



# China In A Box

## ESSENTIAL MERCHANT RESOURCES

### Chinese Customs – Traditions-Superstitions

With a move to a more cosmopolitan culture particularly in cities some traditions are in steep decline, however they are still of great value when traveling in China as the locals will appreciate respect of age-old customs. There are variations in tradition across China particularly within ethnic minorities who have their own different culture; so it is important to point out that there are also local customs.

As a whole the Chinese people are restrained in showing affection in public. Maintaining eye contact is considered intrusive and a physical embrace is reserved for close relationships. Shaking hands is now commonly used for formal business meetings, it is something that Chinese expect to do with foreigners but it is not traditional. Things you take for granted have only recently accepted in China, for instance clapping hands used to be used to drive out evil spirits not to show appreciation. Facial expressions are kept to a minimum and these characteristics have made foreigners use the term 'inscrutable' to describe the lack of apparent reaction. Often careful analysis of a conversation is needed to assess a person's true feelings. An important highly regarded quality in China is ren which roughly means forbearance or putting up with things without protesting. Part of this has its roots in history, for a long time a whole community was punished for the crimes of one individual, ignorance was not a defence, so reticence in saying anything definite became a natural attitude. Losing one's temper is never a good idea, it is seen as a lack of self control and rarely yields a good result as the recipient would lose 'face' if accepting blame.

Spitting is a cultural tradition, it was considered unhealthy to swallow spittle and so spitting is something that still occurs particularly in rural areas. The Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping was admired for his ability to spit with unerring aim directly into a spittoon. Spitting was also considered a defence against demons, they don't like being spat at, so, strangely a passing funeral was a focus for spitting.

On the other hand blowing your nose is not considered pleasant in China. Chinese people will do this much more discretely than in the West. Reusable cotton handkerchiefs are considered particularly vile. Cigarette smoking is very prevalent, and China has the unenviable position as the top tobacco consuming nation (2.64 trillion in 2009). Although there are bans on smoking in some public places and some restaurants these are not always obeyed.

It is traditional to take a shower after work before going out in the evening, and also before bedtime this reflects the often hot and humid climate and contrasts with the Western habit of a morning shower.

### **Chatting**

It is quite common for conversation to immediately get much more personal than would be normal to Westerners. While two Westerners may still be talking about the weather Chinese will be asking questions about age, salary, marital status and health. Chinese are keen amateur doctors and will often interrogate you if you say you are feeling unwell and offer advice on treatment. However most Chinese will feel uncomfortable talking about politics, this topic should be reserved for people you get to know very well.

### **Queuing in China**

Traditionally queuing in line for services was unknown, everyone just barged forward. In the last decades the culture of waiting in turn has become widely established but not everywhere, it may still be necessary to push and shove, for example getting onto an already full bus!

### **Chinese Modesty**

Many responses in conversation will display modesty and humility. The standard response to a thank you xiè xie in Chinese is to respond with no need to thank bù xiè and this attitude is very prevalent. A meal will be presented as a 'poor table' and a compliment will usually be refused such as You speak good English will be returned with a phrase such as not very good. This humility helps to reduce competitiveness and eases relationships.

Historical attitude to sex has been to use metaphor and innuendo rather than direct reference. Symbolism (see our extensive section on this) is often used and so the hidden meaning of objects in paintings and gifts has to be taken into account. Overt sexual advances towards strangers is not acceptable in China.

Once married Chinese people tend to dress conservatively in restrained colors; younger single people wear more fashionable clothes. Sometimes the characteristic black hair of Chinese is bleached. A level of modesty is expected even on beaches, the Chinese do not have a tradition of naked bathing as nakedness is still a strong taboo. At temples of any religion tourists are expected to dress respectfully, at least covering the upper arms.

### **Bowing**

To indicate deep respect and appreciation the Chinese may make the traditional gesture of cupping a clenched fist with the other hand and bringing the hands towards the forehead while the head is gently bowed. Originally deep veneration was practiced with the kowtow, bowing to the ground, although this is now only practiced in a religious context.

## **Color Symbolism**

Colors play an important part in Chinese symbolism. White in China is used in funerals and mourning clothes. Black is the color of darkness and evil and so this is generally avoided. Prisoners wore black, and devils are depicted with black faces. Addiction to opium was termed 'to be stained black'. Yellow is the Imperial color and banned to ordinary people, only Imperial buildings could have yellow roof tiles. Red is considered the most auspicious color, it represents fire, power and good luck. So red is often used widely for festivals, marriages and paper to wrap gifts. The association of colors has deep roots within the system of elemental principles that are still important in Feng Shui. The use of red by Communists helped retain red's popularity; for a brief time traffic lights used red for 'go' and green for 'stop' which did cause confusion for foreigners. Blue was used on seals on the death of the Emperor.

