



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme



CHINESE  
FOR EUROPEANS  
欧洲人学中文

# CHINA

## Things To Know Before You Go



Children |



Students |



Business people |



Tourists



## Preface

Whenever you go to a country or meet people from that country, you always come across things that are different. They eat different things, they have different ideas about time, politeness, how to respect someone, what is important in life. Quite naturally, and in spite of knowing that all citizens of one country do not all behave in the same way, we make generalisations from what we see and experience. It helps us make sense of new environments and gives us clues about how to behave. Here is a brief overview of some of the things you may experience when visiting China or when talking with Chinese people. Clearly not everyone will behave as described, but most will have been brought up in an environment where what we describe is a normal part of social life. What is important is to read this with an open mind and to use this information as a starting point for exploring the riches of China and its culture.



## Some Brief Background

### BASIC MODULE |

**China is the third biggest country in the world – after Russia and Canada – and the biggest country of Asia. The territory of approximately 9.600.000 square kilometres is inhabited by more than 1.300.000.000 of people.**

Cities in China are often very large. According to The official blue book published in 2009 by the Chinese Social Science Academy reports that up to 2008 there are 118 cities with a population over 1 million and 4 cities over 10 million. The most populated cities are Chongqing around 29.190.000 in 2011, Shanghai 23.470.000 in 2011, followed by Beijing 20.180.000 in 2011, The region of Hong Kong is inhabited “only” by around 7.071.576 people.

The country was named China by foreigners. The Chinese traditionally call it the Middle Kingdom (Zhongguo). In the past the Chinese indeed regarded their country the centre of the world. Today, Chinese people are still very proud of their nation and its culture. If you criticise China to a Chinese, he or she may feel personally very offended. So as with any travel to another country, it is wise to keep critical opinions to yourself. This is particularly the case with subjects that have generated criticism of China in the West, such as the one child policy and human rights. Steer clear of the three T’s – Tibet, Taiwan and Tiananmen – as well.

According to official Chinese government information there are 56 different ethnic groups living in China. The vast majority (more than 90%) are Han Chinese, leaving 55 minority groups living all over the country. The Chinese government is concerned to maintain the identity of these groups and as a consequence of this, the groups are not subject to population control legislation.

According to a survey by Purdu University carried out in 2007 more than a half of Chinese citizens claim to be atheist. The Cultural Revolution had a great influence on this. However, believers of almost every religion –

