



YOUR BRIDGE TO CHINA
Translation and Cultural Services

Cultural Information:

UK Businesses Visiting China

for the First Time

Introduction

This is an information pack about Chinese business etiquette tailored to this trip. Meeting Chinese people is an interesting and enjoyable experience and with basic guidance you can get the most out of it. However it is important to stress that people from the East appreciate our cultural differences and will always be as accommodating as possible.

- On first meeting, always greet Chinese people with a cheerful “Knee how”. They will be fascinated and thrilled to meet an English person! Bowing is not necessary.
- Chinese people have an entirely different attitude to personal space, and will often approach you very closely. Don’t be alarmed if this happens.
- Chinese people will ask direct personal questions about your age, marital status, and so on. This isn’t seen as rude.

Here is some guidance on how to deal with common situations.

Chinese Banquets

It is likely that we will be invited to a banquet or two by various hosts. An invitation to a banquet marks the beginning of a potentially important future business partnership. Seldom is a business deal completed without dinner in a restaurant. A person may be judged by his/her behaviour during and after business hours, so here are a few behaviour tips which will help bring maximum benefit to the new business relationship.

Chinese banquets are an old tradition, and likely to be very noisy and busy affairs! They are massive events held for all sorts of occasions including business. Being able to navigate a banquet really is a sink or swim experience as it is one of the main settings you will make or break your *guanxi* with your peers (see later).

Invitations and arrival

Invitations may be sent by email, phone call or in person. You may be invited at short notice even just a few hours before the event, so paper invitations are just a formality, most often written in Chinese, but are sometimes bilingual with Chinese on the front and English on the back.

Being “a little late” isn’t acceptable and is seen as quite rude. We will probably be greeted as a group by the host or an assistant who will lead us to our assigned seats. If a guest of honour is late, then the whole group will wait until they arrive.

Seating and Place Settings

The seating structure follows a hierarchical system so that the person of the highest status (your host) sits furthest away from the door

Seating, usually at a round table, is assigned so that rank goes from left to right starting with the host then honoured guest.

Place setting will contain all or most of the following items:

- bowl for rice and/or soup
- plate for main courses
- smaller plate for condiments and sauces
- short soup spoon
- pair of chopsticks
- chopstick rest
- drinking glass for non-alcoholic beverages
- wine glass for wine/proposing toasts
- smaller glass for hard liquor
- there will often be a rotating disk in the centre of the table, and all the party will share all the dishes

Food will be served complete with bones, heads and feet, and may be very spicy. If in doubt, ask!

If you find it difficult to use chopsticks then say so before eating commences, as to continue to struggle will be seen as impolite, and will embarrass the host. It is better to ask for a knife and fork at the outset, to save face in the business relationship. Also, if you do not want to drink alcohol at all you should mention this at the beginning of the banquet. Bear in mind that eating with your fingers is normal, eg tackling bones or shell fish. The Chinese are quite comfortable with leaving the discarded bones etc on the table! Waiting staff will frequently bring bowls of hot water, or hot towels for you to wipe your fingers.

Up to 12 courses are served at a banquet and a banquet can last between 90 minutes and 4 hours so it is important to pace your eating accordingly as you will be expected to eat food from each dish. The host starts the meal and is the first one to take food and may also serve food to the guests seated adjacent to them. After this, waiting staff would take over. After the first initial serving, guests can serve themselves although it is quite common to have extremely attentive waiting staff.

Be careful of the rotating disk in the centre of the table. Don't spin it too fast, and be careful to take turns. Remember to always leave a little food on your plate. This will indicate that you are full. If you completely empty your plate, then the host will think you might still be hungry, and they will worry that they haven't provided enough food.

Heavy drinking is an established part of a business banquet, and helps "oil the wheels" of the relationship. The Chinese commonly drink beer (Pijiu) and very strong spirits (Baijiu), so be very careful to pace yourself, while accepting top-ups politely. Hot water and green tea will also be served for drinking.

A round of toasts (or several) will be made by the host either during the meal or directly after it. This will consist of him/her going round toasting each guest individually. When the host approaches your seat, you should stand to be addressed.