## **Network of Connections**

If you have been to China or done business in China you will know the importance of connections *guan xi* it means literally closed system or network. Having access to a network of people to whom you have a vague connection is important in all sorts of ways and so a network is actively cultivated by everyone. They may get you into a theater, a university, a job or may be a discount on goods. Using connections is referred to in Chinese as *zou hòu mén* going by the back door. This process is not seen as unfair because everyone uses it. There is strong competition to build a powerful network of connections.

## **Sealing a deal in China**

Anyone doing business in China must be aware that there is a long held belief that a verbal agreement is not necessarily binding. It has its origin in the Chinese philosophy to life, if a better opportunity comes along, it is correct to change course and accept the new one. To many Westerners who try to live by 'my word is my bond' this can take a bit of getting used to. An apparent agreement to meet up or do some work or sign a contract may be sidestepped. Chinese seek to avoid a definite decision as they like to leave themselves some leeway; there has always been a lack of certainty which is in harmony with the concept of yin and yang; there is no absolute right or wrong decision - just an approximation. This is evident in the language, how many is expressed as many-few *duo shao* and distance as far-near *yuan jin*. No malice is intended in a change of an apparent agreement, it is a different attitude and avoids being tied to commitments that no longer appeal.

The concept of conceding and yielding is neatly encapsulated in the character *ràng* and represents a key concept in Chinese relationships. Rather akin to avoiding losing face, a good communicator in China knows the appropriate time to stand firm and when to yield ground. With correct use of *ràng* negotiations move towards agreement rather than confrontation. The application of *ràng* in dealings can be subtle and complex, an Emperor may voluntarily give way to a usurper in the hope his life will be spared. Similarly turning down a small gift may be appropriate as accepting it would require a larger gift to be given in return. A related concept is forbearance (*ren*), hiding displeasure which is considered a virtue but makes discovering true feelings more tricky.

**Business cards** should be printed in English and Chinese so these can be exchanged on meeting. It is traditional to proffer a card by holding it not in just one hand but in both hands.

In many situations a tourist can negotiate a price for goods and services, the quoted price may be much higher than a native Chinese would be expected to pay. This is particularly true at market stalls where no price is displayed. Traders hope that visitors may be wealthy and quite happy to pay an inflated price.

### **English in China**

English for many years has been seen in China as the language to learn if you want a good career. In cities you will find English on many shop signs and translated on many notices and plaques. Chinese people may well be keen to develop their English with you. In comparison most English speaking people's 'phrase-book' Chinese is very poor. By contrast to the cities if you travel into villages and small towns you may not be able to find anyone who speaks English.

### **Face**

The Chinese have a long standing tradition of maintaining their social standing, which has been very loosely translated as face miàn zi. In everyday life this means that taking criticism in front of other people 'loses face' diu lian and is not acceptable. A Westerner who is used to immediately making a complaint has to go about it in a different way. Confronting someone with a problem in front of others will rarely work if it requires someone to admit they are at fault. The way to handle the situation is to avoid any public disgrace by negotiating quietly and in private, this often allows things to be put right. If this fails then an intermediary will often be able to negotiate a compromise.

'Face' represents honor; social standing and appearance, so care is also taken in the style of clothes worn. There was a belief that the features of the face provides clues to personality, so may be that is why 'face' is used in this situation. Any transaction has to take place with this in mind. People who look and behave well will receive better service than those who do not. There is a long tradition of an individual's behavior reflecting on the family and community, so getting poor grades at an examination reflects not just on the individual but also on the wider family. Moving on socially involves becoming familiar with those of higher social standing and establishing connections guan xi.

Getting drunk is a severe loss of standing and it is therefore rare to see Chinese people very intoxicated with alcohol.

### **Da rén bù da lian**

Better to hit a person than their reputation. Losing 'face' is a major consideration for Chinese people  
Be diplomatic or tactful when giving criticism

To err is human; to forgive divine

### **Rén yào lian, shù yào pí**

Keeping a good reputation is as essential as bark is to a tree

Reputation ('face') is important to maintain at all costs

### **Hao rén hao shì**

Good personality good deeds

Pleasant person; good actions

### **Family loyalty in China**

There is great loyalty to the extended family in China respecting a continuous ancient tradition. The Confucian doctrine for respect for one's elders and betters still has deep resonance. For many the family comes before friends. It is inappropriate to refer to people outside one's own age group too familiarly. The epithet lao old is used as a mark of respect and is traditionally used to address anyone slightly older. Deference to parents is more prevalent than in the West. Grandparents often have an active role in bringing up grandchildren while both parents are at work. The penal system used to punish the whole family if one member is convicted and this has led to solidarity among family members. Success or failure of one member is seen to reflect on the whole family not just the individual.

