

Chinese customs and etiquette

Report by Gido Brouns, Anko van Kreij and Xander Steinmann
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Meeting people

Introducing yourself

When meeting Chinese people on a formal occasion, foreigners should display sincerity and respect. Handshaking, imported from the West, is generally the accepted form of salutation. But Chinese tend to shake hands very lightly and a handshake can last as long as ten seconds.

While shaking hands is now the standard form of greeting, traditional etiquette calls for making a fist with the left hand, covering it with the right palm, and shaking the hands up and down. Some Chinese still do this, especially with close friends. It is also a formal way of saying thank you.

When the Chinese greet someone, they do not look a person straight in the eyes, but lower their eyes slightly. This is a sign of deference and respect. A visitor should refrain from looking intensely into a person's eyes, as this can make a Chinese person feel uncomfortable.

Conversation topics

Cultural, political and linguistic differences can cause trouble for Chinese and foreigners over the simple matter of small talk. Expect people in China who you don't know well to ask questions concerning personal matters, such as your age or the members of your family. Chinese are often curious about foreigners and their habits, and their questions are usually related to what they consider to be important in life. Often this involves money. For example, a Chinese may ask how much your watch cost, the amount of money you make, what kind of car you have and how much it is worth. It is obviously not polite to tell people that such matters are none of their business. Frank answers are a sign of familiarity and closeness.

Family members can be an important topic of conversation, because Chinese who are getting to know you may evaluate you as the member of a family as much as an individual. Asking Chinese about their families is readily acceptable, and they may go into great detail about the lives of their brothers, sisters, parents and so on.

One area of conversation about which one needs to be particularly sensitive is politics. Avoid criticizing communism, even if the Chinese initiate such talk. Nor should you talk about the Republic of China on Taiwan, although discussion of Taiwan as an economic entity or as a province of China is fine. The Tiananmen tragedy of 1989 is another topic that should be avoided, as are the situation in Tibet and human rights.

Attitude towards foreigners and nationalism

The vast majority of Chinese in China scarcely think of the outside world. Many Chinese have never even seen a foreigner. Foreign guests can expect to be the object of much attention in China. Many Chinese will regard foreigners with a mixture of awe, fear, and curiosity. Chinese often stare at foreigners in wide-eyed wonder. While the Chinese accord foreigners a certain amount of respect, there is also a great pride in Chinese culture and a belief that the Chinese population is the greatest race of people on earth.

Chinese generally consider any Westerner to be rich. This causes respect as well as resentment. The Western ideas about individual freedom are totally alien in the collectivist culture of China. As a result, Chinese often see Western behavior as selfish and uncaring for the common interests of a group. Westerners visiting China should try to behave in ways that cannot be viewed as too self-centered.

China's early exploitation by foreigners is still remembered today. The English are routinely reminded of the abuses they committed during the Opium Wars. However, if the Chinese people had to single out one country for hostile feelings, it would be Japan. During World War II, the Japanese army committed atrocities in China on a grand scale. Although trade and economic cooperation between China and Japan is booming today, in private many Chinese will admit to negative feelings about the Japanese.

Nonverbal communication

In conversation, what is not said can be more important than what is said. Even the seating arrangements can tell you how the Chinese view a certain meeting. Chinese often use body language that can be incomprehensible to unfamiliar Westerners, and some Western body language can be misunderstood. Examples are:

- Holding one's hand up near the face and slightly waving means no, or it can be a mild rebuke.
- Pointing at someone with the forefinger is considered rude or hostile. When you point, use the entire hand, palm open.
- Laughing or smiling among Chinese can be confusing and means different things according to the situation. When nervous or embarrassed, Chinese will smile or laugh

nervously and cover their mouths with their hands. This can for example be in response to an inconvenient request, or a sensitive issue that has been brought up.

Face value, respect, status and prestige

Having face (or *mianzi*) means having a high status and prestige in the eyes of one's peers, and it is a mark of personal dignity. Much of the Chinese obsession with materialism has really to do with gaining face. Chinese are very sensitive to having and maintaining face in all aspects of social and business life.

A person can lose face on his own by not living up to other's expectations, by failing to keep a promise, or by behaving disreputably. In some cases, people may actually want to die because of slights to their face.

The easiest way to cause someone to lose face is to insult the individual or to criticize him or her in front of others. Westerners can offend Chinese unintentionally by making fun of them in the good-natured way that is common among friends in the West.

But just as face can be lost, it can also be given by praising someone for good work in front of peers or superiors or by thanking someone for doing a good job. Giving someone face earns respect and loyalty, and it should be done whenever the situation warrants. You can also save someone's face by helping him to avoid an embarrassing situation.

How Chinese say no and telling what one wants to hear

When asked for a favor, Chinese will usually avoid saying no, as to do so causes embarrassment and loss of face. If a request cannot be met, Chinese may say it is inconvenient or under consideration. This generally means no. Another way of saying no is to ignore a request and pretend it wasn't asked. Sometimes a Chinese will respond to a request by saying: "Yes, but it will be difficult". To a Westerner, this response may seem to be affirmative, but in China it may well mean no or probably not. If a person says yes to a question and follows by making a hissing sound of sucking breath between his teeth, the real answer could be no.

