

Cultural Patterns and Processes

AP Human Geography

Introduction to Culture

Culture 文化 is the shared set of beliefs, values, practices, and objects of a group of people. Geographers split it into two parts:

- **Material culture** 物质文化 — the things people make and use (clothing, tools, food, buildings, art).
- **Nonmaterial culture** 非物质文化 — the ideas people hold (language, religion, values, rules).

A **cultural trait** 文化特征 is a single element of culture (using chopsticks); a group of linked traits is a **cultural complex**. **Cultural relativism** 文化相对论 is the practice of judging a culture by its own standards rather than your own.



Chinatown signs: culture is shared practices, values and symbols that people learn and pass on

Cultural Landscapes

The **cultural landscape** 文化景观 is the visible imprint of human activity on the land — buildings, farms, roads, signs, and monuments. It records the values of the people who made it.

- **Sequent occupance** 承继占用 is the idea that each group who lives in a place leaves a layer on the landscape, so the landscape shows its whole history.
- **Ethnic enclaves** 族裔聚居区, religious buildings, and language on signs are all readable clues to who lives there and what they value.



A Chinatown gate in Seattle: the architecture and bilingual signs mark an ethnic enclave, a clear imprint of one group on the cultural landscape

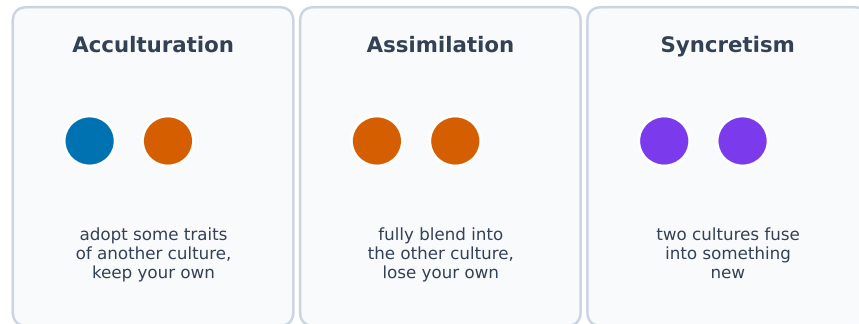


Chinatown street signs: cultural landscapes and diffusion leave lasting patterns in cities

Cultural Patterns

Cultures spread across space in patterns. Key ideas:

- **Centripetal forces** 向心力 pull a group together (a shared language or religion); **centrifugal forces** 离心力 push it apart.
- **Acculturation** 文化适应 (adopting some traits of another culture while keeping your own), **assimilation** 同化 (fully blending into another culture), and **syncretism** 融合 (two cultures blending into something new) describe how cultures change on contact.
- A **lingua franca** 通用语 is a common language used between groups who speak different first languages.



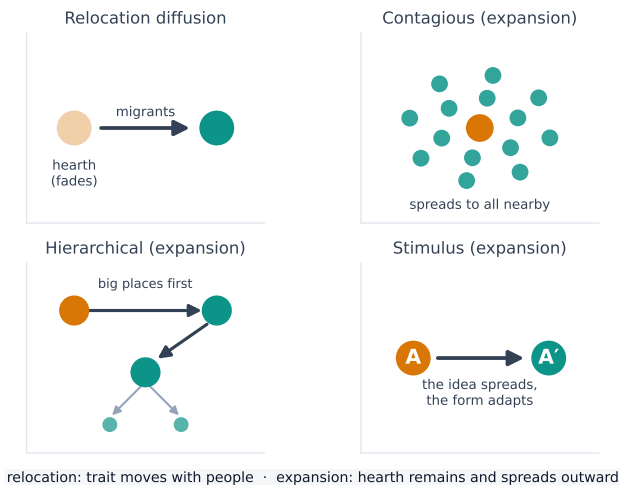
AP HuG · U3 · Three outcomes when two cultures meet

Acculturation keeps your own culture, assimilation replaces it, and syncretism blends both into something new

Worked example (a real AP exam question). “Explain how food preferences can be a culture trait.” (2023) A full-mark answer: “Many dishes use ingredients or ways of cooking that are unique to one culture group — for example a national dish — so choosing and eating that food expresses belonging to the group, which is what makes it a culture trait.” The command word **Explain** needs a link, not a definition: connect the food preference **to** the idea of a shared culture. Simply listing foods earns zero.

Types of Diffusion

Diffusion 扩散 is the spread of a cultural trait from its **hearth** 源地 (place of origin) to new areas. There are two big families.



Relocation diffusion moves with migrants; expansion diffusion spreads outward while staying at the source

- **Relocation diffusion** 迁移扩散 — the trait moves as **people migrate**, so it appears in the new place but may fade at the source.
- **Expansion diffusion** 扩展扩散 — the trait spreads outward while **staying strong at the source**. It has three types:
 - **Contagious** 传染扩散 — spreads person-to-person to nearby people (like a viral video).
 - **Hierarchical** 等级扩散 — jumps from big, important places to other big places first (a fashion from major cities).
 - **Stimulus** 刺激扩散 — the underlying idea spreads even if the exact trait changes (a global brand adapting its menu locally).

Causes of Diffusion

Diffusion has both **historical** and **contemporary** causes.

- **Historical:** **colonialism** 殖民主义, **imperialism** 帝国主义, trade, and the spread of religion carried culture across the world for centuries.
- **Contemporary:** **globalisation** 全球化, the internet, transport, and **time-space compression** speed diffusion up enormously — a trend can now spread worldwide in hours.

These forces can spread culture but also threaten local traditions, raising debates about a global culture versus local identity.

Diffusion of Religion and Language

Religions and languages are the two clearest examples of cultural diffusion.

- **Universalising religions** 普世宗教 (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism) actively seek converts and spread widely by expansion and relocation diffusion. **Ethnic religions** 民族宗教 (Hinduism, Judaism) are tied to one group and spread mainly by relocation.
- Languages belong to **language families** 语系; they spread with migration and trade, and can split into **dialects** 方言 or die out as speakers switch to a dominant language.

Effects of Diffusion

When cultures spread and meet, several outcomes follow:

- **Cultural convergence** 文化趋同 — cultures become more alike as they share traits (global brands, English online).
- **Cultural divergence** 文化分化 — a culture becomes more distinct, often to resist outside influence.
- Diffusion can enrich a place with new food, music, and ideas, but can also erode local languages and traditions — a central tension of a globalising world.

Exam tips

- Distinguish **relocation diffusion** (people move) from **expansion diffusion** (the idea spreads and stays at its source).
- Name the expansion sub-type precisely: **contagious**, **hierarchical**, or **stimulus**.
- Separate **universalizing religions** (seek converts) from **ethnic religions** (spread mainly by birth).
- Use the **cultural landscape** — architecture, **toponyms**, **sequent occupance** — as evidence of past groups.
- For effects, keep **acculturation**, **assimilation**, and **syncretism** distinct; they are not the same.