

Preparing yourself for life in China

Living in China is not the same as living in the West. While deep down, people share the same prime characteristics - need for love, need for food, need for shelter, need for God – the way they express these may not always be the same. For foreigners living in China, there is suddenly a whole set of rules that you need to learn:

- What do you do with your chopsticks when you're not eating?
- What should you take when you are invited to dinner?
- Why do Chinese women wipe bus seats?
- Why can't I simply ask someone to help me?

This set of rules provides some principles and thoughts. It could be much longer. However, we hope it will be a useful short-hand for anyone hoping to go on a Summer team, or for a longer experience.

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Greeting and gifts

Greeting quests

When greeting a guest, whether someone who drops in your office, or an invited visitor, it is normal to stand up, shake hands, invite them to sit down, and give them a drink. Give it even if they say they don't want one. The drink may be hot or cold water, it does not have to be tea or coffee or juice. A Chinese handshake is often a bit longer than a British one. If you are introduced to several people, shake hands with everyone. If given a name card, receive it with both hands, and read it before putting it in your pocket.

Receiving gifts

When offered a gift, Chinese will usually try to refuse, saying that it is not necessary. Traditionally, most Chinese will never open a present in the presence of the giver (thereby saving the giver's 'face' if the gift is not suitable). Also, do not expect the receiver to comment on the gift afterwards. The expression of thanks lies not so much in whether the recipient says 'Thank you', but in what he does in repaying a favour or in giving a gift of equivalent value. This also applies when you receive a gift - never accept a gift or favour if you are not ready to reciprocate. You will be considered impolite in Chinese society if you accept something on first offer. Historically, this was a means to cover up a lowly family background - you must refuse so as not to show that you lack something in your family - another aspect of saving face. So if someone offers you something to drink, or gives you something to eat, the expected thing is to politely decline, or at most, just to pick at the food. Thus, when visiting a home it is polite to refuse tea or food when it is first offered. Then when pressed, you may accept. However, when you are with Westernised Chinese, they may not expect you to observe that, so you have a problem - if you refuse, you may not get it! Sometimes, to a Westerner, Chinese seem to be angrier at each other than polite, and waste a lot of time in their volleying of offers and refusals. It can take three or four rounds before something is settled! Patience is a big part of politeness in China.

Admire, but avoid excessive praise of any object belonging to Chinese friends. They may feel they have to give it to you.

Suitable presents

Anything from the UK and identifiably English is acceptable. Postcards or coins for children, a mug with a university crest for a student, a university tie for a teacher, the better-quality sort of souvenir you get in National Trust shops for someone who has given you a present or done you a favour. Chocolates are OK. The (small) supermarket will gift-wrap them if you ask a friendly shop assistant nicely. Wrap presents in red paper or at least tie with red ribbon and stick on a red bow. If you are in a position of having to give a present to someone who is wealthy and has treated you accordingly, you may want a 'bigger' gift. A coffee-table book - in English - with pictures of stately homes or scenery compliments your friend on his/her education and sophistication. Leave the price mark in, and when they calculate the price from the exchange rate it will be expensive. Do not 'give a clock' as a present - it sounds like 'attend a funeral'.

Gifts for a meal

If invited to a home for a meal, it is a courtesy to take a small gift such as fruit. It should be about 2 kilos, a large quantity by our standards, of best quality fresh fruit, e.g. oranges. A class of students were asked for advice; they confirmed 2 kilos would be right, and also suggested 200 cigarettes (although you may not consider this appropriate), flowers, or a bottle of Great Wall (not French) wine (again, probably inappropriate). To make more of the present, you can have a nice selection from the fruit shop in a basket with ribbons. Traditionally, flowers are only for hospitals or funerals, but times are changing. Still, don't give yellow and white chrysanthemums. When certain fruits are in season and therefore cheap, people give each other large red boxes of them. Most Chinese go shoeless in the home and expect visitors to do likewise. After you remove your shoes they may offer you a pair of slippers or sandals

Saying 'No' to requests

Be careful about making a direct refusal. Replying at once, "No, I'm sorry I can't" in response to a serious request, is like a blow in the face. So if you are asked, for example, at a meal to which you have been invited, to give tuition to a child, and it is out of the question, do not reply

immediately. Your non-response says there is a problem. Talk about something else for a while, then bring up the matter and say there is a difficulty. Your 'problem' with the request does not have to be the full or exact truth. A Chinese faced with a similar situation, especially if asked in English and not knowing how to refuse politely, might say 'OK' but when the time came would send you the negative message by taking no action and making excuses; but we do not recommend this approach!