The host will say 乾杯 gānbēi (Gan-bay), the Chinese version of cheers, translating as "empty glass", at which point you should gulp down all of your drink. It is considered rude not to do this.

The banquet will end soon after dessert, however if the host stands up, the meal is over and it is time to leave. Usually you will be shown to the door. The general rule is the more hospitable and accommodating the host is to you on departure, the higher they regard you and the better guanxi you have with them. Often karaoke at the same or different venue will continue into the evening.

Guanxi

The Chinese only do business with their friends or people they trust. On the surface this seems similar to western business practice (and common sense). However, Guanxi, pronounced gwan-she, goes deeper than simple camaraderie. Before two individuals or organisations partner up they first try to form a lasting bond informally through socialising, creating a bond of obligation and reciprocity. We have similar relationships in the west, however we fail to classify them as consciously as the Chinese do. *These relationships belong to the individuals within a business or*

organisation, not to the organisation itself. Depending on how deep or important the bond is, you may be able to ask for a few favours with a low expectation of that favour being returned. However if you asked an individual for 3-4 favours, when he/she asks for a return favour they will expect you to comply *even if it puts you in a unfavourable position.*

There are three attributes that make up a good guanxi partner.

- Durability (naiyong) translates as unconditionality, the more certain you are that support will be reciprocated; the longer it can be deferred.
- Hardness (ying) the hierarchical position of the partner in relation to your own position ie. the more powerful the person the **harder** he/she is.
- Connectivity (lianhua) does the partner have the relevant networks you need? There is no benefit to developing strong guanxi with an individual who doesn't have a useful network.

Exchanging business cards is a vital opening to a business and/or social meeting. Before the meeting commences every member of the group needs to address everyone else by swapping business cards. You must pass the card to the person using both hands and also receive with both hands. Once a Chinese businessman/woman passes you a card, look at it for a few seconds with interest and then put it away. Do not take this event as a casual exchange like we do in the West, as the Chinese attach ceremonial importance to this ritual.

Saving Face

The Chinese are very keen to be seen to do the right thing, and as guests in their country, it is vital to avoid causing any kind of social embarrassment. This is what is known as "Saving Face". To lose face causes offence and loss of honour, and any relationship would be at risk.

The abstract concept of "face" can be described as a combination of social standing, reputation, influence, dignity, and honour. Causing someone to "lose face" lowers them in the eyes of their peers, while saving or "building face" raises their self worth.

Simple Tips for Saving Face

- Avoid pointing out someone's mistakes openly in front of their peers or strangers.
- Always give sincere compliments when they are due.
- Show extra respect to all elders and people of rank, title, or uniform.
- When negotiating prices in China, be prepared to be very flexible and generous

- If offered, always allow your host to pay for your dinner.
- Avoid politics as a topic of conversation
- Politely refuse a gift at first, but always eventually accept the token with both hands.

Gift Giving

In China, gifts are often given to express friendship or hospitality or as a way of saying thank you. In China, tradition dictates that the recipient does not appear greedy. Therefore, he or she will often decline a gift two or three times before accepting. If you're the giver, offer again until it is accepted after the third time. At the same time, especially in business, your gift may be absolutely refused, so don't press beyond several refusals.

Don't be offended if the person does not open the gift in front of you. Chinese people do not usually open a gift in front of the giver. It might embarrass them. They will open it later, then call or write to thank you for the gift.

Business Gifts

In business, it is important to show sensitivity to people's status, so be careful to present your gifts to the person of highest status in the company.

It is generally not appropriate to photograph the event of giving a gift. If negotiations are involved, gifts should be presented once they are finished.

Receiving Gifts

Here are some general rules for receiving gifts in a Chinese way:

1. Gifts should be received with both hands when presented to you.
2. Chinese people who have had contact with Westerners might expect you to follow the Western custom of opening the gift in front of the giver. To avoid confusion, you can always ask, "Would you like me to open this now?"
3. Call or send a thank-you note and, if possible, offer a gift back on a suitable occasion.

Thank you for reading. In summary, just remember patience and persistence is key.

Enjoy your trip to China!