**Taoism,  
Buddhism,  
Islam, Judaism,**  
can be found in China.



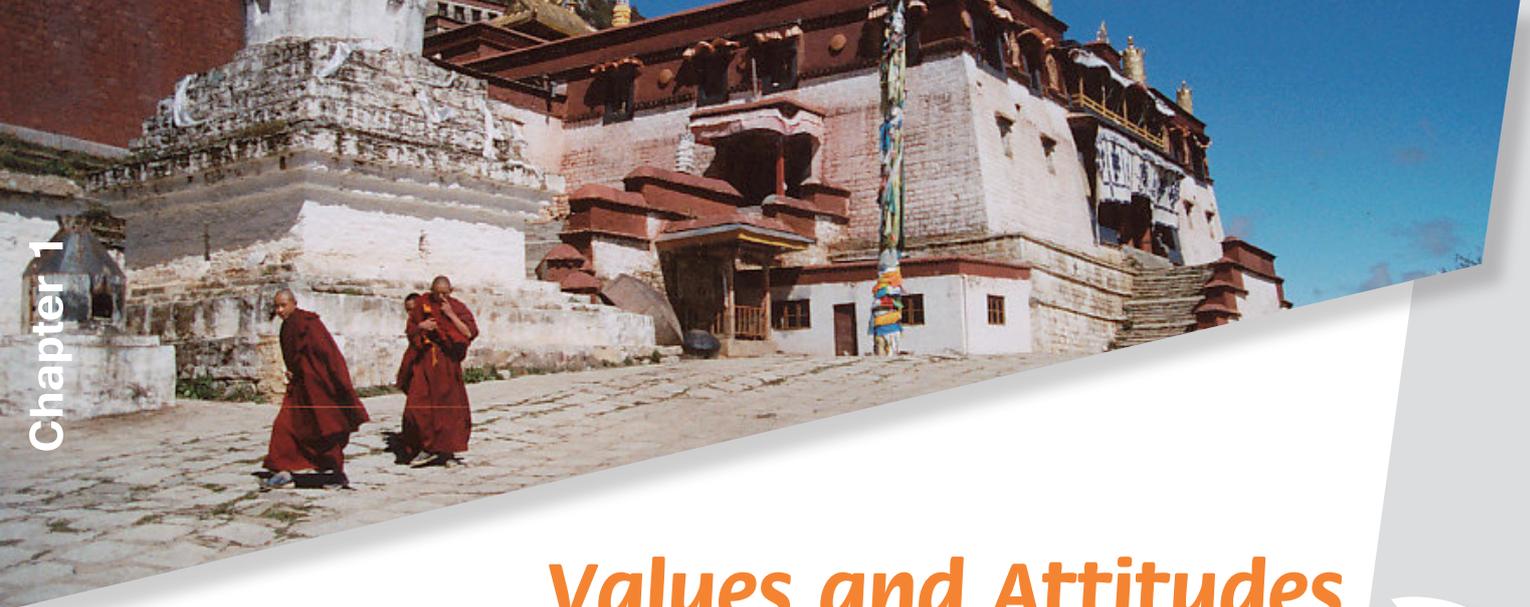
# Ethnic Communities

BASIC MODULE |



An individualistic attitude to every human being is often seen as typical for the western culture. In China people are brought up in the belief that the community comes first – its welfare is more important than individual happiness. Thus, Chinese people often do what others do, think what others think and make decisions collectively. After all, if everyone is doing something in a particular way it must make sense. Harmony within a group is the main value. Consequently, standing out from the crowd, which is seen as positive in the west, is viewed negatively in China. There is acknowledgement that this is changing. The younger generation tends to be more individualist, although the sense of loyalty to family, to company and to country is still very strong.





# Values and Attitudes

BASIC MODULE |

Chinese people regard the principles of Taoism and Confucianism as fundamental to their culture and these are still cherished today. These traditional values are essentially concerned with striving for harmony with the surrounding world, self-acceptance, as well as the Confucian five virtues of propriety, wisdom, faithfulness, righteousness and humanity.

The most important thing for a Chinese is to „save face“. This can be identified with the western concepts of dignity, honour and reputation. Someone who „keeps his own face“ and helps the others to keep their face is a respectable person. For a Chinese „loosing face“ is a tragedy. It may result in the breakdown of a relationship. Therefore it is important to make sure that conversations run smoothly. Direct criticism, particularly of a person’s point of view could well result in loss of face and destroy a potential friendship or business relationship.



Traditionally, the Chinese hate showing off. They value modesty and courtesy is understood as underestimating oneself, which is more or less equal to western forms of modesty. A Chinese would always underestimate himself and emphasize the status of those around him. When he hears a compliment he would say it is exaggerated and he doesn’t deserve it.

Respect for tradition is very important in Chinese life. This is not surprising since some Chinese traditions have lasted uninterrupted for thousands of years. Chinese people are conscious of how important their contribution to the development of world civilisation is. Indeed, what would humanity do without paper, pasta, porcelain, the decimal system, umbrellas, silk, compasses, barrows, printing, gun powder, tea, toothbrushes and... toilet paper?





# Children in China

## CHILDREN MODULE |

**In China children are adored. They are not seen as separate beings, but as descendants – progeny of the line. A Chinese is inseparably and for life, bound with a family that loves and accepts, but also gets involved in everything and knows about everything**



.....  
In China usually the grandparents take care of a baby. Children are traditionally carried in arms or on the back of adults for much longer than is usually the case in the West. They also often sleep in their parents room for much longer than in Western homes. Some believe that it is this carrying that gives rise to the spirit of collectivity so prevalent in Chinese society.

Since the late 1970s, with the gradual introduction of the ‘one child policy’, the average Chinese family raises only one child, although this policy is now beginning to be relaxed. Partly this has to do with increase in wealth. Parents can now afford to bring up two children and some can pay the fines that are sometimes imposed for having a second child. The child is the centre of the family – they call them ‘little emperors’ - and even in families which are not very wealthy parents strive to provide the best for their children. Some say they are incredibly indulged.





# Children in China

## CHILDREN MODULE |

A small Chinese does not have much free time. Chinese parents think that too much free time has a negative effect on learning results. In time away from studies, children may fly kites, practice kung-fu, play table tennis or badminton or other outdoor activities. Parents see this as part of the child’s overall development.