FOOD

All Chinese are foodies. Mixing your food is even worse than mixing your metaphors. Each dish is served as a separate entity because the Chinese believe that every flavour is unique and should be savoured as such.

Chopsticks

We cannot hope to tell you how to use chopsticks here - the only trick is practice makes perfect. Once you have mastered chopsticks you will realise that some foods are harder than others. Tofu, for example, is so soft it breaks apart under the slightest pressure. Don't try to pick up individual grains of rice. Instead, to finish your rice, bring your bowl up to your mouth and scoop it in.

In cheaper restaurants, you will have to break your chopsticks apart before using them. It is a good idea to rub them against each other to create a smooth edge; this is to avoid putting splinters in your mouth.

Traditionally, it is bad luck to drop a chopstick. Don't put your chopsticks into the communal bowl more than is necessary to get the grub. Also, never stick your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice. This symbolises death. It is frowned upon!

Entertaining

If you are keen on cooking, by all means invite a Chinese friend to cook a Chinese meal for you in your kitchen, but don't invite him/her for a Chinese meal cooked by you - it is sure to be cooked wrong one way or another, and they will say so. There isn't much point in inviting them for a typical McDonalds or Western restaurant meal either, they probably won't like it. Apart from pizza (maybe), fruit salad and ice cream, and some Chinese like coffee. Buy some dishes of Chinese food at a takeaway, cook some rice, and microwave and serve it at home, with fruit to finish. They will enjoy that. Or you can have the food sent in from a restaurant.

Finishing a drink

If you do not want more tea or juice, leave your cup or glass half-full. Do not drain your glass too quickly. Better yet, it is more polite just to have one glass or cup of beverage. In a restaurant, you may not want to drink any more, but don't try to stop the waitress from topping-up your cup, it's her job and part of the service. When having their cup topped-up, you may see someone tap lightly on the table with the third finger. That says, 'Thank you', or, 'Enough', politely.

In a restaurant

If invited to a restaurant, it is not necessary to take a gift of fruit, but the next time you turn the invitation round and invite them. If you invite someone to a meal they will feel under an obligation to invite you to a meal or to do something in return. In general, the seat opposite the door is the place of honour and you should always let the host indicate where he wants you to sit. Don't tuck into the first dish greedily - notice the Chinese will take a very little only - and there will be a lot more to come. If you are the guest of honour at a banquet you will be expected to depart before anyone else. So after the final course - usually fruit - wipe your hands with the towel provided and then excuse yourself. Everyone else will follow you shortly.

Suppose there is business to be discussed at a meal; don't betray your ignorance of civilised behaviour by being in a hurry. The meal serves to establish a good relationship as the background for the matter. The right time for the business will be when your Chinese friend or opposite number raises it, which will be towards the end or even after the meal.

If you are the host at a formal dinner, you should escort your most important guests to the street door yourself. Don't delegate it to a junior or leave them to find their own way out. When seeing guests off from your apartment, escort them to the lift, or stay waving goodbye until they are

round the corner and out of sight, before you close your door. This is called 'to song'. The further you *song* someone, the greater the kudos you give them.

If you are trying to persuade your Chinese friend to let you pay for a meal, don't wave money about, or try to press money on him. Try to get the waitress to give you the bill, or just give her the money. Or you can say you are going to the toilet and sneak by the pay-desk on the way. However, if he is determined to pay, there isn't much you can do about it, except invite him back another day.

Leaving food

Many Chinese foods have bones. What do you do with them? Usually in a restaurant, you will have a bowl and a plate. Feel free to leave your bones on your personal plate, or even beside your plate where there is no tablecloth. You may seem Chinese people spitting their bones on the floor. It is not impolite not to do this.

Brits think that Chinese waste an inordinate amount of food when eating in restaurants, and tend to order only as much food as they will eat. But if entertaining Chinese to a restaurant meal, order more dishes than you really need, because the lavishness of the meal indicates your respect for the guests. An expensive Chinese meal will include so many other dishes that most of the guests will not want any rice as well, but rice (or noodles) is usually offered towards the end of such a meal, in case anyone is still not full. The napkin provided is to protect your clothes; use a tissue to wipe the mouth. If there is food left over, it is quite normal to ask for a bag to take it home.

Weird food

China has a head to tail eating policy. No part of the animal is ignored as Chinese chefs demonstrate their culinary expertise. They also provide foods that are most unusual to a Western diet. How should you respond to this?

You wouldn't expect a guest in your home to pick up a bit of steak and laugh and say, "Yuk! What animal did this stuff come from?" So don't make laughing or critical remarks about the food. If pressed to have something that you may not like, accept it courteously, without comment. You don't have to eat it - you can pretend to eat a bit, and put it on your rubbish plate a few minutes later.