In China there was no concept of universal individual rights, the deeply entrenched attitude is that people are all different and they must live within the position they are in. People have responsibilities rather than rights, a responsibility to look after elderly relatives is the flip side to the right of the elderly to receive care.

### **Food and Drink**

At a dinner one person will usually pay for all the diners on the basis that it is that person's turn rather than try to divide equally or apportion accurately. It is polite to join in with offers to pay for everyone at the end of the meal, even though, if you are a guest this will be politely declined. A guest is seated at table first and is usually in the most honored position to the left of the host.

Choosing dishes of food will take into account balance and medicinal value as well as smell and appearance. Meals are a social and friendly occasion for an extended family and not just a married couple as it is elsewhere. There are many traditions associated with food and especially formal banquets, for a full description see our main section all about Chinese food and traditions. A tip is only expected at very posh establishments or where service has indeed been exceptional, they are not a normal addition to a bill.

### **Guests**

Appropriate ceremony should be shown to guests. People should rise from their seats when a new guest arrives. Tea cups are held by both hands not just one, and the cups were offered cross-handed - the right-hand one given to guest on left. The drinking of tea by a guest was traditionally

considered a signal that the visit was at an end. An invitation by a host to drink tea can be interpreted as a subtle suggestion it is time to leave.

### **Chinese Tea**

All the tea in China... Tea originates from China, it has been drunk there for thousands of years..

Chinese tea is the drink of choice. Only on special occasions is alcohol taken. There are traditional tea-houses dotted over China, many in Sichuan, here friends can sit and chat for hours with an indefinite supply of tea. The protocol is to lift the lid of the teapot to request that it is refilled with hot water. When it has been recharged you serve all the other people at the table and yourself last.

### **Foreigners**

In remote rural areas the sight of a foreigner with strange facial features: large noses, deep set eyes, strange colored hair may still stimulate interest and gawping. As all Chinese have black hair, another hair color was traditionally seen as 'demonic'. In the 1980s when there were very few foreign travelers whole crowds would just 'stare' at the strange apparition. It is best to try to ignore a sea of staring faces.

In the days of early contact in the Qing dynasty period foreigners were often described as Ocean devils: Yang guizi yáng gui zi or fan gui 'barbarian devils'. Dutch people with red/orange hair were described as hóng máo red heads and associated with Buddhist demons who are portrayed with red or blue hair.

### **Foxes: hú li**

Foxes have had an evil reputation in China. A demon takes the form of a fox and gets up to all sorts of evil. In addition the spirit of a fox can possess a man and cause him to get up to all sorts of mischief. By custom a fox when it reaches fifty it can turn itself into a woman, and into a girl when a hundred years old. It would become a celestial fox at a thousand and so powerful it could bring down a dynasty (as in the case of the Shang dynasty). Foxes are also associated with sensuality.

### **Funerals in China**

The Chinese have different rituals and customs concerning funerals. Everyone used to be buried not cremated as it was important to be interred intact due to ancient beliefs about the after-life. By contrast to Christian tradition white (or more strictly un-dyed cloth) not black is the color of mourning. The funeral procession to the place of burial would be long, noisy (with musicians and jugglers) and colorful. Strict protocol was enforced, with invitations sent out to people and gifts sent.

People used to join many 'societies' whose sole purpose was to take part in the procession at the funeral. The annual subscriptions raised the money for the funeral. The processions could involve hundreds of people. Specially printed 'paper money' was strewn on the road. Families have an ancestral burial plot and the names of the deceased are inscribed on the ancestral tablet. The date

and exact place for burial was carefully determined by a Feng Shui practitioner. The period for mourning of parents was long - traditionally three years - and wearing white or fragments of white cloth was normal for this period. All work and study was stalled during this period and marriage was out of the question. On the death of the Emperor the whole nation went into long mourning with, for example, all marriages postponed.

## **Gifts**

It is usual to bring the host a small gift if you are invited to a house. These are not generally opened until the guests have left. Gifts should be offered in both hands, and this tradition applies to business cards as well. The importance of this ritual is made plain by the character *li* which can mean both ceremony; ritual and gift. A birthday or wedding gift is usually wrapped in red paper for luck.

