

Chinese Etiquette

Guanxi (gwan-she)

Throughout much of Chinese history, the fundamental glue that has held the society together is the concept of 'guanxi', the relationships between people. This is why Chinese people do not relish business with strangers but prefer to work with established personal relationships.

It is not uncommon for the first few minutes of any first meeting to be spent where the host tries to establish your 'guanxi' in Exeter and/or any other educational circles to assess your status and if there are any other mutual acquaintances.

Guanxi also refers to the power of 'connections' that an individual may possess i.e if a person has 'guanxi', s/he is considered to have high-powered or strong connections and accordingly gains 'face' (see below).

Mianzi (me-an-zee)

Mianzi, commonly referred to as 'face', is a reflection of a person's level of status in the eyes of his or her peers. Having 'face' means you are viewed by your peers, superiors, and subordinates as a person in harmony with the prevailing values of society/relevant group. It is a subtlety that is not openly discussed in Chinese society, but exists as a conversational skill and is an extremely important aspect of Chinese people's everyday social and business lives as 'any' loss of face is considered a serious problem.

Mianzi can best be understood as the avoidance of embarrassment, either yours or the other party's in front of others. However, losing face, saving face and giving face is very important and should be taken into consideration at **all** times.

Greetings and Introductions

The Chinese do not like to do business with strangers, and will make frequent use of go-betweens. Whenever possible, try to use established relationships, or an intermediary known by both sides, to make the first contact.

Chinese prefer to be formally introduced to someone new. This applies to both Chinese and foreigners.

The Chinese may seem unfriendly when being introduced. They are trained not to show excessive emotion, hence the reference to Chinese and other Asians as being inscrutable.

Always stand up when being introduced and remain standing throughout the introductions.

When being introduced to Chinese, the accepted form of greeting is the handshake, even among Chinese. The handshake should be firm but brief. Chinese may also, in the alternative, nod or slightly bow (unlike the Japanese, the Chinese bow from the shoulders rather than the waist). One would then present a business card.

As a simple rule, be guided by your host as s/he will lead the procedure.

Business Card etiquette

Use both hands when both presenting and receiving a business card.

When presenting your card, ensure the University logo is nearest yourself. If you have cards translated into Chinese, you should present it with the Chinese side face-up and the University logo nearest yourself.

This should be followed by a standard “I am pleased to meet you” or “ni hao (nee-how).

It is important not to put away immediately any cards you have received. This shows a lack of respect. Additionally, one might well be surprised at how long it takes for your host(s) to read a card!

When seated, the laying of their cards on the table in front of you is a clear mark of respect for the first meeting (and helpful for remembering names if there are several in the party!).

For purposes of clarity, Mainland China (People’s Republic of China) uses simplified characters whilst Hong Kong and Taiwan (Republic of China) both use the more stylised ‘complex’ characters.

Titles & Forms of Address

The Chinese will state their family name first, followed by the given name (may be one or two syllables). For example, Liu Jianguo, in Chinese, would be Mr. Jianguo Liu - using the Western style. (NB 70% of all PRC people have one of 12 family names and, therefore, it is important to use the full address of the family name followed by the first or given names – either in verbal or written format)

Never call someone by only his/her last name. Unless specifically asked, do not call someone by his or her first name.

Addressing someone by his/her courtesy or professional title and last name conveys respect. In Chinese, the name precedes the title. However, it would still be acceptable to use the western version of, for example, President/Assistant President/ Professor Liu Jianguo

Women's names cannot be distinguished from men's names. Chinese women use their maiden names even after marriage, but may indicate marital status by using Mrs., Ms., Miss, or Madam. Mrs. Wang might be married to Mr. Liu. Additionally, some Chinese firstnames are used by both genders

Chinese who frequently deal with foreigners or who travel abroad on business may adopt a Western first name, such as David Liu. They may request that they be referred to as David, once a relationship has been established.

Do not use the term "comrade" in China.

Personal Questions & Compliments

Do not be surprised when asked personal questions, even at a first meeting regarding age, marital status, children, family, income, job, etc. This is done merely to seek common ground.

On the other hand, the Chinese will be uncomfortable with American-style familiarity, particularly early in a relationship. The arm around the shoulder or pat on the back with "just call me Bob" approach is to be avoided.

Unlike the Western custom, compliments are not graciously accepted with a "thank you," but rather with "not at all" or "it was nothing." Accepting and giving direct praise is considered poor etiquette. One should not be overenthusiastic/gushing with gratitude or thank yous.

Social distance, Touching & Gestures

Westerners find that the Chinese 'comfort zone' regarding personal space is a little too close for their comfort. Instinctively, Westerners may back up when others invade their space. Do not be surprised to find that the Chinese, simply, will step closer.

The Chinese do not like to be touched, particularly by strangers. Do not hug, back slap or put an arm around someone's shoulder.

Do not be offended if you are pushed, shoved or queue-barged in a line/queue. The Chinese simply do not practice the art of queuing (say, for example, at an airport check-in desk) and courtesy to strangers in public places is, most definitely, not required. Indeed, a Chinese person would not say "please" or "thank you" to a stranger.

People of the same sex may walk hand-in-hand as a gesture of friendship in China.

Western gestures that are taboo in China include:

- Pointing the index finger – instead, use the open hand
- Using the index finger to call someone – instead, use the hand with fingers motioning downward as if waving

- Finger snapping
- Showing the soles of shoes
- Whistling – which is considered rude.