The big entrance

When you go into a small restaurant with your friends, don't embarrass everyone in the place by going in as a noisy group, calling out to each other and laughing. Pause in the doorway and see if there is room for your party. Let one person go in first to check, then go in quietly. If you sit at a table which already has any Chinese seated there, they will usually get up and take their food elsewhere.

Don't wave your arms about or shout if you want more tea or anything. When you see a waitress, just point to your cup. If you don't know how to ask for the bill, one of you can go to the desk to pay.

People and Relationships

You are not Chinese

Chinese regard their own nation as 'the middle kingdom'. The rest of us, historically speaking, are barbarians and uncivilised. If you are lucky enough to live in China, you will be treated as an honoured guest, because that is polite. However, the Chinese may also feel a little sorry for you that you are not Chinese, and therefore a slightly lesser human being. An illustration for this: you and your Chinese friends are sharing a taxi to your various different homes. Yours is the first. The taxi driver is lost. However good your Chinese, the driver won't think of asking you the way. Instead, he will ask your friends, and failing that, he will call out to random strangers on the street. They - at least - are Chinese.

Be humble

If you are an extrovert, you must exercise self-control in China. In a group situation you may be in the habit of loudly cracking jokes as a sign of friendliness, but if you are not the host or the guest of honour, keep your voice down. Forget the wisecracks - the Chinese won't understand them.

Don't talk about your job or your home country unless asked to. In coming to China your status will have changed. At home you may be a high-powered graduate, a teacher or a business executive, accustomed to being the centre of attention and giving your opinions with authority, but in Chinese society you are like a child, unimportant, unable to communicate, and with no place in the social hierarchy. Check your body language and conversational habits and adjust them accordingly. Practise humility in social situations, and one day someone may say to you, "Friend, come up higher".

Guanxi

Chinese are skilled at personal relationships, and they are all-important in their life. An employee may be demoted for having 'bad relationships' with his colleagues in the office, irrespective of how well he performs his duties. Guanxi is the Chinese term for relationships, networking and the complex and crucial art of offering and receiving favours.

Being observed

You will be carefully watched to find out what sort of person you are, whether you are trustworthy, hardworking, and good at your job. They will look to see if you are 'friendly', i.e. towards the Chinese people, and whether you are trying to become a civilised person by learning Chinese good manners and studying the language. They will note how you relate to your colleagues or students. They will be in no hurry to trust you with information or confidences. But in time you may gain some genuine and lasting friends.

If you are a teacher, a Chinese teacher will be sent along to observe your class, of course without telling you. You may be informed that 'the students like you', which means that your teaching is satisfactory or good. If you are offered a hint about doing something differently, you should take it seriously, even though it is presented as a casual suggestion.

Group Culture

Chinese society sees everyone as a member of a group. This is a big difference from British (Cartesian) culture, in which an individual is only responsible to himself, and what his colleagues do or don't do is none of his business. All the foreigners in a business or university or school in China will be considered as a group. Reprehensible conduct on the part of any one will give all in the group a bad reputation, at least partly because the others failed to prevent the loss of face and spoiled relationships. Should your fellow-countryman be doing something wrong, it may be commented on to you, as a request that you should do something about it.

Relating to a teacher

A good relationship with your teacher is naturally important. Confucius said, "If anyone brings the smallest token of appreciation, have I ever refused to teach him?" If you go to your teacher's home for tuition, show your respect for your teacher by usually taking a small gift, a packet of biscuits, for example. If the tuition is at your home, the glass of water or tea is essential, and some fruit or nibbles - remember to press him/her to eat some - are like the gift. There is no need to be embarrassed about making the payment. Offer it, with two hands, at the conclusion of the lesson. If you attend a class in a language school or university, a gift to celebrate a festival or holiday will be appropriate.

Using a middle person

If you want someone to do something for you, for example, to give you Chinese lessons, or to be your 'house-helper' or cleaner, don't approach them directly. The tactful, civilised Chinese way is to ask a third party to ask on your behalf. That way, they are not put in the position of having to say 'no' to you directly if they can't or don't want to do it; and if money is involved, it can be mentioned discreetly. Chinese people are accustomed to being the helpful middleman in such matters. If you ask the right person, in the right way, it is amazing how easily things can work out. A consequence of this indirectness and middleman thinking is that a casual comment may be taken as a request from you for help. So if you remark by way of chit-chat to your Chinese colleague that you have a problem, they may think you are asking them to do something about it for you.

When you grumble about a person or a department or your work, your comments are sure to be passed on, and not necessarily to someone who will make good, kind, and tactful use of the information. They may take some action you didn't want or expect. Any sort of criticism of your

hosts will come across as bad manners. So never whinge to a Chinese colleague or student unless you know him/her very well.