Loving Chinese parents care mainly for the development of their child. A young Chinese is meant to be hard working and to strive for excellence. The parents are supposed to equip their offspring with skills that can be useful in adulthood. Just as in many countries wasting time either on television, or on video games is considered wrong, though the younger generation is becoming more internet friendly.



Traditionally a Chinese mother does not care much about her child’s self-esteem. Her discontent with the results of her child’s work is expressed frankly and bluntly. She also does not go into raptures about everything a child is doing – some things are obvious and do not need to be rewarded. True achievements are admired by the whole family. Recently, however, this is becoming a cause for debate in Chinese media.



.....  
**Parenting puts great emphasis on the traditional virtue of “dong shi”, in other words, teaching a child to behave appropriately to the situation at any time and without admonishments. Children should be thoughtful and mature, in the first place caring about others and in the next place about themselves. Young man should also predict the needs of others.**





# Education

## STUDENTS MODULE |

Education is treated extremely seriously – it takes priority over all other things. Chinese have high hopes of their children and consequently strive to achieve them. From the very early age children get used to competition and working hard for the highest grades.

Learning is mainly based on memory practice. From an early age in order to write, a young Chinese has to remember a large number of characters. So it is quite understandable that memory practice is an important feature of the education system.

In China, teachers are treated with great respect. It is considered to be rude to call them directly by their name. The normal way to call them is by surname and the word 'teacher'. So if you have a teacher called Mrs Wang, you would call her Wang Lao Shi (Wang 'teacher').

Apart from *dong shi* there is also the virtue of “*zheng jing*”, or propriety. A young Chinese should be faithful, honourable, virtuous, righteous, and obedient. In no way should they stray from the accepted norms.

In China education starts at the age of 3, and so does almost an obligation to make the family proud through good results. An “A minus” could be a family

tragedy. School grades that are not satisfactory, lead to hours of additional exercises at home, according to the rule that “practice makes perfect”.

Chinese children are very hard-working – they spend hours with books and most of them attend extra classes chosen by their parents. These are often English lessons, playing musical instruments, swimming and other physical exercise.



# Education

## STUDENTS MODULE |

There are three levels to the school system - elementary, middle and high school before taking exams to move on to university.

The university exam is called “a higher exam” (Gao kao) and is carried out in June each year in each province. It lasts for 3 days and includes maths, Chinese language, a foreign language and an additional subject for which varies according to the major a prospective student wishes to apply.

**In China in 2011 there were 2429 approved state and private universities. This number does not include military universities nor universities in Hong Kong or Macau. (In China no distinction is made between colleges and universities) Around 34.000.000 people study at Chinese universities at the moment. After 4 years students usually receive a bachelor’s degree. To obtain a Masters often requires a further 2 or 3 years of study. PhDs normally take 3 – 5 years.**

Although many young Chinese attend university (in 2011 78.7% of all school leavers had the opportunity to go to university)\*, selection for the top universities is very tough. Sometimes it requires being a province top student to be admitted to a top university. The competition is tough and sometimes a fraction of a point may decide if a student is admitted or not. Some universities now operate their own entrance examinations on top the “Gao Kao”, or as a direct entrance test.





# Education

## STUDENTS MODULE |

The Chinese eagerly invite students from abroad. Apart from a desire to share knowledge and experiences, the international profile of a university will be enhanced through exchanges with, and visits from, overseas students.

Most of Chinese students live on campus. They live in dorms, where rooms almost always shared. A student may find themselves sharing with as many as 8 in the room, though more often there will be 6 or 4. At postgraduate level you may expect 2 students to a room. International students usually do not live together with Chinese students.

In China higher education is not free. Even state schools charge tuition fees. For an average Chinese family it is a large expense. Still, children's education is a priority for every family. Even at the cost of great sacrifices parents and grandparents save money for their grandchild's education. Education is seen as the pathway to prosperity and a good job.

"Become a doctor, an engineer, or a businessman" - these are the wishes of Chinese parents. These professions are seen as prestigious. One of the reasons they have such status is because they require many years of education and lifelong learning.

Although certain professions such as those connected with literature, languages or art were not as highly valued as science, medicine, or law, nowadays if someone is able to earn a good living with these skills, then this is seen as positive. Parents are still concerned, though about how stable their children's career will be.





