

Protocol for Canadians in China

China is an ancient civilization with well established norms of social behaviour. A premium is placed on courtesy to guests. The Chinese are tolerant of the social customs of others, and do not expect visitors to be fully conversant with the norms of Chinese social behaviour. When in doubt, it is useful to remember that good Canadian manners will almost always be recognized as courteous behaviour in China.

Public Behaviour

The Chinese tend to be more formal than Canadians, especially so with foreigners until they know them well. Dress in China is almost always informal. Most Chinese wear loose fitting cotton slacks and jackets, though young people are increasingly wearing Western fashions, and officials increasingly wear Western suits.

The Chinese are punctual. Do not arrive late, particularly at a banquet where this would be construed as an insult. If you are the host of the banquet, arrive before your guests. Banquets end shortly after the fruit course and are no longer than 2 hours.

Forms of Address

Chinese personal names usually consist of a three characters combination, with the surname being given first. There is a paucity of surnames, and the Chinese share a few commonly used names. A Chinese with the name, for example, Zhou Pengfei, goes by the family name Zhou (pronounced "Joe"). In formal situations, which extend to all business and work contracts, it is best to stick with Mr./Mrs./Miss Zhou. In Chinese, you would use Xiansheng (Mr., pronounced Syenshung) or Nushi (Ms., pronounced Nuhshur) after the surname, e.g., Mr. Wang would be Wang Xiansheng; Ms. Wang would be Wang Nushi.

Greetings

A nod or a slight bow will usually suffice when greeting someone, but a handshake is most acceptable. The Chinese tend to be quite formal in introducing visitors and will use the full title of their guests. However, the Chinese often avoid identifying themselves precisely.

Eating

It is polite to sample every dish served. Chopsticks are used at all meals and should be placed neatly on the table when you have finished eating. The food is placed in the centre of the table, and it is polite to taste every type of food prepared. Any bones or seeds should be put on the table or in special dishes, not in your rice bowl. When dining at a restaurant, the host will pay the bill. Business is generally not discussed while eating. It is impolite to drink alone, therefore toasts are usually offered to the people sitting nearby or to the whole table. Guests should have a short but friendly speech prepared to reciprocate. Nondrinkers may toast with water or soda pop.

Conversation

Chinese prefer to have their country referred to as the "People's Republic of China" or simply "China." Questions asked out of interest and in friendly manner about the politics or economics of the country are quite acceptable. The Tiananmen tragedy remains a sensitive issue, however, and would not normally be raised in casual conversation.

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To be Avoided

- Tipping. Under no circumstances should tips be offered.
- Facetiousness. Frivolous remarks should be avoided on all official occasions including banquets and toasts, especially with reference to political leaders.
- Calling Taiwan a country. This will invite an instant rebuff. Taiwan is considered a province of China.
- Photographing military objects, photography from aircraft, taking pictures of people against their will. It is advisable to ask permission before photographing wallposters. Otherwise the attitude towards photography is liberal.
- Exchanging foreign currency. Resist the temptation to change foreign currency or foreign exchange certificates unofficially. It is strictly forbidden by Chinese law.
- Favours. It is wise to decline politely when approached by a stranger for a favour, such as buying goods for them in hard currency.
- Discourtesy. Try to cultivate patience - life in China goes at a slower pace, and rudeness will not speed things up. In fact, it is usually counterproductive.
- Antisocial behaviour. Unruly and wild behaviour, excessive noise and obscene gestures occasioned by heavy drinking or high spirits are not usually well received, although Chinese do enjoy moderate drinking and mild jokes at banquets when behaviour is always tempered.

Business and Social Customs

A recent study of Chinese business culture conducted at the Political Science Department of Carleton University has made the following noteworthy points:

- In China, your firm is considered of utmost importance; in North America, typically the product is considered most important. Since most North American firms are unknown to the Chinese, the negotiation process is used as a method to obtain more information about you.
- Trust must be established before discussing deal specifics. Trust is formed by a combination of the personal relationships built up with business counterparts, as well as knowledge about the stability and permanence of the counterpart organization or firm. Introductions by trusted intermediaries should not be underestimated.
- Chinese appreciate the involvement of a senior corporate official in negotiations. The presence of a senior manager is seen as a guarantee of performance, as well as a mark of respect.
- Dinners are an indispensable aspect of deal-making with the Chinese. The party initiating the business transaction will normally host the banquet. A company should not underestimate the importance of details, such as restaurant pricing, ambience, service and the role of the host, at these dinners.
- In the negotiations, price flexibility is considered an important indicator of trust. Packages of product, installation, training, service and technical support should be unbundled and priced individually.
- On occasion, Canadian firms may receive requests for agency fees or kickbacks.
- Chinese tend to mediate the opaque regulatory environment by cultivating personal relations with officials. A good Chinese counterpart should be able and willing to negotiate the regulatory environment on your behalf.

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- Chinese are extremely uncomfortable about walking away from a deal. Sudden hardening of terms or impossible demands may be a signal that a deal is not possible; your counterpart may be pushing you to back out. Do not attempt to embarrass your counterpart by calling his bluff. A polite disengagement could be rewarded in the future.

Receiving Chinese Delegations and Conducting Business Presentations in Canada:

Formal introduction to all members of the delegation is important. Business cards should be exchanged among all members of a delegation and is an essential part of business protocol. You should try to present your business card with both hands to show your respect, especially to the leader of the delegation.

If possible, have your card translated into Chinese, or at the least, have a Chinese (Mandarin) speaker translate or transliterate your family name into Chinese characters and write it on the card beside your name. Make brief welcoming remarks and introduce your staff individually. The delegation will likely do the same.

When planning the text of your presentations, allow at least equal time for interpretation. Speak clearly with a slightly slower speed and pause after two to three complete sentences to allow the interpreter to provide accurate translation. Whenever possible, use maps, charts and overheads to illustrate your essential points. It is very useful to have key ideas translated into Chinese and handed out to the delegation members.

Written handouts are important -- even if the delegation members may not understand them, they will have English speakers in their company translate them after their return. When hosting a delegation at a meal, the host should ensure that the most important guest is seated on his or her immediate right and the second most important guest on the left. The interpreter will most likely sit on the immediate right of the head of the delegation. Although more dairy products are gaining acceptance in China, it is suggested that cheese, cream sauces, milk and butter be generally avoided if a Western meal is to be selected.

Visiting China on Business:

Be aware of the significant cultural differences and make an effort to adapt to it in both personal and business interactions.

Try to understand the intricacies of "guanxi" or personal connections. "Guanxi" could also imply reciprocal exchanges between two parties who have developed this relationship. Be sure to develop your "guanxi" wisely and observe local customs while doing so.

Recognize the importance of "face" in interpersonal relations. Be deferential to those above you and considerate to those below you by virtue of age or position.

During business negotiations, emphasize the long-term association a business relationship would be able to bring. Do not rush negotiations with eyes set only on the signing of the contract.

Chinese often strive for consensus in internal decision making. As consensus often takes time, the Canadian company should learn to adopt the virtues of patience and perseverance.