that occurs, and may make them feel more valued.
- Encourage employees to take greater personal responsibility and work more independently. Openly discuss who will be blamed if there is a problem and what the consequences will be for everyone involved.
- Do not criticize or praise your employees directly in front of others. Remember that being direct with someone who highly values indirectness may lead to offending someone unintentionally.
- Encourage employees to talk about work conflicts with you directly or through a mediator. Reassure them by explaining what will happen if they come to you with a problem or suggestion. Otherwise, you may never hear about what is bothering someone.
- If someone seems to be suffering from severe culture shock or depression, be sensitive about the person's feelings. Everyone who chooses to go abroad experiences culture shock to some degree. It may be necessary to explain that seeking help from a counselor is not shameful, and will be confidential.

## Conversational Puzzles

These conversation examples by Craig Storti ([Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide](#)) can be used for discussion with your co-workers.

### ◆ The Deadline

Carol: How's the research project coming along, Yang?  
Yang: Fine, fine.  
Carol: Are we still on schedule?  
Yang: Oh yes. We're working extra hard on this.  
Carol: Great. I'm anxious to see the results.  
Yang: Of course. When are you expecting to see them?  
Carol: By the end of the week, like we agreed.  
Yang: I see.

*Is the research still on schedule? Does Yang really not know when the deadline is?*

### ◆ A Question

Theresa: That was an excellent presentation. You and Dr. Nagai must have worked very hard on this.  
Miss Yoshikawa: I was very honored to be asked by Dr. Nagai to assist him on this project. He was my thesis advisor, you know.  
Theresa: Well, you were very good. He's lucky to have found you. I had a question about a point you made at the end.  
Miss Yoshikawa: Yes, of course. Let me just get Dr. Nagai.  
Theresa: Oh, don't bother him; he's talking to some other people. Anyway, it's about a point that you made.  
Miss Yoshikawa: I see. Can I get you some tea?

*Will Miss Yoshikawa answer Theresa's question? Why does she insist on getting Dr. Nagai?*

## For More Information, or for Workplace Specific Help...

- Contact the Cultural Linguistic Services: 120 USB, The University of Iowa

Jane Gressang, Language and Culture Specialist, jane-gressang@uiowa.edu, 319-335-5822, Spanish and some Mandarin

Yousun Shin, Language Consultant, yousun-shin@uiowa.edu, 319-335-2461, Korean

Viviane Diamitani, Language Consultant, viviane-diamitani@uiowa.edu, 319-335-2461, French and Ewe

- Try the SkillSoft class "The Impact of Culture on Communication": <https://login.uiowa.edu/uip/login.page?service=http://web-farm3.its.uiowa.edu/skillsoft/>
- Read [Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide](#) by Craig Storti, 1999, Intercultural Press. (Available in Books 24/7 after you login to SkillSoft.)