

## Chinese Etiquette

Take a bow, at the waist with people older than you, but only a slight nod of the head with younger folks. Use two hands. Don't cross your chopsticks. Cover your shot glass when you drink it. Don't point. And for the love of Confucius, don't write anything in **red**. The list of what to do and what not to do is a long one, but don't let it get you down – with a few helpful pointers you'll be able to stand your ground in the myriad of Chinese'isms.



These rules, and many others, are all just a day in the Chinese life. How you address yourself and others, what you do at the dinner table, even how low you bow and how many hands you use to pass an object are all part of a tradition that runs deep in China's Confucian roots. To a Westerner, some of these customs may seem bafflingly pointless or hard to remember, but take it all in as part of your Chinese adventure. It's

important to respect the local culture of any foreign country you visit, especially in your workplace. Once you make an effort to adhere to the traditions, you might not only find it fun, but that it smoothes out your transition to life in China. If you can't remember all these tips off the bat, don't worry! Folks in China are proud of their heritage and culture, and will be more than happy to teach you the ins and outs of their etiquette. Remember to keep your eyes open and feel free to ask the locals about the new customs you observe.

You'll learn a slew of etiquette tips from your coworkers when you first arrive, so here are just a few things to get you started:

**Chinese Hierarchy 101:** From saying "hello," to giving gifts, or knowing who picks up the coffee after lunch, Chinese people depend strongly on **hierarchy** to determine how to act with each other. In Western cultures, your boss is considered your authority, yet he/she is still approachable; in China, your director/principal is treated almost like royalty. You'll also quickly realize that the oldest members of society, regardless of vocation, are treated with the greatest respect—you'll never see drivers honking at old ladies crossing in the middle of the street. Don't be too suspicious when your coworkers ask your age right off the bat, they're just fitting you into the pyramid. You probably won't know your coworkers' ages for a while (unless you ask), so it's a good rule of thumb to treat all of them as if they were older than you.

But what does this all mean? Great question!

**Respect your elders (and your bosses):** Showing respect to those who deserve it in Chinese society is crucial to everyday life. When you say hello, take a bow:

- When you meet someone for the first time, it is best to be introduced by a third person or your host instead of introducing yourself.
  - The formal bow: Plant your feet together, straighten your legs, keep your hands to your sides and bend at the waist. Avoid direct eye contact as a sign of respect.
  - The informal bow: Just nod slightly and slowly once, and smile.
- The formality of your bow depends on the level of authority of the person you are greeting. You might be amused when your students feel confused between bowing to you and waving hello; all you have to do is acknowledge their greeting with a slight head nod.
- East meets West: After bowing, a Chinese person will typically shake a foreigner's hand as well.
- While you're at it, take another bow! A bow is a typical gesture when leaving a conversation or location, or as a means of saying "thank you."

When addressing each other, Chinese people will add the person's profession or title along with their name, i.e., Teacher Chen, Pastor Li, Director Zhang. You'll notice that your students will add "teacher" to your name as well.

**The first day at school:** It's your first day of work! Be dressed to impress—conservatively, of course. Women must cover up both their legs and shoulders (think knee-length skirts or dress pants, and no tank tops) at work. Men should stick to button-down, long-sleeved shirts. When you give or receive something, use two hands. Your school will probably have you change into special slippers at the door. They'll prepare a pair for you, but if they're too small have someone go shop for some with you.

**Don't point at me! (and other oddities):**

- When pointing or signaling, use your entire hand, not one finger or a chopstick. Pointing with one finger is offensive.
- It is highly offensive to touch a person's head, even if the person is a child. The head is considered the most respected part of the body. Touching someone's head in China communicates you treating them like a dog... yikes!
- When you gesture a person or student to come to you, do so with your palm down instead of up. Complete the "come here" motion with your palm facing the ground, and bring your fingers in toward your body. Animals are beckoned with the palm up.