The Chinese language and culture leads itself to much symbolism. So when you give a gift in China you should be careful not to choose something with an unfortunate hidden meaning. An example is a pear, as sharing a pear *fenlí* sounds the same as separate/divorce *fen lí*. Gifts of belts and ties have the symbolism of betrothal and should only be given to very intimate friends. For similar linguistic reasons fans and umbrellas bring bad luck. *Shan* for fan sounds like *san* meaning scatter or fall apart as does *san* meaning umbrella. A clock is an unlucky gift as it has the connotation of counting down the remaining life span. To give a clock *sòng zhong* is written the same as pay last respects. As in the European tradition giving a knife is unlucky, the luck can be salvaged by the recipient giving back a token payment in return (so it is no longer purely a gift). Because four is such an unlucky number, it is not a good idea to give a gift of four of anything.

Generally Chinese will find it odd to be given something old or secondhand. It is usually best to stick with wine; cigarettes and sweets. It is considered rude not to give a gift in return or refuse to accept one.

## **Hierarchy**

For centuries the Confucian doctrine of social hierarchy has been taught and followed. In a group of Westerners it is likely that they will feel they have equal status and decisions should be decided democratically. Not so much in China, it is still expected for juniors to defer to seniors in conversation, waiting for a senior member to initiate topics for debate. Chinese will expect to deal with the 'leader' of a group of visitors and channel contact through them. The correct relationship based on status or age remains an important cultural principle.

## **Hobbies**

### **Caged birds**

There has been a long tradition of keeping caged birds in China. The birds were taken to a park every day and there they sang to the delight of the owner and all around. The tradition is under steep decline now because other pets are affordable. Laughing thrushes (*Garrulax canorus*) *huà méi* and Mongolian larks (*Melanocorypha mongolica*) *menggu bailing* are two species that can occasionally still be seen.

## **Exercise**

When people think of China many will picture martial arts as these have been portrayed so widely in films and on TV. The various techniques were developed in the monasteries where active exercise was the perfect balance to long spells of meditation. Many ordinary Chinese practise Taichi each day to maintain health and suppleness.

The best known form of Chinese exercise is the Martial Art of which Taijiquan (Tai Chi) is the best known variety. Martial arts used to be practiced widely in public parks in the morning. Nowadays it is mainly the older generation that keeps up the tradition.

Gymnastics has always been popular in China. Athletic acrobats perform great feats of balance in

Traditional Chinese Opera was the entertainment of all Chinese over many centuries. A long evening performance contains elements of drama, music, comedy, acrobatics and martial arts. Each region has its own distinctive form. Over time complex movements have been given specific meanings as a very sparse set is used open on three sides. The art form has inspired many Western composers to emulate the style.

### **Chinese Opera**

To many, the most characteristic Chinese art-form is the Opera. Different regions have developed their own style (Beijing (Peking) and Kunqu are the best known). It is an art-form where movement, music, voice, humor and costume combine together to give a unique impression which has stimulated composers and playwrights the world over.

### **Theater**

Although the operatic form predominates there are many traditional plays too. For many centuries street theater included shadow plays, where historical drama was played out using delicate puppets placed against a back-lit cloth.

### **Kite flying**

Along with many other things the Chinese lay claim to the invention of the kite. Kite flying remains very popular in China and many can be seen flying in public parks. In the past they have been used for military purposes but fishing is probably the most ancient use.

Children and adults like to fly kites in parks and on hills whenever there is an adequate breeze. Chinese kite designs are many and varied with some hundreds of feet in length

### **Board games**

Many of the age-old games have their origin in China. 'Go' is a game of great age and taught students the basics of strategy. Mahjong is in essence like the card game of 'rummy ?' but with tiles. Chinese Chess or Xiangqi can claim to be closer to the original game than the version played in the West.

### **Luck**

In Chinese the even numbers 8, 9, 2 and 6 are considered lucky. However, four is considered particularly unlucky as the sound sì is similar to that for death si - differing only in tone. Chinese in

general have a strong belief in lucky numbers and will pay a premium for a lucky number, 8 is considered the luckiest

### **Names in China**

In China the family name comes before the personal name. So Xi Jinping is Mr. Xi. When Chinese emigrated abroad some reversed the order to avoid confusion. They may also choose an English name in place of a Chinese name because this may be tricky for English people to pronounce correctly. The surname is called xìng and the given name míng. People who are not close friends or relations are addressed by surname only with a title (zì) e.g. Mr. Wang, the title may be their job description. So Zhou Enlai was referred to as 'Zhou zong lí' meaning Zhou Premier. A less formal naming can be used among friends lao old; venerable to address older people and xiao young; small to address someone younger. Children may address strangers as shu shu uncle or a yí aunt.