# Travel and Tourism

## TOURISTS MODULE |

**A European travelling to China will contact a different world, still the one with friendly people, clean hotels, with no danger of theft. China is a relatively safe country for a tourist. It is such a big country that to get a feel of it you have to travel around. Bear in mind that not only foreigners, but literally millions of Chinese also like to travel.**

Some times of the year – particularly national holidays - get booked up early. At the Spring Festival most Chinese make the journey back to their home town and the transport system gets so full you might think that there is no space for anyone. Cities themselves, once the province of bicycles are now full of cars and traffic jams are commonplace.



### Air travel

There are now an increasing number of relatively cheap carriers that can ferry you from one region of China to the next. Flights are well organized and efficient and for those with little time this is easily the best way to get from A to B. Just as domestic transport gets booked up early, so international flights and connections also suffer during the typical summer holiday period and at festival ties such as Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving.





# Travel and Tourism

## TOURISTS MODULE |

### Train travel

If you have the time and feel like an adventure, trains in China are a great way to travel. They are punctual and efficient – especially with the number of new high speed trains that are being built – though they are often incredibly crowded.

In China tickets for trains are released on sale on specific days before departure. This could be 10 or 20 days. You need to know when they go on sale to be sure of getting a ticket. On holidays it is almost impossible to buy a ticket – people are camping at the station and struggle to get on a train.

**On sleeper trains there are soft beds for the rich travellers, hard berths for those, who are not that well-off. There are also soft seats and hard benches for other social classes.**



# Travel and Tourism

TOURISTS MODULE |

## Chinese Public Holidays

Festival	Date	Days' Holiday
New Year's Day	Jan. 1	3 days
Spring Festival	Moves according to the lunar cycle	7 days
Qingming Festival	Usually in April but moves with the lunar cycle	3 days
May Day	May 1	3 days
Dragon Boat Festival	the 5th day of the 5th lunar month	3 days
Mid-Autumn Day	Aug. 15 according to the lunar calendar	1 day
National Day	Oct. 1	7 days



Be aware if you are making travel arrangements that many Chinese people take time off work around these holidays to extend them – particularly the **Spring Festival** and the **National Day**. At these times all forms of transport are particularly crowded.



# Travel and Tourism

TOURISTS MODULE |

## Dialects

There are many Chinese dialects, but only two of them count: Mandarin and Cantonese, though Mandarin is becoming increasingly accepted as the standard for the country in written and spoken form. Both are tonal languages. This means that the meaning of a word can change according to the tone - and even for the same tone the meaning can change according to the context! However, it is very useful to know some basic expressions in Chinese as many Chinese people do not yet speak much English.

Chinese has two faces – spoken and written. This means that the writing is not a transcription of how a word sounds (as it is in a western writing system). To help learn Chinese, there have been many attempts to Romanise it (ie to use a form of western alphabet). This has culminated in Pinyin – (a way of spelling Chinese through sound) and it is used both in school in China and to help foreigners learn the language. Ever since the computer era began, users of computers, instead of troubling themselves with calligraphy of Chinese characters, simply type a word in pinyin and proper characters appear on the screen. A computer can also read the characters.



## Bargaining

**Bargaining is very frequent in China. Wherever you are it doesn't hurt to ask if you can have a discount. In tourist areas especially you can bargain hard. You could even start from 10%! Where the stallholders or shopkeepers speak no English, you can easily communicate using their calculator to show how much you are prepared to pay. As in any country, sometimes people may use emotional blackmail to persuade you to buy more or pay more. In the end it depends on what you feel something is worth and whether you really want it.**



# Travel and Tourism

TOURISTS MODULE |

Restaurants in China are often bustling, noisy places, where the business of eating is accompanied by lots of conversation. In some there are separate side rooms for groups of people or for special occasions and if you are being invited for dinner by a Chinese host you may well be taken to one of those. As in any country there is a range for restaurants from high end luxury to food halls in shopping malls. The menu you are provided with is often a large book with brightly coloured pictures of the food in it. In some there may be a description of the food in English, but in many places this is still not the case and you may have to guess what you are eating. Chinese cuisine involves a lot of meat eating. Pork is popular as is chicken, duck and fish. You may even be shown your fish alive in a plastic bag before they take it to the kitchen and cook it for you. If you are vegetarian, however, you will not go hungry. there is a wide range of very tasty vegetable dishes to choose from.