**Modest conversation:** Talk softly and politely, and you probably won't get into trouble.

- It is typically not recommended to bring up sensitive topics such as the Chinese Revolution, communism, religion or politics when you first meet someone. Wait until you have established a friendship.
- Don't criticize someone in front of others. If you have a problem, have a private word with the person. Modesty and humility are high values in Chinese culture.
- Although you will notice Chinese people doing this at some point, it is generally considered rude to speak loudly on the subway or buses, especially while talking on the phone.

**At the dinner table:** Sharing a meal with Chinese people gives you one of the best insights into their culture. Meals arranged outside of working hours often take quite a while to finish, as it is a very social event.

- As with most things in a culture with Confucian heritage, it is important to let the eldest person in the group to sit down first and start eating first. The eldest should also be the first to stand up after the meal is finished. To be safe, just wait to be told where to sit.
- Traditionally, Chinese people believe that sharing from one bowl or dish creates a closer relationship. Food is often shared from the **lazy susan** in the center of the table. Dishes are given for the entire table to share instead of individual plates.
- If the dishes come out one at a time or if there is some special delicacy, they are typically served to the guest of honor first (depending on the meal, you might be the guest of honor) and then rotated clockwise around the table on the lazy susan. The host will often wait to serve himself last.
- Dishes should come with **servng chopsticks** (*gongkuai*) – it is considered rude and unhygienic to use your personal chopsticks to serve out of the dishes on the lazy susan.

### Chopsticks

- When you hear the elder say "Let's eat," **only then** should you pick up your chopsticks and begin eating the meal.
- Keep your chopsticks uncrossed when they are not being used.

***Expatriate Voices:** "Your first meal out with Chinese friends or coworkers might freak you out, but expectations are surprisingly low! If you can't remember all the etiquette, just follow my system. **1.** Watch the head honcho carefully (not creepily) and do what he/she does a couple seconds after he/she does. If he/she eats, wait and then follow. **2.** Practice getting good with chopsticks. If you are good with chopsticks, Chinese people assume you can handle Chinese etiquette authoritatively as well. **3.** Say **shee-shee** (thank you) perfectly and frequently. If you can do all these things at your first meal, you'll impress everyone at the table."*

*-Tayler, Shenzhen*

- It's considered rude to point with your chopsticks. Or stir your food with them. Or stick them in your rice (a Chinese funeral ritual).
- Apart from soup, all dishes should be eaten with chopsticks. Start practicing your chopstick skills soon, as most places do not have forks available.

### Toasting

- Don't be surprised if the head of the table makes a toast, and if they do, get ready to stand up.
- Avoid filling your own glass! Someone else at the table will fill your glass if it is empty. It is most polite to pick up the glass and hold it with two hands as they fill it up. If you notice another person's glass is empty, especially if they are older, it is polite to offer to fill it. When filling another person's glass, you should also use two hands as you pour.
- Make sure to use the appropriate glass for each beverage. Do not put beer or alcohol into your tea glass. If you want water, you'll probably have to ask for it, as tea is the Chinese drink of choice.

### The Bill

- You do not need to tip at the vast majority of Chinese restaurants and if you try the waiter or waitress may chase after you thinking you forgot your money.
- While dining with a group of Chinese people it is typical for one person to pay the entire bill. This is often the oldest person at the table, or if you're with your colleagues, your boss.
- Sometimes there will be a "fighting to pay the bill" when the bill comes. This refers to friendly 'bickering' or 'arguing' (in the most positive sense) over who pays the bill. This is considered very good manners. Most Chinese people know that if there is no fighting for the bill, your manners are sub-par.
- The most senior person will pay the bill. Just make sure you offer to pay, and put up a little "fight."

### Other Restaurant Tips

- You'll find that floor-seating restaurants require you to remove your shoes. Don't wear your shoes inside a Chinese household, either.
- Dishes are always presented in the middle of the table, usually on a spinning lazy susan.
- Dishes should typically not be removed from the lazy susan and placed on the table: at most, one should hold the dish aloft while serving and then return it to its place on the tray.

Have no fear; you'll be a savvy, cross-cultural expert in no time. If you think of an etiquette tip that we didn't cover, we'd love to hear your thoughts!