

## CULTURAL AWARENESS TIPS



*While this is not a complete guide to understanding or working in a different culture, it will assist to make an easier transition and help you to avoid many of the most common cultural gaffs !*

*Remember to ask your host or associates if you are unsure what to do in a particular situation.*

*Watching and learning is imperative to getting along well. Don't ever stop this practice!*

When meeting people in China, handshaking is normal though the handshake may be longer and may not be as firm as a 'Western' style handshake. Kissing and hugging is generally OUT. Back slapping and shoulder squeezing is OK for good friends and acquaintances. Your two hands clasped together in front of you is also a common and formal greeting though become familiar with this action before you employ it.

When giving gifts or Business Cards, ALWAYS give or receive the card or gift with TWO hands (**ALWAYS**). Generally study the business card for a moment to show you are interested in this person. The two hands theme is often used when someone gives you food, tea or other item. If any item is passed with two hands, it is best and safest to receive with two hands. This shows respect and is standard etiquette. Receiving Business Cards etc with one hand is considered rude and disrespectful.

While you may find many things unsavory or disgusting, like spitting and hacking, some things you do may have the same affect here. Chinese people may find it disgusting if you pick your teeth with your finger(s) or insert fingers in your mouth or **lick your fingers** – especially at a restaurant. Avoid this at all cost. Also refrain from picking up dropped items on the floor (food or dropped chopsticks) or even food dropped on the table at a restaurant.

When dining, generally place bones or scraps on a separate plate or dish. Keep the 'rubbish apart from the food'. It is generally acceptable in mid range restaurants to spit bones onto the table, though you may opt to use a separate plate as above.

Your host will generally ensure your teacup or beer glass etc is always full. If pouring tea or other drink, ensure you fill your host and other guest's glasses/cups first. Acknowledge the 'filler' by a few discreet taps on the table with your finger. Watch the locals and follow suit. Many smaller informal restaurants will expect you to rinse you utensils before eating. Follow your hosts /guests till you learn the routine.

Fabric Handkerchiefs are also frowned upon and regarded as very dirty (you use it and then put it back into your pocket/bag !). Best to use tissues and dispose of immediately after use. Blowing your nose in public and especially at the table is not appreciated. When picking your teeth (with toothpicks please) or blowing your nose, be a little discreet.

Chinese people will often allow you to enter or leave an elevator or pass through a door before them. If you have time, reverse the offer OR politely thank the offering person, accept, smile, and move on.

If you are invited to a meal, generally the **INVITER** will pay the bill. You should however offer to pay the bill. Normally this game will go through up to 3 rounds. The same should apply in the reverse. If you INVITE people to a meal, you should pay **regardless** of the battle presented by your guests. They will often go through till the 3 round of arguing who gets the bill until you win. It is NOT advisable to allow your guests to pay just because they put up a good fight for the bill. Insist.

If you are invited to a Chinese home, it is generally advisable to take off your shoes even if they say 'don't worry'. They will usually supply you with 'house slippers'. Remember the streets are quite dirty, so wearing shoes inside is bringing the street filth into their house. They will often have several sets of slippers for different rooms.

**If invited to dinner** etc at a private home, you can take a small gift or fruit/flowers. Small typical gifts from your home country are well appreciated both for personal friends and for business clients or colleagues.

You will rarely find bad food in Chinese restaurants. Most people, who fall ill from food, do so when eating in 'Western' Restaurants. Most Chinese foods are cooked at very high temperatures and of course the chefs know how to handle Chinese produce. They may not be so familiar with many Western products (Dairy etc) or with the Western styles of preparation. You will rarely be served raw foods in China, and if unsure, refrain from eating uncooked foods.

Don't be afraid to try new foods and new places to eat, especially the smaller restaurants. You may miss out on some great experiences. What you may be indifferent to at first, may become your favorite dish !

**Shopping.** Many shops and markets require you to bargain and negotiate. The rough rule in the markets is to start a counter offer at about 30% of their first offer though each location is different. Many newer shops have fixed prices. If you make an offer, you are generally obliged to carry through at that offer.