For travellers who do not want to taste the local food, or who want a rest from the communication challenge of trying out their Chinese in restaurants, there is an increasing number of international chains such as Pizza Hut and Macdonalds. Of course these too have been adapted to suit local tastes, so don't expect to find exactly what you get at home.



## Eating out

Chinese cuisine is sophisticated and highly diverse. The food varies from region to region – and some regional food is more famous than others (like Sichuan or Guangdong). Rice or noodles are staple foods of most Chinese dishes. Some dishes are known internationally such as Peking duck or dumplings with meat filling. Do not be surprised if people eat things that westerners would rarely even consider – such as hen's feet or pig's snout. However, the myth that all Chinese eat everything is just that – a myth.



# Travel and Tourism

TOURISTS MODULE |

## Different habits

Travelling to any country you will inevitably see things that people find normal, but that you may find unusual and possibly surprising. Equally things you do naturally may inadvertently offend. China is no exception to this.

Although it is considered bad manners, people do spit in the street more often than in Europe, and they often make more noise when eating. They also sometimes blow their nose openly without handkerchiefs. In public toilets, paper is not always provided. You need to take your own. And many public toilets are squat toilets.

Chinese people think that some European habits are rather strange too: putting used tissues back to one's pocket, biting one's nails, picking in one's teeth, touching mouth with one's fingers are all considered unhygienic. Avoid making faces, and gesticulating, particularly pointing.

Negotiations usually last a long time. One should be patient, optimistic and calm and remember, that Chinese people are not used to putting their opinions straight. Traditionally, they would rather avoid a confrontation, tackle an issue once again and find a different solution.

**Negotiations usually last a long time. One should be patient, optimistic and calm**



## Business Life

### BUSINESS MODULE |

**For Chinese businessmen, when making a deal, the most important thing is the competences of the contractor. They check his knowledge about a particular field during the first meeting. Depending on the knowledge of a business partner, they either respect him, or try take advantage of his lack of knowledge.**

Thus, when expressions such as: “maybe”, “we will come back to this later”, or “we will see” appear, they should be understood as “no”. It should be kept in mind that in Chinese there are no equivalents of “no” or “yes”.

Chinese people treat hierarchy in both private life and business with utmost respect. Thus, the heads of delegations are the first ones to enter the conference room and they are negotiating. The partners should make sure that they represent an equal rank. The team members should avoid expressing opinions different from the leader’s position.

A violation of etiquette is regarded by the Chinese as a blemish on honour and may bury the chance of cooperation. If you want to do business with the Chinese, you must not criticise him openly, make fun of him or treat him in a way that doesn’t fit with his position in the company.

Punctuality is very much appreciated – coming late to a meeting is a personal offence. A meeting begins with a welcome speech of the host – the head of the team. Then a reciprocation should follow. Chatting about trivial things is meant to loosen the atmosphere and make it pleasant. An applause can be a way to welcome someone in a company. They should be reciprocated.





## Business Life

BUSINESS MODULE |

If you want to make business with the Chinese, you should make yourself plenty of smart business cards – they care a lot about beautiful presentation on the card. Business cards should be given and taken with both hands. It is inappropriate to put a business card into one's pocket in front of the owner. It is often useful to place the business cards on the table in front of you during a meeting (where there is a table) as a guide to help you remember names.

You must not gesticulate, make faces, touch someone or pat on a shoulder, giggle or burst into laughter with no reason! The Chinese value restrained behaviour and calmness. They hate pointing with fingers – if you want to point at something, do it with an open hand.

### Dress Code

Business dress is conservative – dark suits and shoes, subdued ties. In business etiquette women are expected to wear dresses or suits, not too high heels. Mini dresses, gaudy jewellery or low-cut blouses do not make a good impression. In summer men do not need to wear ties and jackets. Dark trousers and a shirt with undone neckband are acceptable.