Some expats acquire a bad reputation for grumbling all the time. The foreigners' office try to look after you as well as they can, and if all they get is aggro and complaints and never a 'thank you' or a word of appreciation for their efforts ... well, how would you feel?

Conversation

Talking with strangers

Certain standard questions are asked as a polite way to converse with a stranger. You often get asked about differences between British and Chinese culture, or why you have come to China, but they do not expect a long explanation. Just say, for example, China is developing fast, or that you have good Chinese friends at home, so you wanted to visit their country.

If asked what you think about China, do not comment on anything you find annoying, peculiar, strange or embarrassing. Instead, remark on the beautiful gardens and parks everywhere. Mildly exaggerated praise will be considered good manners. As a matter of good manners, don't volunteer anything that suggests Britain or the US is more advanced, wealthier or better in any way.

'I want to improve my English, may I be your friend?' There is no need to be embarrassed. Treat it as a set phrase, like 'How do you do?' Reply, 'Yes, are you a student?' If asked for your phone number, you can ignore the question, or give an office number. Don't be offended if questions seem inquisitive, or not suited to your status. They are intended to convey friendliness. Get the feeling, never mind the words.

When asked if you like Chinese food, the correct answer is to say that you like it very much. You can say you find the local food rather spicy - they will laugh, of course - but there is no need to say you don't like MSG or the live fish or terrapins in the tank in the restaurant, or that putting raw meat into the hotpot is strange to you.

Talking about home

Most Chinese have no chance of going to the UK or the US, and are not that interested in being told about the place. Try not to give information about your home country until you are asked, and you will be surprised how long you have to wait! Requests for comparisons may be made by way of conversation rather than to obtain information, so don't oversupply it. Never correct anyone directly. If you are told that London is always foggy, (i.e. before coal fires were banned in 1952), what does it matter? A good relationship is far more important than mere facts. Always compliment your friends on their English; even if it is barely intelligible, say, "Your English is very good," and if you can say it in Chinese, so much the better. As good manners, Chinese tell any foreigner who says five words of Chinese that they speak it very well.

Pointing

Don't point to things and laugh or smile. This is very important, because, as you will observe, Chinese frequently indicate the foreigner and make a critical remark and laugh, so they know exactly what you are doing. Enjoy life and sightseeing and be cheerful, but don't make jokes about anything Chinese in public. Learn to point with your chin and make your humorous comment with a straight face, because there are people everywhere in China observing you. If when walking along you point to something, everyone in sight will look to see what you are pointing at, and if you smile, they will know you are 'laughing at them'. So don't point and smile. Don't point with the index finger, but with the open hand. Teachers in class should note this. To beckon to someone to come to you, keep the palm vertical. With the palm up it is a vulgar gesture.

Check you haven't developed the bad habit in conversation of pointing at the other person, or wagging your first finger under your colleague's or student's nose (like mother to a child at home) or tapping on the table to emphasise what you are saying. Relax! Be cool!

Smiling

As well as a sign of friendliness or humour, Chinese smile or laugh in embarrassing situations. You may see a group of Chinese gathered round a road accident and laughing. It's not callousness,

merely embarrassment. If a Chinese has to disappoint you over a request, he may well give you a big smile and laugh quietly while telling you the bad news.

Therefore, don't bother giving a big smile to a stranger because you are feeling happy, or want to spread international friendship - it may well be misinterpreted. A friendly nod of the head or a slight bow, for example when being introduced, is suitable and respectful. Persons in menial occupations such as gatekeepers and cleaners are usually ignored, and they appreciate a friendly nod if you see them regularly. Try not to laugh out of embarrassment if you don't understand what is said to you. They are trying to be polite and friendly. Also, don't laugh if there is no joke, it just makes you look silly in Chinese eyes. Laughing at Chinglish also gives offence.

Thank yous

Don't say xiè xiè 'thank you' all the time in shops. A polite nod on completion of the transaction is sufficient. The reason is that 'xiè xiè' implies an outstanding obligation; but you have got what you want and paid in return, so that's the end of the matter.

Facial expressions

Try not to frown. The Chinese will think you are angry with them. If you have the habit of thoughtfully wrinkling up your forehead when giving thought to a matter, attempt to let your Chinese friends know this is a Western mannerism.

If the person you are speaking to gazes around the room or looks to one side, do not take offence; he or she is just being polite. Shopkeepers and others who are not used to foreigners may appear offhand, for example 'rudely' shouting to someone else across you, but this may just be to cover their embarrassment.

