

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.



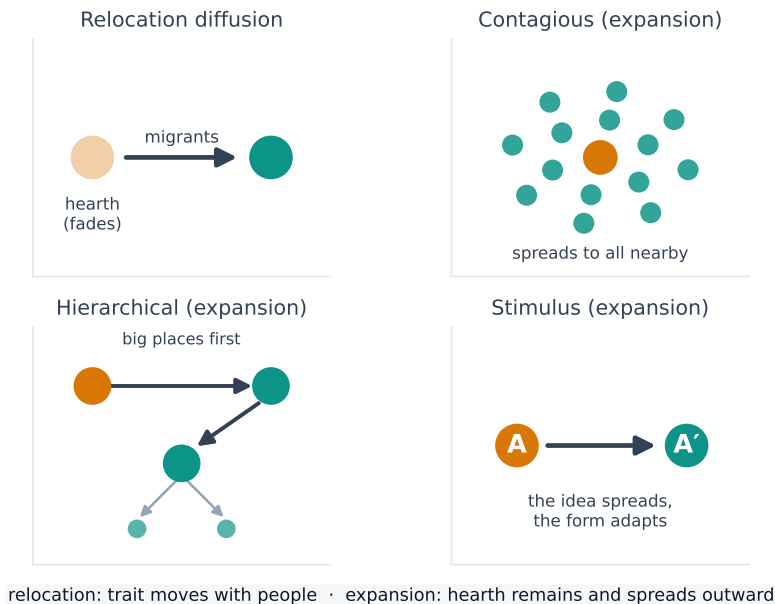
AP HuG · U3 · Three outcomes when two cultures meet

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.