The Chinese also have the habit of telling a person whatever they believe he or she wants to hear, whether or not it is true. They do this as a courtesy, although it can be a real problem. If bad news needs to be told, Chinese will be reluctant to break it.

Gifts

Gifts express friendship and they can symbolize hopes for good future business or appreciation for a favor done. The Chinese consider the Western habit of simply saying thank you for a favor glib and perhaps less than sincere. Foreigners visiting a place of business may present a single large gift to the company as a whole. Gifts to individuals should be of lesser value, in the range of USD 10 to USD 15.

If you are invited to a Chinese person's home, it is courteous to arrive with a small gift. Suitable presents include a basket of fruit, tea, perfume for the wife or toys for the children. They will likely be appreciated. Such presents show that you are concerned about the welfare of the entire family. Foreign liquor is another gift that is much appreciated. French cognac is the most prized, although it can be rather expensive.

It is polite for the recipient to refuse a gift two or three times before finally accepting it. For Westerners, the process can be tricky. If the Chinese person appears embarrassed when he refuses your gift and says that he cannot possibly receive such a nice item, the proper thing to do is to insist that your gift is only a small token and to add that you would be honored if it were accepted. As a rule, after some hesitation, the Chinese will accept the present graciously.

Any gift that you give wrapped to an individual should be wrapped in the traditional lucky colors of gold or red. White and black are considered colors of mourning.

Whatever you do, never give a clock to a Chinese as clock (*zhong*) in both Mandarin and Cantonese sounds like 'end', and to give someone a clock sounds like burying the dead.

How to recognize a genuine invitation to a meal

Chinese people will often invite their friends or acquaintances to a meal when they bump into each other in the street. What confuses Westerners is the difficulty in telling the difference between a genuine invitation and one that is no more than a "Nice seeing you again. Bye now". To avoid embarrassment, refuse a dinner invitation at least a couple of times to test how genuine it is.

Chinese dining

Seating arrangements

A Chinese dinner host will not expect a visitor to know all the traditions associated with a Chinese meal. But the visitor who knows some of them will gain face and give face to his host.

The guest of honor will usually be seated facing the door of entry, directly opposite the host. The next most honored guest will be seated to the left of the guest of honor. If the host has any doubts about the correct order of precedence for his guests, he will seat them on the basis of age.

Dining etiquette

It is the host's responsibility to serve the guests, and at formal banquets people do not begin to eat until the principal host has served a portion to the principal guest. Or, the host may simply raise his chopsticks and announce that eating has begun. After this

point, one may serve oneself any food in any amount, although it is rude to dig around in a dish in search of choice portions. Remember to go slow on eating. Don't fill yourself up when five courses are left to go. To stop eating in the middle of a banquet is rude, and your host may incorrectly think that something has been done to offend you. It is acceptable to spit bones into your bowl or plate or even onto the table, but to fill your bowl to the brim with food is bad manners.

As for meal-time noises, while licking your fingers after eating is considered bad manners, making a crunching noise while eating is alright. So is drinking with a slurping sound, which is actually considered a sign of appreciation. It is alright to belch after a satisfactory meal.

Toothpicks and chopsticks The use of toothpicks at a table is a standard practice. As in most Asian countries, the polite way to deal with lodged fragments of food is to cover one's mouth with one hand while the toothpick is being used with the other. Toothpicks are frequently used between courses as it is believed that the tastes of one course should not be allowed to mar one's enjoyment of the next course.

Toothpicks have another major value. They are ideal, and socially acceptable, for picking up those meal items which often defy the best chopstick approach: slippery button mushrooms and jelly-fish slices.

When eating in China you should pick up the bowl with one hand and use your chopsticks to put the food into your mouth with the other hand. If you want to serve your guests, either use the serving chopsticks or reverse your own chopsticks, showing that you are using the clean ends of the chopsticks.

The socially-acceptable method for eating rice is to bring one's bowl close to one's mouth and quickly scoop the rice into it with one's chopsticks; this is difficult for the foreigner and so simply lifting portions of rice to the mouth from the bowl held in the other hand is perfectly acceptable. Do not attempt to eat rice from a bowl sitting on the table; no one else will!

There are superstitions associated with chopsticks. If you find an uneven pair at your table setting, it means you are going to miss a boat, plane or train. Dropping chopsticks will inevitably bring bad luck, as will laying them across each other.

Drinking Drinking takes an important place in Chinese banquets. Toasting is mandatory, and the drinking of spirits commences only after the host has made a toast at the beginning of the meal. When he says the words *gan bei*, which means bottoms up (literally 'empty glass'), all present should drain their glasses.

In the course of drinking at banquets, it is not unusual for some Chinese to become quite drunk, although vomiting or falling down in public entails loss of face. Many Asians often get drunk sooner, and their faces turn crimson, as if they were blushing.

Dinner conclusion When the last dish is finished, the banquet has officially ended. There is little ceremony involved with its conclusion. The host may ask if you have

eaten your fill, which you undoubtedly will have done. Then the principal host will rise, signalling that the banquet has ended. Generally, the principal host will bid good evening to everyone at the door and stay behind to settle the bill with the restaurateur.