Health and Hygiene

Toilets

Bear in mind that traditional Chinese consider Western toilets very dirty. Until very recently they would never consider sitting bare-bottomed on a seat that someone else has sat on bare-bottomed. For this reason in many mid-standard hotels where there are Western toilets, you will find the seat broken off, or very dirty, because they prefer to stand on the seat and squat. But a surprising number of Chinese family apartments now have Western toilets, which they think are more convenient, or more hygienic, or fashionable.

Modern cities have greatly improved in this matter in the last 10 years. Perhaps the Beijing International Toilet Symposium in 2004 made a difference! Clean, tiled public toilets are found in every park and main street, with washing facilities. Put 2 mao on the table. They will give change for 1 yuan. But many public toilets are free, and the attendant is just selling tissues. The parks often have taps in the open air, and you can see middle-class families washing fruit they have bought, and their children's hands. Outside is considered 'dirty' - with good reason. It is recommended always to wash your hands on returning home.

Domestic plumbing works on 2.5-inch waste pipes. Putting paper down the loo blocks the system, so bins are provided for the soiled paper.

Wiping

Middle-class ladies delicately wipe the chopsticks provided in a restaurant with a tissue, and in buses they carefully inspect the seat before sitting down, maybe whipping out a tissue to wipe it first. Most people carry a small packet of tissues. They are considered more hygienic than a hanky for blowing the nose - you throw the tissue and contents away. Logical really.

Water

Tap water should never be drunk, unless you are training your constitution for great trials. Boiled or bottled water should be used. The same is true when you are brushing your teeth. However, for cleaning the outside of your body, tap water is perfectly acceptable.

Fruit and vegetables should be considered unclean to the Western stomach. The rule of thumb is, peel it, wash it, cook it or forget it. When you see fruit being sold on the streets sat in jars of water, it may look delicious, but we recommend that you don't eat it.

Go by science and local experience, not the health fads in the papers at home that create worry. There is no need to pass round antibacterial sprays before meals - you eat with chopsticks not your fingers. Don't keep your toothbrush in a damp bathroom, and certainly not in the same room as a WC. You wouldn't keep your chopsticks there, would you? In many cities healthy expat residents use the bottled water for drinking, but tap water for washing fruit, washing up and cleaning teeth - ask someone about your city. Apply antibacterial cream to even the smallest cut or spot.

Shopping and Money

Money.

The Chinese use a straightforward decimal system for money. Because of inflation, there are a number of denominations of coin and note. The primary currency is Ren Min Bi, with the key denomination being 1 YUAN (also called Kwai, which means cash). This is then divided into 10 jiao, also called mao. Denominations are 1 jiao, 2 jiao, 5 jiao, 1 yuan, 2 yuan, 5 yuan, 10 yuan, 20 yuan, 50 yuan, 100 yuan.

Dealing with money

If you produce a wallet full of notes and credit cards, everyone will crowd round to see what you have got in it. The cool technique is to pull a handful of scruffy notes out of your pocket to pay with. In any case, don't flash money around, and safeguard your wallet / purse in crowded buses and stations.

Change and ATMs

The Chinese way (varies in different provinces) of showing numbers with the fingers is worth getting someone to show you. Small shops dislike giving change for notes over 20 yuan as that accounts for a large portion of their daily takings. Change 100 yuan notes in a chain store or taxi. You can get RMB from cash machines that take VISA, Mastercard etc at some banks and the airport. They have an English option, but may not give account balances. Select 'checking account' not any of the others. Most Chinese do not use credit cards or cheques. They pay cash. Do not offer 250 元 for anything, it means a 'stupid'.

Bags and backpacks

In bookshops and supermarkets you have to deposit your bags and backpack. There is no charge. In our experience, not all the shops that sell pictures, clothes etc ask twice the price from foreigners and expect you to bargain, though many do. If buying upmarket items like silk pictures, you first need to find out from a Chinese friend what they paid. Don't stress yourself over prices. It's only money.

Tea gardens

Tea shops are nice for sitting around in as an interlude from shopping. 5 yuan is the minimum price of a cup of tea, but in the smarter ones you may pay 30 yuan for a special cup of tea. There is usually a menu card showing the different types of tea on offer. Point to the one at the price you want to pay. Chrysanthemum tea is nice and fun if you want a suggestion. Take your own fruit and nibbles, and you can stay as long as you like. Sometimes in tea gardens people go for a walk, leaving their teacups on the table for their return. So be careful about taking over a table which has cups of tea on it - it may not have been vacated. Let the waitress confirm you can sit there. Don't put your bag on the dirty ground - get another chair to put it on. (Never put your bag on the ground).