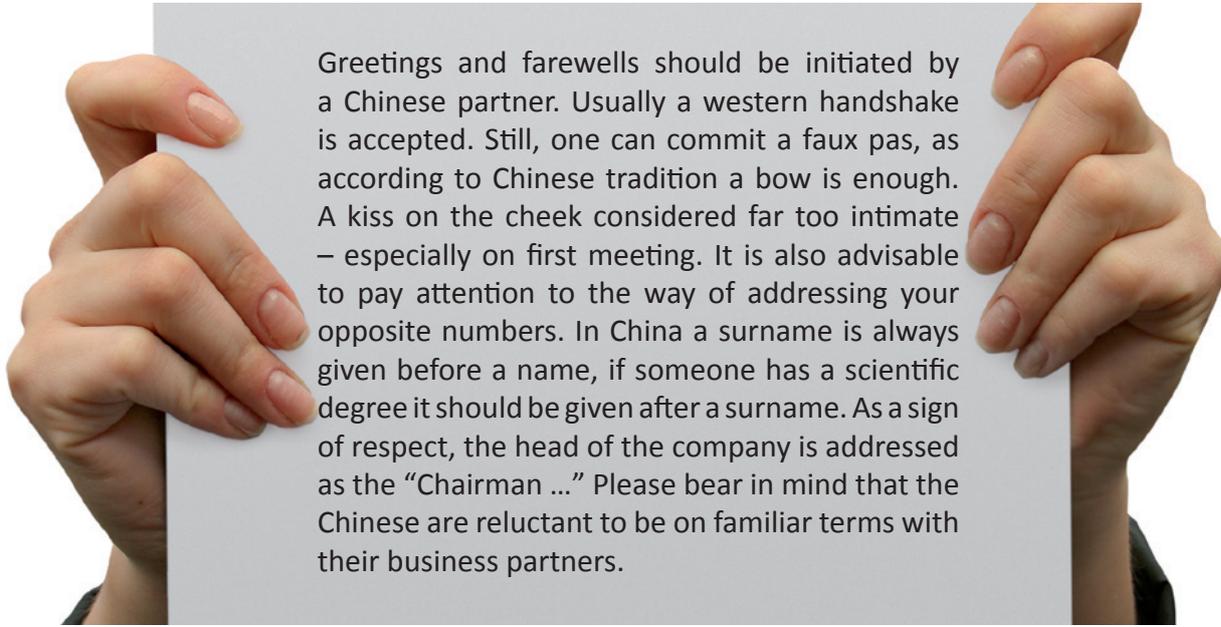
When doing business with Chinese be aware that negotiations take time. The Chinese think of time in a “cosmic” context and always make long-term plans. While a hasty European would like to get everything done quickly. When deadlines are being set it is good to have a few weeks in reserve.



# Business Life

BUSINESS MODULE |

## Greetings



Greetings and farewells should be initiated by a Chinese partner. Usually a western handshake is accepted. Still, one can commit a faux pas, as according to Chinese tradition a bow is enough. A kiss on the cheek considered far too intimate – especially on first meeting. It is also advisable to pay attention to the way of addressing your opposite numbers. In China a surname is always given before a name, if someone has a scientific degree it should be given after a surname. As a sign of respect, the head of the company is addressed as the “Chairman ...” Please bear in mind that the Chinese are reluctant to be on familiar terms with their business partners.

## Gift Giving

An important part of business and social relationships are traditional gifts. The Chinese give presents and expect the others to do the same. A present needs to be packed beautifully. The best colours are golden and red, or silver and pink. Be careful with things in white or black, as in China they are colours of mourning. The Chinese are pragmatic and it shows in their attitude to gifts. Good business gifts are elegant corporate gadgets, handicraft from your country, elegant desktop accessories. A gift should be neither too cheap, which would show lack of respect, nor too expensive, as it could be embarrassing if their gift is not as valuable. Some numbers have a special meaning. Number “4” is forbidden – it resembles the word “death”. Number “8” is well seen as it is similar to a word meaning prosperity and development.



## Business Life

BUSINESS MODULE |

The Olympic Games in Beijing begun on the 8th day of the 8th month in 2008 at 8 o'clock. Number "9" represents a long-lasting relationship.

During home visits it is greatly appreciated if you hand a gift to the host's wife. Chocolates or cognac are appropriate. Presents are not unpacked in front of the gift-giver. According to one tradition, you should pretend that you do not want to accept the gift. The other party should insist. Then it is necessary to accept a present and melt away in gratitude. Presents are given and accepted with both hands.

Some presents are forbidden. It is unacceptable to give clocks (they sound like they are condemning someone to death), an umbrella (it may symbolize a farewell), a green hat indicates a betrayed husband. Knives are also not a good gift.