Karaoke

After dinner, a hardy Chinese host may invite you to go singing at a karaoke club. Karaoke clubs began in Japan, but in recent years the craze has spread to all other countries in East Asia. For Chinese, the karaoke phenomenon is a technological extension of their natural desire to sing with close friends. And being a competent singer enhances face, because one's close friends will be watching. Most karaoke clubs have Chinese, Japanese, and English songs. Expect to be forced to sing at least one song when you visit a karaoke. Foreign guests are not expected to sing proficiently, and any attempt to sing will be greeted with much praise and applause.

Why has karaoke become so popular in the collectivist cultures of Asia? One answer is that singing in front of one's peers is one of the very few socially acceptable ways in which an individual can display his or her talent without being branded arrogant or self-centered. If you wish to establish close relations with Chinese, going to karaoke is one of the best ways of doing it. However, some Chinese may regard karaoke as somewhat low-class, so you should avoid mention of karaoke unless you are invited to go.

Some other peculiarities

Spitting and smoking

Clearing your throat and discharging it on the floor or out of the window is perfectly acceptable in China. Everyone does it any time, any place. It's not as bad in summer, but in winter (when many people are afflicted by the notorious China Syndrome) you'll have a hard time keeping out of the crossfire.

A typical Chinese smoker puffs away more than one pack of cigarettes a day. Although the government has made some grumbling about starting an anti-smoking campaign, there is little indication that this is being taken seriously. Nor is such a campaign likely since tax revenues from tobacco sales are a major source of income for the government. It also seems that few are observing the warnings to be careful with cigarettes. In many hotel rooms you can find an impressive number of burns in carpets, sheets and furniture. The Chinese will be offended if you tell them not to smoke. As with drinking hard liquor, smoking in public is largely a male activity.

Teatime traditions: yum cha and dim sum

When in Hong Kong, visitors should do at least one thing that is typically Cantonese: have morning or afternoon tea.

Hong Kong restaurants cater extensively to the territory's seemingly insatiable appetite for tea and snacks. A visit to one of the better-known *dim sum* restaurants will reveal why the Cantonese tradition of *yum cha* endures so well. *Yum cha* literally means 'drinking tea'. After 5,000 years of cultivating tea plants and brewing their leaves and those of other shrubs or herbs, the Chinese can truly be said to have a tea culture. Tea is more than a refreshment in China and Hong Kong. It is a medicine, a tonic, a social stimulant, a way of life.

The Cantonese, like the French, proudly proclaim that they live to eat, not eat to live. It is no coincidence that *dim sum* literally means 'to touch the heart'!

Finger tapping

When you see tea-drinkers tapping the table with three fingers of a hand, do not think it is a superstitious gesture. It is a silent expression of gratitude to the member of the party who has refilled their cup. The gesture recreates a tale of Imperial obeisance.

Joss

On a daily level the Chinese are much less concerned with the high-minded philosophies and asceticism of Buddha, Confucius or Laozi than they are with the pursuit of worldly success, the appeasement of the dead and the spirits and the seeking of hidden knowledge about the future. Of most importance is *joss*, meaning 'luck'. The Chinese are too astute to leave something as important as luck to chance. Gods have to be appeased, bad spirits blown away and sleeping dragons soothed to keep *joss* on your side. For example, no house, wall or shrine is built until a favorable date for the start of construction has been chosen, the most promising location has been selected, gifts have been presented and prayers have been said to satisfy the spirits who might inhabit the future construction site.

Numbers

Numbers play an important role in Chinese life. Most importantly, both in Mandarin and Cantonese, the number of four (*si*) should be avoided because it has a similar sound to the word 'death' (*si*), the only difference being in the tone. This is why you would be wasting your time trying to sell an apartment on the fourth floor or a house at number four in the street. In fact, developers in the West who expect Chinese buyers to be interested will simply not have a fourth floor or an apartment four.

Conversely, the number eight (*ba*) is a lucky number, suggesting fortune and triple eight (*ba ba ba*) is the best. You will often see personalised number plates with '8 8 8' on cars owned by Chinese. At formal gatherings, for instance a dinner party or wedding dinner, each table is usually set for either eight or ten or twelve people, with twelve being the most common.

Chinese New Year

Preparations for the new year often begin during the last month of the lunar year. It is an auspicious occasion, and great detail is taken in its readiness. The home must be cleaned thoroughly. The past year's dirt is swept away, and clutter is straightened out. This is done so that negative aspects of the past year is not brought forward to the new year. New clothes and new shoes are worn to usher in the new year. Special foods are carefully prepared.

On New Year's Eve, family members must return to their parents' home for a special meal together. Various foods are prepared and eaten because of their symbolic significance. The food must be abundant, and some must be left over at the end of the meal. The new year will, therefore, start with plenty. It is hoped that there will be abundance throughout the year.

At new year, people greet each other commonly with the phrase "Gung Hay Fat Choy". In doing so, they are wishing each other congratulations and prosperity.