Shoe shining

In tea gardens and smaller restaurants you can have your shoes cleaned while you eat and drink. The normal charge is 1 yuan. When he/she has brought your shoes back and you have put them on, don't ask the price, just casually give the 1 yuan note which you have ready. It will be accepted, maybe with a surprised look. If they demand 5 or 10 yuan, you will have a test of your life and language skills.

Overcharging

You can often see Westerners smile together as they point at goods for sale and make supercilious and derogatory remarks, as though they were commenting on the animals in a zoo. The shopkeepers aren't stupid and know they are being criticised. You can't blame them for getting their own back for the rudeness by overcharging. But why not be appreciative, even when shopping?

Classroom Behaviour

Exercising self-control

When in a group with Chinese, do not act as though you are the leader. Try not to be the one who asks for the aircon to be turned on, or who points out that something is wrong and ought to be seen to, or who suggests shall we start eating, or whatever. Just relax and wait patiently and see what happens. If you are with Chinese friends or colleagues and you all want a taxi, don't stride into the road and hold up your arm like a policeman - leave it to them and see what they do. Observe how consensus - the feeling of the group - is important in Chinese life.

Our body language, especially if we have been in leadership positions, often suggests to Chinese that we are arrogant and ill-mannered. In China, humility is considered a positive character quality.

Bossy habits like interrupting to put someone right or to taking over someone's conversation, are particularly ill-mannered in Chinese eyes.

If you belong to a profession where communication and expertise are highly valued such as doctors, teachers and senior executives you may have to work hard to keep your lips tightly pursed in order to show due deference to your new colleagues and counterparts.

First Impressions

If you are starting teaching, you may well not receive your timetable until the day before term starts, giving you little opportunity to prepare. It is worth preparing a 'First English Lesson Plan' suitable for school or university use, which will enable you to give a good, well-prepared first lesson. It will give a good initial impression of you as a teacher and make a good start to your relationship with the class. Always dress up for the first class, and maintain a 'power distance'. If you get too close to your students or colleagues too soon, they will soon lose respect for you. Friendship can come later.

Language

Learn to speak slowly, clearly and refrain from using idiom or slang. Don't be fooled into thinking that short words are better. After some months of teaching, you will have a grasp of the words that are taught and the words that are unknown. However, the speed of speech is less important than good enunciation. It is also possible to speak too slowly for good comprehension.

Many young professionals wanting to be informal, speak to Chinese just as they do at home to their friends, but this will be almost impossible even for someone with good English to comprehend. Few courses for professionals going abroad to work attend to this matter. You may hear native English speakers talk at 150 words a minute to local people. This will not aid communication. If you know you suffer from poor diction or have a strong regional accent you will have to work hard to modify your speech. This is not to cast aspersions on regional accents - simply that they are less familiar to Chinese learners of English.

Learn how to read aloud properly, or to speak more slowly to a roomful of people. The fact is that many new foreign teachers are barely understood by most of their students, but they don't know it. Also, if you are in a business or other professional context, the last thing you want is for your translator to misinterpret what you just said.

Noise

Speech full of ok / right / just / yeah / you folks / you guys / and stuff / sort of / and ums and ers, is referred to as 'noise'. It has the same effect as someone blowing their nose during a conversation since it interrupts the flow of speech. It hinders comprehension, as well as appearing less than professional.

So, check with an experienced English as a foreign language teacher who has heard you teach or give a talk, whether your speech is reasonably easy for a local to understand. Outside of the classroom, make sure your voice is not louder than the Chinese you are speaking with.

If you are coming to the end of a lesson and haven't used all your material, don't start speaking faster to try and get through it, and don't complain that you haven't got time - just leave out a few points and next time plan your lesson better! Under no circumstances steal the time of the next speaker or the students' break.

Exams

Everyone must pass (and 60% is the pass mark). You may feel this is unfair - and in a Western system it is. But before you work yourself up about this, consider: (a) you cannot seriously expect a university student to be expelled and have their future irreparably damaged just because he fails one exam (and the university probably won't be perceive your exam as having the same value as that of the locals) (b) all marks are processed by the Party office before being published, but they prefer you to make the adjustments or 're-test' the student, and (c) you can't change China.

Marking

Everyone knows that red is the colour of happiness and good luck, but red ink is only used for correcting exams and for protest letters. Avoid marking an X against a name, as it was used in the past to signify criminals (though the students may not know that). Use a tick or something else instead.

Odds and Ends

Clothes

If you want to be inconspicuous (not that it's possible, but you can try) and adapt to the local culture, dress like a teacher rather than a foreign tourist or a hippie. Jeans, baseball cap and an expensive camera swinging on your stomach are tourist gear. Torn jeans or sports gear worn at work will not generate respect for yourself or your employer. You will notice that older Chinese ladies dress modestly to conceal their figures. When they see a large foreign woman with tight-fitting clothes, they are inclined to make ribald comments.

