



Asia

Best practice guidelines

Definitions

'**Asian ethnicity**' is an umbrella term referring to the broad range of **ethnic groups** originating from the continent of Asia. Ethnic groups are socially defined groups that are unified by shared factors such as, but not limited to, ancestry, history, language, culture and customs.

Asian ethnicity can be used as a term to collectively describe all of these ethnic groups. However, it should not be used to generalise them into a homogeneous category. Doing so would ignore and erase the nuances and differences of each ethnic group, and insinuate that they are interchangeable.

Furthermore, the term Asian ethnicity can be used to specifically talk about particular regions of Asia (i.e. Southeast Asian ethnicity). Due to the immense size of Asia, it is often more useful to refer to these regions than the entire continent, in order to respect and acknowledge the nuances between different cultures within Asia.

If possible, it is always best to refer to a specific ethnic group. Even if the cultures of a particular region appear to have similarities, they are still not interchangeable.

Asian diasporas

The term '**Asian diaspora**' refers to people of Asian ethnicity who live outside of the country that their ethnic group is associated with. For example, someone of Japanese ethnicity who lives outside Japan is a member of the Japanese diaspora. This includes people of Asian descent who were born in other countries.

By virtue of living amongst other cultures and societal values, and having new traditions formed as a result of these cultures and values, members of Asian diasporas have a different perspective concerning their Asian identities than those who live in that ethnic group's associated country. These differing perspectives are equally important to consider when creating content about a particular ethnicity.



Note that, without establishing which diaspora is being talked about, the word 'diaspora' on its own refers specifically to the Jewish diaspora.

Stereotypes and tropes

Due to the vast amount of ethnic groups in Asia, there is no concise way to explain what to avoid in regards to each group. For this reason, hiring a consultant or a sensitivity reader is strongly advised.

In the interest of providing a middle ground, the following section describes some common terms and actions to avoid. These terms particularly concern East Asian ethnicities, and how the relative prevalence of East Asian cultures, especially Japanese and Chinese cultures, in Western media hurts other regions of Asia in turn.

The terms '**oriental**' and '**the orient**' should be avoided—especially when describing people—as it is a term that not only generalises the cultures and people of the entirety of Asia into a single set of stereotypes, but also dehumanises and fetishises these disparate ethnicities and countries into an exotic and mysterious east. Furthermore, the image of Asia that is associated with this term is usually one of East Asia, usually a harmful blend of Japan and China, rather than the whole continent.

The term '**yellow fever**' describes those with a fetishistic preference towards people of East Asian ethnicity when considering romantic and/or sexual partners. When people attracted to women—especially straight white cis men—use it to describe themselves, it is probable that they also believe the racist and misogynistic stereotype that Asian women are more submissive than women of other ethnicities. Furthermore, the term itself is offensive, as it plays off the racist notion that people of East Asian ethnicity have yellow skin. (Incidentally, yellow fever is also a real disease that can result in serious illness or death.)

The term '**yellowface**' refers to when non-East Asian people portray East Asian characters, usually with the help of makeup and other face enhancing techniques, such as facial tape. As implied by its name, yellowface relies on stereotypes associated with East Asian ethnicities including, but not limited to, yellow skin, slanted eyes, and an accent that generally borrows from stereotypes of native Japanese and/or Chinese speakers when they speak English. The act is dehumanising, and often highlights a racist unwillingness to cast people with Asian ethnicity in the roles of Asian characters.

Comments which could be understood as **colourism** should be avoided. Colourism is discrimination on the basis of skin colour (as opposed to **racism** which is based on the concept of **race**) and can be

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prevalent in many Asian and Asian diaspora communities. This can take the form of people of a lighter skin tone to be considered of higher standing and/or being in a position of privilege to those of a darker skin tone—all within the same overarching ethnic group. Statements about a person's skin colour in general should be avoided, but in particular, statements such as 'You are so light/dark for a [ethnicity],' can be particularly problematic. Similarly, in practice, it should not be assumed that someone of a particular ethnicity needs to have a certain skin tone in order to be portrayed as such.