Again - don't be afraid to go shopping in local stores for everyday items. Make it fun.

**Taxis** can often be a challenge re: fares in certain cities. You can cut a fixed rate deal before your trip i.e. Airport to Shekou ~ 80rmb OR work off the meter. Make sure at least the meter is on. If you do not ensure the meter is on, the driver may request a high fee or stop in the middle of a freeway. If in trouble, make it look like you are writing down the Taxi and driver number or you CAN call the complaint line which should be in the Taxi. It sometimes pays to record the Taxi number anyway in case you forget or lose items in the taxi.

**Tipping** is neither standard nor expected in most service businesses. Sometimes you may find it appropriate to leave a small tip at a restaurant, hairdresser or massage person if you were happy with the service.

Chinese people may be very **curious** and ask many questions, some of which may be 'too personal' or intrusive in your terms i.e. asking how much money you have or earn. Find simple polite standard replies to such questions ex: QUESTION "How much do you earn"? ANSWER "Not Enough" !

If you get into a **conflict**, best to try to find a simple easy solution rather than take the conflict to an elevated level. Get help with a translator or experienced person to resolve until you have spent enough time in country to thoroughly understand the predicament.

You will need to understand that the '**decision making**' process in China maybe very different to most expectations. What may appear to be a simple decision for you - may not be simple for your Chinese counterpart because higher permission will probably be needed before the decision can be made. This can even be the case for a Chinese Manager who has to report to a higher level. This may not be apparent to you, and probably will not be explained to you.

Take the good with the bad and remember you are a guest in China. In general you will be treated with respect and in a polite manner. Try not take this most frequent polite behavior for granted, and be sure to continue to thank people for polite gestures. Don't let the occasional bad experience spoil your attitude or experience, this can happen anywhere in the world and maybe more likely in your own country. Remember the amount of contacts you will have with people here is greatly multiplied due to the immense population, hence the chance of you having to deal with more experiences, situations etc is guaranteed.

There are many **beggars in China** like most other countries. Some are genuine people in need but the vast majority are Con Artists, usually noted for their apparel of: head band, bamboo stick, contrived limp or injury, beggars bowl and pushy attitude. They will often work in troupes often with a small child, so be aware and best to ignore them or give a firm NO and walk on !

**Do NOT write peoples names with a RED Pen !!!** In general it is best NOT to use Red Pen at all in China unless you are a Mathematics Teacher. It is considered impolite and generally reserved for criminals including those scheduled for execution. This can be seriously offensive.

Buying watches or clocks for older people is also a bad omen.

Many Chinese are superstitious, especially the southerners. **In China the Number '4' is considered unlucky** while other numbers such as 6,7,and especially 8 have good luck related to them in different ways. As such - often the 4<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> etc Floors of a building will be renamed 3A, 13A etc or just completely skipped.

**To 'Lose Face' in China is a BAD thing ! Avoid ever causing** anyone to '*Lose face*' as it may be unforgivable. In general this means to embarrass, criticize publicly, or ridicule someone's professional ability, especially in public - would be good examples of causing someone to '*lose face*'. Giving face on the other hand, is a GOOD thing ! This would be giving praise or compliments in front of their superiors, or doing a good deed which makes the individual look good or well connected etc.

Most positions abroad will be in locations and countries that will be vastly different to your own. Learn to enjoy the differences and avoid constant comparisons of 'How things are at home'.

**There is nothing more boring than someone who constantly complains or compares** the new location or working environment - to his or her home country work situation.

**OF COURSE IT WILL BE DIFFERENT.**

**Learn as much as you can about the location,** culture and people before and after you arrive. If you can pick up some of the language earlier in your project, this will allow for better contact and relationships with local working people. Appreciate the differences and get out and amongst the local environment. Always respect your host country citizens, as you are the foreigner. Many of us take it for granted that fact that the locals are making the effort to speak our language and to accommodate our needs. Behave like a guest rather than a brash wise tourist, and you will enjoy a more pleasant stay.