Any shirt with a collar, with long trousers, and shoes not sandals or trainers, is considered formal, suitable for teaching, for meals in expensive restaurants, and occasions like the above. Ties are rarely worn, except by businessmen. Sandals are acceptable for teaching in hot summer weather. You may see many Chinese men with their trouser legs rolled up. This is not rude, but they are usually doing this when they are relaxing. Of course, your clothing should also bear in mind the climate of the area, and other prevailing or religious local customs.

Feet

Don't point the bottom of your foot towards someone, it's considered an insult - and even more so in Islamic areas. Bear this in mind if you like to put your feet up on the desk. There are other ways of making a statement of informality.

Traffic

The traffic is not chaotic. You have just been evaluating it with the wrong dataset. You naively thought that the green pedestrian light means that it has all stopped for you! But the following all go anyway: vehicles turning right, taxis, vehicles caught on the crossing when the lights changed, buses which were in sight of the crossing when the lights changed, and cars driving onto or off the pavement; and cycles, electric bikes and pedicabs use the pedestrian crossing in all directions at once. The small bossy woman with a red flag and whistle can no longer issue on-the-spot fines.

Haircuts

Haircuts are a pleasure. You should get two free hair washes (one before and one after) and some head massage with a haircut. Sometimes the couch has a machine with wheels that knead your back, with a control to vary the speed and pressure. If you enjoy it, you can go in and ask for a hair wash only. You can spin it out by asking to have your ears and eyes washed as well. It's done with running water, no instruments.

Massage

Massage is great here - once you have been able to explain how you want your hair cut (a picture may help). For foot massage and whole body massage (which is done through your clothes) you specify how long, an hour is normal. They are quite likely to go on longer, and of course charge you for it, if you don't keep an eye on the time. Foot washing (=massage) may include most of the body as well. If the beds are open to the street you can assume the services are respectable and cheapo, but not everyone likes to be in full view of passers-by. Respectable establishments that offer privacy have cubicles, individual or for two or three friends together; they are often part of a hairdressing business and the massage, like the haircutting, may be done by a man or a woman. (A woman wearing a skirt may be offered a pair of disposable plastic pants for 5 yuan to put on). The first time, you could ask a Chinese friend to go with you. Sometimes, work colleagues (men and women) go together for a special treat.

Compass

A pocket compass is useful if you go walking. So is a pocket torch in the winter, and for when the power goes off. Chinese compasses point south, British and American ones point north. (Can you explain that?) The smallest roads on the town maps are often inaccurate. The Chinese often give directions by compass points: "Turn East at the traffic lights and then head North"...

Phoning

To use a public phone, go into a small shop with several phones and indicate you want to use one. When you have finished, they will tell you how much to pay. They may not do overseas calls.

Beggars

If you pass a disabled beggar, and you believe in helping the unfortunate, there is no harm in giving 1 yuan. In most cities you won't be pursued by more of them - although beggar children, who are being exploited, may follow you, tug at your clothes and be very persistent. It is also acceptable to hand over food items.

Getting unlost

If you get lost and have no cell phone, get a taxi and show the driver the phone number of your (preferably Chinese-speaking) friend, written on a bit of paper. He will call him/her for you. Problem solved! Always carry a card with (a) your address in Chinese characters, and (b) where it is near, because a taxi driver won't know all the streets in the city, and he may not understand your directions. This explains why foreigners are sometimes driven around and then dumped at a hotel - the taxi driver doesn't know where they want to go. If you are in a place where many taxi drivers are from a minority group, they may not read Chinese, so you may have to give verbal instructions or the name written in pinyin or English.

Case Studies

Removing Napoleon

A group of foreign teachers on an outing with their English-speaking minder stopped for lunch at a small-town restaurant. Among the Western pictures in the room was a print of Napoleon. The teachers commented on it, making jokes. The guide asked, what were they laughing about, and was told that Napoleon had been an enemy of England 200 years ago. A few minutes later a waitress came in, climbed unsteadily on a chair and removed the picture.

This illustrates the sincere desire of Chinese to please their guests; the importance of pictures as symbols; that what is no longer seen has ceased to exist; not to laugh at anything because it will be taken as criticism; and sensitivity towards political matters.

What's the point of dinner?

