

Diversity Tip Sheet

Southeast Asian Culture: An Overview

History

Southeast Asian refugees began coming to the United States in large numbers around 1975, prompted by two major events. In Cambodia, the brutal Khmer Rouge (meaning Red Khmer, i.e. Communist Cambodians) took over the country and ruled from 1975-1979. It is estimated that about half of Cambodia's population was either murdered by Pol Pot's vicious regime or died of disease and malnutrition because of the government's oppressive policies.

At the same time, the Vietnam War ended, with the North Vietnamese taking over Vietnam and the Pathet Lao taking over Laos. Those who had fought alongside the U.S. became targets of the Communist governments, especially the Hmong, a people group with their own language and culture who lived mainly in the mountains of Laos. Known as fierce fighters, many of the Hmong collaborated with the U.S. during the war.

Thousands upon thousands of refugees fled Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, often walking for months through the jungles to seek safety and survival in refugee camps in Thailand. Although most had hoped to return home when the political situation improved, as the Communist regimes became only more entrenched, many found new homes in other countries. About 40,000 Southeast Asians came to Minnesota at this time.

Religion

Buddhism has been the major religious influence in Southeast Asia, and though often mixed with elements of other religions, has exerted a profound influence on Southeast Asian cultures (with the exception of the Hmong). Buddhist values that have shaped the Southeast Asian way of life include temperance, patience, endurance, nonviolence, passivity, and a strong belief in the inevitability of fate.

Vietnamese: Syncretistic religious practices combining ancestor worship, components of Buddhism and Taoism, and animism (belief in spirits). Catholic influence is also present.

Cambodian and Lao: 99% practice Buddhism, generally combined with animism.

Hmong: About half of Hmong are Christian, while the other half practice animism and ancestor worship.

Take Note

Every culture encompasses a spectrum of people, and regional and individual expressions of that culture may vary widely. Below are some generalizations about Southeast Asian cultural values that may help you better understand and relate to you coworkers from these countries. Keep in mind, however, that not every Southeast Asian person will subscribe to all of these values, and the degree of influence these principles wield will vary from person to person. In addition, most Southeast Asian immigrants have been in the United States for many years now, with the younger generation having been born on American soil, and American cultural mores are exerting an increasing influence.

Values

In addition to Buddhist value, Southeast Asian cultures are generally characterized by a number of other principles:

- Saving face is a powerful force in most Asian cultures, affecting communication styles, conflict resolution, management styles, and much more.
- The group is generally considered more important than individual. Individual incentive and achievement are not as highly valued as they are in American culture, and may be sacrificed for the benefit of the group, be it family, business, or community. Southeast Asian employees may be more productive if they have the opportunity to work as a group.
- Southeast Asians in general and the Vietnamese in particular are characterized by a strong respect for education.
- Responsibility for the extended family has a profound impact on Southeast Asian society. The family serves as social security, and the younger generations are expected to care for their parents and grandparents.
- The Southeast Asian view of time is more flexible than in Western cultures.
- Sharing food is a central aspect of relationship building, whether it be a meal or simply a glass of water.
- The feet are considered the lowest part of the body, and the head the most sacred. Touching another person's head is taboo, and touching something or even pointing at it with your foot is offensive, as is putting your feet up on a table.
- Public display of affection is considered inappropriate in traditional Southeast Asian cultures. Although two people of the opposite sex holding hands is generally looked down on, two men or two women holding hands is perfectly appropriate.

Communication

- Direct eye contact is considered disrespectful, especially with an elder or superior. Americans may perceive an unwillingness to make direct eye contact as dishonesty or evasiveness, whereas it is simply a sign of respect and a deeply ingrained habit.
- Speaking or laughing loudly in public is considered impolite in most Southeast Asian cultures, particularly for women.
- Southeast Asians often smile or laugh in situations that Americans consider inappropriate. In American culture, smiles and laughter are generally limited to expressing happiness in humor. To Asians, a smile or laugh may communicate many things—scorn, pleasure, indifference, embarrassment, awkwardness, or disapproval.
- The value placed on saving face results in a style of communication that is more indirect than the typical American style. For example, a Southeast Asian may be unwilling to express a negative opinion, even when asked for it. If a Southeast Asian employee seems to be having a problem, but tells you that everything is fine, try sending a go-between to ask again. They may be more willing to discuss the issue with someone who is neither a superior nor directly involved in the situation, knowing that they will pass the message on to you.
- Public praise and criticism can both be embarrassing, and it is better to express both one-on-one.

Naming

Although immigrant who have been in the United States for many years often follow Western naming order and protocol in public, they may continue to follow tradition at home or in their own communities. Below is a summary of naming traditions for each culture:

Vietnamese

Family name + Middle name + Given name

People call only close friends by their given name. Using the given name of a superior is taboo, and young people will generally address others using a title rather than a name, e.g. Little Sister, Uncle, Teacher, Doctor, etc. The wife keeps her own family name after marriage, while children take the father's family name. About half of all Vietnamese share the family name Nguyen.

Cambodian

Family name + Given name

Formal address: A Cambodian man is addressed as Mr. + Given name.

A Cambodian woman is addressed as Miss/Mrs. + Family name + Given name

Young people generally call their elders by titles: Aunt, Uncle, Grandma, or Grandpa. The wife takes her husband's name after marriage, but may still be called by her maiden name informally.

Continued...

Naming, Cont.

Lao

First name + Last name

Formal address: Mr./Mrs. + First name

The wife takes her husband's name after marriage, but may still be called by her maiden name informally.

Hmong

Clan name + Given name

There are only 14 common clan names. Women keep their family names after marriage.

Resources

Want to learn more about your Southeast Asian friends and coworkers? Here are some great books to get you started. All books are available at Rochester Public Library.

- **First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers**, by Loung Ung. The harrowing story of one Cambodian family's survival during the brutal rule of the Khmer Rouge. Winner of the National Book Award.
- **Lucky Child**, by Loung Ung. This sequel to *First They Killed My Father* follows the author's journey on her escape from Cambodia to her new home in Vermont.
- **Where the Orange Blooms**, by Thomas Taylor. The story of an interpreter who worked for the U.S. military during the Vietnam War and later immigrated to Montana. A breathtaking account of war, tragedy, prison, escape, and freedom, rich in cultural detail.
- **Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives**, by James Freeman. Fourteen Vietnamese refugees speak about their fight for survival, their escape from the oppressive Communist regime, and their struggles to adjust to life in the U.S.
- **The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down**, by Anne Fadiman. The story of a Hmong child with severe epilepsy, and the cultural clashes that ensued when her family sought treatment in the American medical system. A compassionate account full of insight into the Hmong way of life.