## Business Dinners

Establishing personal relationships is more important than official meetings in offices. An ability to gain the Chinese partner's trust while spending time together is a key to success. Dinners, either formal or informal, are a way of building relationships and you may find yourself invited to many of them. This is the place for wide ranging conversation – not just business. Showing curiosity about China, without being critical, is highly appreciated and is seen as a sign of friendliness.





# Business Life

BUSINESS MODULE |

Invitations to evening banquets are an important part of personal relationships. A Chinese expects the host to welcome him at the door and lead him to a place at the table corresponding with his position in the company. The seat of honour, reserved for the host or the guest with highest status, is the one in the center facing east or facing the door. Seating is then arranged according to status with those of higher status sitting closer to the seat of honour. (When a family holds a banquet, the seat of honour is for the guest with the highest status and the head of the house takes the least prominent seat.)

If round tables are used, the seat facing the door is the seat of honor. The seats on the left hand side of the seat of honor are second, fourth, sixth, etc in importance, while those on the right are third, fifth, seventh and so on in importance, until they join together.



The menu will be decided for you, or will have been decided beforehand, and you should not expect to choose your own dishes or even necessarily be asked if you like certain food. There should be many dishes on the table – around 20. It is a way to show hospitality of the host as well as his respect for the invitees. The host begins a feast putting pieces of the best dish on a plate of the guest of honour. It befits a guest to try a bit of each dish and leave some leftovers on a plate – it is a sign of having eaten enough. Beware! The Chinese treat alcoholic abstinence with suspicion. This is often put to the test at the end of a meal. Meals often end with a series of toasts. You certainly need to toast your host (this is basic politeness), but you will probably need to toast many people. You will be expected to down your drink in one and often when you leave your glass empty it will be refilled.



# Business Life

BUSINESS MODULE |

## Chopstick etiquette

Using chopsticks is becoming increasingly frequent in Europe with the growth in oriental restaurants. In China the etiquette surrounding how they are used has developed over centuries and it is worth knowing some of this so as not to send the wrong signals and not to offend.

It is poor etiquette to tap chopsticks on the edge of one's bowl; at one time, beggars made this sort of noise to attract attention. It is impolite to spear food with a chopstick. Anything too difficult to be handled with chopsticks is traditionally eaten with a spoon. It is considered poor etiquette to point rested chopsticks towards others seated at the table. Chopsticks should not be left vertically stuck into a bowl of rice because it resembles the ritual of incense-burning that symbolizes "feeding" the dead and death in general. Holding chopsticks incorrectly will reflect badly on a child's parents, who have the responsibility of teaching their children. Traditionally, everyone uses his own chopsticks to take food from the dishes to his own bowl, or to pass food from the dishes to the elders' or guests' bowls. Today, serving chopsticks "community-use chopsticks" are used. These are used to take food directly from serving dishes; they are returned to the dishes after one has served oneself.



**When seated for a meal, it is common custom to allow elders to take up their chopsticks before anyone else.**

**Chopsticks should not be used upside-down; it is "acceptable" to use them 'backwards' to stir or transfer the dish to another plate (if the person does not intend to eat it). This method is used only if there are no serving chopsticks.**

**One should not 'dig' or 'search' through one's food for something in particular. This is sometimes known as "digging one's grave" or "grave-digging" and is extremely poor form.**

**Resting chopsticks at the top of the bowl means "I've finished". Resting chopsticks on the side of one's bowl or on a chopstick stand signifies one is merely taking a break from eating.**

# Business Life

BUSINESS MODULE |

## Chops

In the west, seals were used on important documents and letters. The seal would indicate who sent the letter. Sometimes they would indicate the status of the individual. Sometimes they would indicate the profession. In China they have preserved their own version of seals called a chop and this is used to legally authorise business documents. The company chop is registered with the Administration of Industry and Commerce and approved by the Public Security Bureau. A company may also have other chops depending on the areas of business and the size of the organisation. These may be for contracts or for financial documentation among others. Only people in positions of trust and authority have the permission to use the chop. This means that it can operate as a kind of countersignature measure and authorisation within a company.



**Smaller companies may not use chops as widely as larger enterprises. Western companies need to be aware that they may be asked for seals and chops on documentation by Chinese counterparts who are unaware of differing business practices.**





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