



IN ASIAN COUNTRIES, DO YOU SHAKE, BOW OR NOD?

Hopefully, you'll get some answers here

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Just when you thought you understood the basic protocol of meeting and greeting people in business or social situations, someone comes along and takes a closer look some of the most popular Asian destinations for expatriates and business travelers. You may need a scorecard, so stay with me!

First, let me provide some background information. In the Oriental philosophy, bowing is a method of saying hello as well as for showing respect. In some Asian countries (such as Korea), traditionally men never shake hands with women, they bow and the women nod in return. This is done so there is no close contact with the woman. In Japan, the lower you bow the more respect you show. The reason for bowing originated in the ancient dynasties. You knelt down and bowed to the leader to show your respect, you would never shake his hand. In current business situations, of course, the Asian business people shake hands as they follow the west. However, it is wise to be aware of the customs that preceded these situations, and be respectful of them.

Let's talk about the background of a handshake for a moment. Given that the right hand was customarily the stronger one and if your right hand was busy greeting someone, it could not be holding a weapon. So the gesture was meant to say, "I trust you," or "Look, I'm not carrying a threatening weapon." Shaking hands is also a gesture of equality. We shake hands to signify making a deal. It can mean "We agree, and we trust each other."

Traditional greetings in Asian countries do not involve touching the other person, but they do involve the hands. The traditional Chinese greeting is done by putting the right hand over the left and bowing slightly. Muslims give a 'salaam,' where they touch their heart, mouth and forehead. Hindus join their hands and bow their heads in respect. In all of these examples, the hands are busy with the greeting and, therefore, cannot hold a weapon.

By the 21st century, we find that the handshake is quickly becoming the universal greeting in business situations, but in some Asian countries even that had to be modified. In places like Korea and Japan, people had been taught as children that handshakes should be gentle but firm and that direct eye contact should be avoided as a sign of respect. Now to conform to Western standards, they learn a "firm handshake, direct eye contact" approach! Singaporeans always use a firm handshake; in Taiwan, handshakes had formerly only been reserved for friends; and in China, although shaking hands has become increasingly more popular, they may still nod or bow (by the way, the Chinese bow from the shoulders rather than the waist as the Japanese do).

We haven't touched on women in business. Another completely different set of rules, perhaps! In many Asian countries, Western men will not find women in positions that will require their presence at business meetings or functions. The answers here lie in whether the woman is Asian or Western as to what the protocol is. Safest thing to do: Western men, wait for an Asian woman to extend her hand; Western women, smile and nod at Asian men and women!

The bottom line is, as much as we think Asian countries should have many customs in common, each has its own unique and special way of communicating a greeting.