

Ten Things Never to Do in China

This article may save you from certain embarrassment and possibly even outright humiliation one day. It gives you ten important tips on what not to do if you really want to win friends and make a good impression with your Chinese acquaintances. Take these tips to heart.

Never accept a compliment graciously

You may find yourself at a loss for words when you compliment a Chinese host on a wonderful meal, and you get in response, "No, no, the food was really horrible." You hear the same thing when you tell a Chinese parent how smart or handsome his son is — he meets the compliment with a rebuff of "No, he's really stupid" or "He's not good looking at all." These people aren't being nasty . . . just humble and polite. Moral of the story here: Feign humility, even if it kills you! A little less boasting and fewer self-congratulatory remarks go a long way towards scoring cultural sensitivity points with the Chinese.

Never make someone lose face

The worst thing you can possibly do to Chinese acquaintances is publicly humiliate or otherwise embarrass them. Doing so makes them lose face. Don't point out a mistake in front of others or yell at someone.

The good news is that you can actually help someone gain face by complimenting them and giving credit where credit is due. Do this whenever the opportunity arises. Your graciousness is much appreciated.

Never get angry in public

Public displays of anger are frowned upon by the Chinese and are most uncomfortable for them to deal with — especially if the people getting angry are foreign tourists, for example. This goes right along with making someone (usually the Chinese host) lose face, which you should avoid at all costs. The Chinese place a premium on group harmony, so foreigners should try to swallow hard, be polite, and cope privately.

Never address people by their first names first

Chinese people have first and last names like everyone else. However, in China, the last name always comes first. The family (and the collective in general) always takes precedence over the individual. Joe Smith in Minnesota is known as Smith Joe (or the equivalent) in Shanghai. If a man is introduced to you as Lî Míng, you can safely refer to him as Mr. Lî (not Mr. Míng).

Unlike people in the West, the Chinese don't feel very comfortable calling each other by their first names. Only family members and a few close friends ever refer to the man above, for example, as simply "Míng." They may, however, add the prefix *lão* (laow; old) or *xiào* (shyaow; young) before the family name to show familiarity and closeness. *Lão Lî* (Old Lî) may refer to his younger friend as *Xiào Chén* (Young Chén).

Never take food with the wrong end of your chopsticks

The next time you gather around a dinner table with a Chinese host, you may discover that serving spoons for the many communal dishes are non-existent. This is because everyone serves themselves (or others) by turning their chopsticks upside

down to take food from the main dishes before putting the food on the individual plates.

Never drink alcohol without first offering a toast

Chinese banquets include eight to ten courses of food and plenty of alcohol. Sometimes you drink rice wine, and sometimes you drink industrial strength Máo Tái, known to put a foreigner or two under the table in no time. One way to slow the drinking is to observe Chinese etiquette by always offering a toast to the host or someone else at the table before taking a sip yourself. This not only prevents you from drinking too much too quickly, but also shows your gratitude toward the host and your regard for the other guests. If someone toasts you with a "gân bçi," (gahn bay) however, watch out.

Gân bçi means "bottoms up," and you may be expected to drink the whole drink rather quickly. Don't worry. You can always say "**shuí yì**" (shway ee; as you wish) in return and take just a little sip instead.

Never let someone else pay the bill without fighting for it

Most Westerners are stunned the first time they witness the many fairly chaotic, noisy scenes at the end of a Chinese restaurant meal. The time to pay the bill has come and everyone is simply doing what they're expected to do — fight to be the one to pay it. The Chinese consider it good manners to vociferously and strenuously attempt to wrest the bill out of the very hands of whoever happens to have it. This may go on, back and forth, for a good few minutes, until someone "wins" and pays the bill. The gesture of being eager and willing to pay is always appreciated.

Never show up empty handed

Gifts are exchanged frequently between the Chinese, and not just on special occasions. If you have dinner in someone's house to meet a prospective business partner or for any other pre-arranged meeting, both parties commonly exchange gifts as small tokens of friendship and good will. Westerners are often surprised at the number of gifts the Chinese hosts give. The general rule of thumb is to bring many little (gender non-specific) gifts when you travel to China. You never know when you'll meet someone who wants to present you with a special memento, so you should arrive with your own as well.

Never accept food, drinks, or gifts without first refusing a few times

No self-respecting guests immediately accept whatever may be offered to them in someone's home. No matter how much they may be eager to accept the food, drink, or gift, proper Chinese etiquette prevents them from doing anything that makes them appear greedy or eager to receive it, so be sure to politely refuse a couple of times.

Never take the first "No, thank you" literally

Chinese people automatically refuse food or drinks several times — even if they really feel hungry or thirsty. Never take the first "No, thank you" literally. Even if they say it once or twice, offer it again. A good guest is supposed to refuse at least once, but a good host is also supposed to make the offer at least twice.