Chinese customs that are annoying to Westerners:

- Belching, expectorating or spitting on the street, at the table or anywhere!
- Lack of consideration when smoking and even the failure to ask permission to smoke (including smoking whilst you are eating)
- Slurping food
- Talking while eating

Dining and Entertainment Etiquette & Protocol

Entertaining guests at a Chinese banquet is an important way of establishing guanxi. Similarly, after dinner entertainment, such as karaoke is a very common practice.

For more formal banquets, invitations will be sent and place cards will be at the table. However, you may find it difficult to avoid spending every evening without being hosted to a 10+ course dinner.

Guests should sample all of the dishes and leave something on the plate at the end of the meal. Unlike in the west, a clean plate indicates you are still hungry and it is the host's responsibility to see that you are continually served food and drink.

The Chinese are aware that the western cuisine is not as wide or exotic as that of the Chinese and you may be offered dog, horse, chicken feet, snake or snake's blood, pigs' intestines etc. If you are definitely not keen to try, it is advisable to notify your host at the beginning of the meal (citing an allergy).

Although the Chinese would be pleased if you did use chopsticks, if this means that you are likely to embarrass yourself, it really is acceptable for you to request a knife and fork (although you are likely to receive a fork and spoon).

Under no circumstances should chopsticks be placed in the rice standing up. This symbolizes death.

There are no firm rules regarding dinner conversation. Depending on the closeness of the relationship, business may or may not be discussed. Follow host's lead.

Drinking is an important part of Chinese entertaining and is considered a social lubricant. The drinking officially begins after the host offers a short toast to the group – usually a welcome to the guest.

It is always a good idea for the guest to return the toast either right away or after the next course.

Waiters/waitresses will always promptly refill your glass to the top of the glass. Never fill your own glass as this shows a distinct lack of protocol. Discreetly tapping your right hand index and middle fingers several times on the table cloth, after being served by the waiter/waitress or member of the host's party, signifies your appreciation for their service and gains you face for knowing the custom.

Safe topics for toasts are friendship, pledges for long-term cooperation, the desire to reciprocate the hospitality, and mutual benefit.

The Chinese understand if you are unable to drink alcohol. Stating medical reasons/medication is always a safe and diplomatic opt-out clause. The most likely drinks to be offered are 'beiju' (bye-jew) which is a powerful (but sometimes oily drink with an acidic after-taste, of varying alcoholic strengths) rice-wine, hongju (hong-jew) red wine or 'pijou' (pee-jow) beer. Strongly recommend that you do not mix beer with the rice-wine!

The most common expression for toasting is "Gan bei", meaning 'dry cup', or 'bottoms up'. This necessitates drinking the contents of your glass until it is empty.

It is customary for each of the host's party to, individually, toast you. If you are the only guest, it means that you will be drinking several times as much as each member of the host's party! It is also customary for the host's party to toast each other individually. You should not participate in these private toasts.

The Chinese are not as understanding of tipsy guests as are the Japanese or Koreans. If you feel you have had enough, smile and politely indicate this to your host.

Gift Giving:

'Courtesy demands reciprocity', is an old Chinese saying, and this advice is an indispensable part of social interactions. It is important to both private and business relationships. The best choice for the initial meeting is a gift that expresses some unique aspect of the UK or of the region. The gift packaging should be red (good fortune) or any other festive colour (such as yellow or gold, representing wealth). White and black gift-wrapping are, both, linked to death and should be avoided. It is not proper, and is even considered to be unfortunate, to take a clock, cut flowers as a gift or to choose one related to the number four. The word for 'four', in Chinese, is very similar to their word for death. Even though even numbers are considered as good luck, the number four is the exception.

Scissors or anything sharp should also be avoided as this is interpreted as a severing of a relationship.

Avoid writing any card in red ink.

Similarly, one should not provide a gift that makes it impossible for the host to reciprocate – this causes a ‘loss of face’.

Do not boast about your gift in front of the recipient, and you should use both hands when presenting the gift. Generally, the recipient may graciously refuse the present when first offered or even on several occasions. In this case, you should correctly assess the situation and present it once again.

If the recipient does not open your gift, it does not mean that he or she is not interested. It is considered more polite for it to be opened after you leave (indicating a lack of greed) and, correspondingly, for you to open your own gift later. Unless your host specifically insists, it is wiser to not open the present until later on your own.

Family Visiting

In China, a gift is also necessary when visiting a family, should you be invited to a person’s home, considered a high honour. But it is not as complex as the above situation. Usually, flowers, common fruits and food are acceptable. As for alcohol, you had better check whether the person enjoys it or if they have such a hobby. During lunch time, hosts will ask you to have more food or alcohol. If you do not want to disappoint them, you can have a little more according to your situation. If you are truly full, you had better refuse directly, otherwise, the hospitable hosts will continue to refill your bowl (cf HSBC advertisements relating to food)

Suggested Gifts & Gift-giving Taboos

- Gifts should reflect the giver and the recipient.
- Consider gifts from your area. Gifts with the University logo are fine as long as they do not include things that are considered taboo and are not too showy.
- Gifts of foreign cigarettes, cognac, fine whisky, quality wines are acceptable.
- Do not give anything in sets of four or gifts that carry the association of death or funerals such as clocks, cut flowers, white objects. Do not give scissors or anything sharp as it symbolizes the severing of relations
- Be cautious when giving food items – it can suggest poverty.
- Always wrap gifts, but do not use white paper-it symbolizes death. Red and gold are the best. Avoid elaborately wrapping gifts.
- Never write anything in red ink.