There are relatively few family names in use and many assume there must be some distant family relationship among people with the same family name. For centuries, you were unable to be marry someone with the same family name for this reason. The Chinese have been called the '100 names' Baijia xìng after a classic text of the Song dynasty listing all the families, it actually had 504 names in the list and there are about 3,000 in use today. However some names are much more common than others, for example there are about 93 million Wangs. Names have a patchy regional distribution, so it is possible to guess which province someone may come from just based on their name.

On marriage the tradition is that the wife retains her family name, she does not take on her husband's surname. Children can take either their mother's or father's name. With so few family names the selection of the given name is a matter of much importance, and it will often have some allusion to history or culture. Originally a great deal of ceremony and tradition was associated with finding the appropriate one. Some families used the same poem over centuries to determine one character of the name, this allowed the relationship to anyone in the family to be easily worked out. The look and elemental balance of the Chinese character was taken into consideration. The same given name can be given to a boy or a girl although some names are usually gender specific [Zhi (will), Shan (mountain), Guo (country) for boys] and [Fang (scented), Xiang (scent), Lan (lotus), Shu (beauty) for girls]. A baby was often not named until a month of life and was given a temporary, sometimes derogative, name for this short period following the tradition that demons would not attack a baby with such a nasty name; names such as pig manure and puppy were used. During their early childhood a 'milk name' would be used within the family, and this name would be used informally and affectionately throughout life. When very large families were the norm, children would sometimes be referred to by their number within the family 'third son'; 'second daughter'.

### **The standing of women in China**

Attitudes to women have varied greatly in China over the centuries. The traditional subservient position of women in society has only really changed in the last sixty years.

It was also traditional for people to change their name during their lifetime, particularly after a significant event took place. Scholars had a usual given name hào and a nick or literary name zì as well as the míng given name. An example of this is the poet went by the given name Su Shi as well as the literary name Su Song po meaning eastern slope; you will see both names in use in different

contexts. The Republican leader Sun Yatsen went by a number of different names during his life and is known in China as Sun Zhongshan when the Republic was founded. Mao Zedong had a nick name of Runzhi only used by close friends and seniors.

The names of emperors is even more complex as there are 'temple names', 'reign names' and 'honorary names' to consider as well as their given name (see our Imperial name section for details). Until the Ming dynasty, an emperor may rule under several reign names *niánhào* which he proclaimed during his reign. By the time of the Ming and Qing dynasties the 'reign name' and 'emperor name' became interchangeable so Emperor Yongle is a bit incorrect as Yongle is the name of the dynastic period not a person while Chengzu is his given name.

### **Superstitions**

The Chinese are generally a superstitious people. There was a traditional belief in demons, and that foxes could disguise themselves as people. Ruined houses, dark corners and wide open spaces were considered unlucky places inhabited by demons. The spirit of someone wronged would come back to haunt the perpetrator. Sometimes someone would commit suicide in the belief their spirit would be able to exact their revenge. There is a strong belief that the spirits of the ancestors look down on their living descendents and they can punish those that bring dishonor the family. There are many superstitions associated with the old festivals, for instance it is considered unlucky to write a signature in red ink at the Spring Festival.

There are many ways to seek knowledge of future destiny. The Yi Jing or I Ching for fortune telling is the best known example. Temples offer a fortune telling service often by drawing lots or burning paper containing a question or tossing special blocks of wood.

**Feng shui** with its sometimes weird rules is considered by some to be superstition, particularly when it advocates such things as the position of toilets or the placement of goldfish bowls. Feng shui is still important for choosing the location for graveyards and new buildings.

### **Time**

To many Westerners the Chinese have a relaxed attitude to timekeeping in common with other Asian cultures. A meeting set for a specific time should be regarded as a rough estimate. Lateness should not be seen as rudeness or laziness, it is just a less precise definition of time. When visiting friends it was traditional just to turn up at any time without warning.



[www.chinainabox.org](http://www.chinainabox.org)

- Alipay Payment Solutions ●Resources And Downloads
- Social Media Campaigns And Apps ●Staff Training And Recruitment
- Menu And Document Uploads ●Traditions And Customs Info
- Translation Services And Apps