In professional settings, it is advisable to avoid discussing events relating to and/or following the Second World War, as well as the impact of colonialism in various Asian nations, in addition to other contentious geopolitical topics (see below where regions of Asia are discussed in detail). Avoid conflating individuals with the actions of their nation-state of origin, and seek guidance from a consultant with lived experience when needed.

Overall, it is best to avoid making general, sweeping statements and assumptions about Asia and those of Asian ethnicity. Asia is a highly diverse collection of ethnicities, cultures, and communities, with a rich and complex intertwined history. Countries such as India and China are home to dozens of separate ethnicities, religions, and cultural communities, while many Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia are home to Asian diaspora from other parts of Asia, which combine with the local culture to form further unique communities. What may be best practice for a specific group may not be applicable to those from even the same country, and thus utilising consultants and those with specific lived experience with the community in question is highly recommended.

Major regions of Asia

The following section will cover broad, general information on the major regions of Asia, the culture, geopolitics, and history of each region, the impact of colonialism, information on diaspora communities, and specific things to avoid for each region.

East Asia

East Asia refers to the eastern part of the Asian continent. Major countries/states include China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, North Korea and South Korea, and surrounding countries. Major languages include Mandarin and Cantonese (Traditional Chinese/Simplified Chinese), Japanese, Korean, and various other regional dialects. Major religions include traditional religions pertaining to each region such as Shintoism in Japan, and Chinese folk religions, as well as Buddhism.



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Most East Asian households prefer to remove shoes prior to entering the home. East Asian households typically eat with chopsticks, though chopstick and dining etiquette varies between countries.

East Asian history and geopolitics

Modern day East Asian countries share an interconnected, at times conflicted history with neighbouring countries. The region's historical context continues to influence modern geopolitics. At time of writing, China continues to have tense relationships with the nations/states of Taiwan, Tibet, and Hong Kong. Internally, the Uyghur minority have faced state-sanctioned persecution. Japan also continues to have tense relationships with both North/South Korea as well as China following on from the events of the Second World War.

Colonialism in East Asia

Japan held a number of colonies in East Asia from the beginning of the 20th century up until the end of the Second World War. This included modern day South Korea, Taiwan, and South Sakhalin (now part of Russia) prior to World War 2, and expanded to include several areas in mainland China and Southeast Asia during the war. After the war, these territories faced a range of conflicts as a result of the ensuing power struggle such as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Japan's imperial history continues to be a point of contention in East Asian and Southeast Asian geopolitics.

East Asian diaspora communities

East Asian diaspora communities are widely distributed throughout the world. Chinese diaspora make up large populations in many countries of Southeast Asia, as well as the United States, Canada, and Australia. Japanese diaspora are prominent in Brazil, the United States, Australia, and many south-east Asian nations. Korean diaspora have significant populations in the United States, China, and Japan.

East Asia: Actions to avoid

Given the complexity of the region's history and geopolitics, any topics relating to the Second World War and any subsequent geopolitical tension should be avoided. Absolutely do not conflate private citizens with the actions of their nation-state of origin and any other comments which would alienate the individual.

Try to engage with their specific cultural background as opposed to 'East Asian' or 'Asian' culture more broadly, as each specific region has its own unique culture. Because of its vast geographical size, individuals from China can be highly diverse depending on their specific region of origin; thus, it is recommended to engage with their specific culture as opposed to 'Chinese' culture more broadly.

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South Asia

South Asia, also known as the Subcontinent or the Indian Subcontinent, covers the southern region of Asia. Major countries include India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Major languages include Hindi, Urdu, Bangla/Bengali, Tamil, English, and various other regional dialects. Major religions include Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Christianity.

South Asian food is typically eaten by hand (specifically the right hand) and shoes are removed before entering the house. Because Muslims do not eat pork, and Hindus either do not eat beef or are vegetarian, depending on the region in South Asia in question, specific foods may not be readily available.