An experienced foreign teacher and his wife were invited by a school principal, through a third party, to a meal in an expensive restaurant. No reason other than 'meeting the boss' was given, but the teacher surmised that the purpose was to invite him to join their staff. Also present was the school's English-speaking recruitment agent, and a few new foreign teachers and their wives. Probably they had been told the school wished to welcome them / show them some Chinese

culture. They would make up the numbers, and as it is customary to entertain new foreign teachers to a meal, it would kill two birds with one stone.

In China no-one volunteers any information unless it is necessary to get you to do what they want. So if you had been one of the newcomers, how could you learn the hidden background to the meal? For a start you could discreetly ask one of the host party to tell you who the other people were, and their jobs.

The head teacher was the host. A senior woman executive from the company that owned the school sat next to him. You might have noticed that she took no part in the conversation, only picked at the food, and spent half the time on her cell phone. Perhaps she was not fluent in English and was embarrassed to speak it with foreigners. But her presence complimented the guests and indicated there was serious business afoot. With this information you might have hazarded a guess at the purpose of this apparently straightforward social occasion. After the meal, in the car park, you might have seen the agent and the school principal talking business with the teacher.

Be observant for the little things that reveal a lot about life in China, and ask the right questions.

Dressing for Television

Some foreigners and their wives were invited to a TV studio, to record a programme about laowai (foreigners) in the city (i.e. "The food is delicious, the people are friendly, and we all like it here"). The presenter had a young woman to interpret for him, and there were a number of Chinese students and others present. In descending order of precedence on the Chinese scale were: the presenter in charge of the proceedings, an old Chinese man of 82 who spoke English, a famous Chinese actor, and a white-haired laowai couple. The actor sat upright in his chair with his knees together, showing dignity and respect for the occasion, and said nothing for a long time unless he was spoken to. The older couple, who were newcomers in an unfamiliar situation, observed him and did the same. An Indian teacher who had been invited, complimented his hosts by wearing a smart Chinese style embroidered jacket.

In contrast, a middle-aged foreigner made himself the centre of attention, talking loudly, upstaging the presenter, joshing with the interpreter girl (a menial in this context), and putting his arm round his (Chinese) wife. Another foreigner, a young man who had turned up in a T-shirt and shorts, sprawled in his chair with his elbow intruding into the space of his neighbour sitting next to him, and was obviously impatient to be interviewed.

Learn how to behave in different situations from the Chinese around you. Patience and modesty are highly valued in China.

When the bus misses you

Two senior foreign teachers waited in the rain at the main road at the usual time for the teachers' bus to pick them up. For some reason, it drove past them without stopping. One walked back to their apartment block and asked the gatekeeper "Is the bus coming today?" (not "Why didn't the bus stop for us?") The gatekeeper phoned the driver, who happened to be his son, and he turned back to collect them. Because Chinese see everything in personal terms, such an event causes loss of face all round and everyone was embarrassed. On getting out of the bus at the college, one of the foreign teachers (not a fluent Chinese speaker) said quietly to the driver in Chinese, "It's a lot of trouble driving in the rain." Offering this face-saving excuse to the driver said to him, "I am not angry, and it will not spoil our relationship."

This would further good relationships with the gatekeeper and the college drivers, significant people in the lives of all foreign teachers. It shows appreciation of Chinese sensitivity to 'face', and how to deal with it tactfully, and also that even a simple sentence can turn a bad situation to good account.

Shouting out of character

Bad experiences in connection with language classes are not uncommon in China. A lady in her mid-forties joined a university class which taught Chinese to foreigners. None of the students were beginners, but like many Westerners, her speaking ability was in advance of her reading. She was also unfamiliar with the textbook. The teacher asked her to read a sentence. She only knew one or two of the characters in the sentence, so couldn't do it. The teacher scolded her at length and kept on asking her to read, until she was reduced to tears. (Incidentally, the classmate sitting

next to her should have helped her by whispering the correct words - that would have been quite acceptable).

You may ask yourself, 'Didn't the teacher realise that if you don't know a character you don't know it and can't read it? Why did he make her lose face? What was he trying to do?' Analysis of this and similar situations will give you insight into the mindset of a Chinese teacher and the Chinese educational system.

Examine your feelings about this story. You are convinced that the educational system in which you were brought up, despite some faults, must be superior to one that can produce such an outcome. It's self-evident. Now you know exactly what most Chinese feel about everything Western.

Last-minute request

A Chinese graduate decided to organise a summer camp, that is, a holiday school for children or students to learn more English. Near the end of the semester, he asked a foreigner with teacher contacts, to get a few foreign teachers for his camp, which would start in two weeks time. He was most surprised to be told that it would be quite impossible. It had not entered his mind that foreign teachers might go home to see their families in the vacation; or that, like Chinese, they lead full, planned lives. Chinese understanding of how Westerners think and live is a blank sheet.