South Asian history and geopolitics

Like East Asia, South Asian countries also share an interconnected history and modern geopolitics. Countries of South Asia have a long history of colonisation and occupation by various forces from Europe and prior to that, the Middle East, and the modern nation-states/republics as we know them today were established as recently as 1971 (Bangladesh) and 1972 (Sri Lanka). A range of conflicts have taken place across South Asian nations in gaining independence from their colonial occupiers. At time of writing, India continues to have a tense relationship with neighbouring Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as internal conflict relating to the marginalisation of Muslims in India and relationship with the Hindu majority. There is also ongoing tension between China and India, in particular in relation to the Nepalese border and Tibet. The Rohingya people of Myanmar have also faced state sanctioned persecution over the past several years, resulting in significant numbers of refugees in neighbouring countries.

Colonialism in South Asia

Modern day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar were British colonies during the 19th century and prior, then known as the British Indian Empire. The region as a whole was progressively seceded, initially as semi independent Dominions under the British Empire, and then subsequently full independence as republics. Major events over this period include the Partition of Bengal in 1905, the Burmese (Myanmar) Separation from British India in 1937, the Sri Lankan independence movement throughout the early 20th century, the Partition of India in 1947, and the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

South Asian diaspora communities

There are numerous South Asian diaspora communities throughout the world. Common locations include the United States, the United Kingdom, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Diaspora communities are generally specific to the region of origin (i.e. Indian diaspora, Sri Lankan diaspora etc) given the great diversity in cultures, languages, and religions.

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South Asia: Actions to avoid

Comments relating to the region under colonial rule, as well as the subsequent independence movements and conflict between neighbouring nations should be avoided. Given the diversity of the region, we once again recommend that you avoid trying to broadly generalise 'South Asian' culture and instead try to engage with the culture of specific regions and countries. This also applies to the entire country of India, which, like China, has significant diversity between its different regions. Some cultural nuances may also be driven by the individual's religion as opposed to their specific country of origin.

Colourism, as outlined earlier in this guide, is particularly prevalent in South Asia. It manifests in many ways, including backhanded compliments about skin tone, media representation of fair-skinned people, and blatant advertising of skin-lightening products and procedures.

Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia refers to the various nations in the Southeastern part of the Asian continent, many of which are coastal and/or island nations in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Major countries include Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. Major languages include Mandarin, Malay, Indonesian, Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese, and English. Major religions include Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

Depending on the region, Southeast Asians can eat with their hands, chopsticks, or cutlery (generally forks and spoons). The cuisine has various influences from South Asia, East Asia, and the various European nations which once colonised the region. There are generally options for both Muslim and Hindu dietary restrictions. Shoes are typically removed when entering the house.

Southeast Asian history and geopolitics

Southeast Asia has a unique cultural context of being influenced by both the indigenous population as well as aspects of both East Asian culture and South Asian culture. While the region has a long colonial history, most countries now enjoy independence. The region is used as a major trading and business gateway worldwide.

It is significant to note the Cambodian genocide of 1975–1979, which still has far-reaching effects on the Khmer people and Khmer diasporas globally. During this time, 1.5 to 2 million people were killed, approximately a quarter of Cambodia's population at the time. This genocide, which occurred during the radical push towards communism in the region, was supported by the Chinese Communist Party. This



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genocide led to a number of refugees fleeing Cambodia for neighbouring countries like Thailand and Vietnam.

Colonialism in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia has a long colonial history: from Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms from the beginning of the common era to the spread of Islam in the 8th century, to the subsequent colonisation of modern day Vietnam by China, European colonies of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), French Indochina (now Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), and British Straits Settlements (now Malaysia and Singapore). This was followed by many of these regions being occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War before various independence movements such as the Indonesian National Revolution and Vietnam War.

Southeast Asian diaspora communities

Southeast Asian diaspora are common around the world. Large populations of Malaysian diaspora are present in countries such as Singapore, Bangladesh, and Australia. Indonesian diaspora are common in Malaysia, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, and Singapore. Vietnamese diaspora are common in the United States, Cambodia, and France. Filipino diaspora are common in the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Japan.

Southeast Asia: Actions to avoid

Avoid topics relating to the Second World War, the Vietnam War, and colonial rule more broadly. Once again, Southeast Asian regions are quite diverse and so it is recommended that you engage directly with the specific culture or country in question. It is also not advisable to discuss the Cambodian genocide without hiring a consultant of the Khmer diaspora, due to its ongoing effects on survivors and their kin.

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