

Key Culture Concepts: Courtesy

6 Secrets to Impress Chinese People with Your Manners

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Certain common Chinese behaviors may stand out as strange or even rude when you are traveling abroad in China.

These include:

- Spitting on the streets
- Shouting "服务员 fú wù yuán" to get the server's attention in a crowded restaurant
- Asking someone how much money they make
- And, of course, every weary tourist on a late-night/early-morning bus has woken up at some point to a man screaming into his cell phone.

But just because someone exhibits behaviors that cause offense, doesn't mean he is rude. It just means that politeness can mean different things in different societies.

How come saying "please" doesn't work?

At the dinner table in the U.S., friends and family would say to each other, "Please pass the salt," or, "Thank you for the sugar." If you did this at a Chinese table, you would get some strange looks and awkward silences long before you got any seasonings. As my cousin explained to me at his table, when you're with family, you don't have to be so 客气 kè qi, (polite) and act like a guest. Among Chinese friends and family, there is no need for such cordiality.

In fact, if you seem too formal (which can happen if you repeat "thank you" and "please" too many times), your friends may actually feel hurt that you see the need to be so polite with them. Formal language, such as "thank you" and "please", are most often used by customer service representatives, instructional signs, and in business exchanges.

But just because parents don't drill children to say 谢谢 xiè xiè (thanks) and 请 qǐng (please) doesn't mean that politeness doesn't matter. The Chinese concept of 礼 lǐ - customs, etiquette, and proper behavior stemming from Confucian times - continues to hold great weight in Chinese culture today.

Here are the secret ways of the practice of 礼 lǐ:

Respect elders by treating them like family

Chinese parents may not be too concerned about children chewing with their mouths open. But even before babies can speak, they are coached on greeting their relatives with the proper endearments. As most Chinese language learners are aware, describing a Chinese family tree can require painstaking specificity. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles are referred to differently if they are related to your father versus your mother. Siblings are distinguished by being younger or older. If you happen to be a younger sibling, you'll often use 哥哥 gē ge (older brother) and 姐姐

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jiě jie (older sister) instead of your siblings' names. If a child does not greet their elders or refer to them properly, someone will be sure to call them out for being 不礼貌 bù lǐ mào - having no manners.

It is also common to use these familial terms for people with whom you are not related. A younger woman at work may add a single “姐 jiě” (older sister) after the name of an older female mentor. And even when you are a mom with full-grown children, you may still refer to an older friend or neighbor as aunt (阿姨 ā yí) or uncle (叔叔 shū shu).

Pay attention to people's food intake

Food is major facet of Chinese culture. One way to show concern for someone is to ask whether they have eaten. If not, there is always the opportunity to dine together. When eating with family or loved ones, a common gesture of love and affection is to pick out a choice bite and place it on someone else's plate. If it feels awkward to drop something onto another person's plate, you can always say, “多吃点 duō chī diǎn” (eat more) to encourage people to eat more.

Finally, another interesting note on cultural differences. In the U.S., it would be downright mean to point out that someone has gained weight or looks heavier. In China, however, complimenting someone on growing fatter is generally accepted as celebrating someone's good health. Of course, I was not so grateful to hear these comments when I returned home from college with my Freshman 15.

Parting with regret and kind words

After a shared meal or evening, it inevitably becomes time to part ways. Reassuring someone that there is no rush or exhorting them to stay longer shows that you have enjoyed the time spent together.

One way to do this is to reassure them that there is no rush - 不急不急 bù jí, bù jí. Another way is to appeal to sit a little longer - 多坐坐吧 duō zuò zuò ba. Finally, when there is no longer any way to delay the parting, it is good to wish each other a slow and gentle walk (慢走 màn zǒu). Some customer service representatives will also add a "please" before they wish you a gentle walk, but this may sound stilted and formal among friends and acquaintances.

[Additional note: Chinese hosts will always walk out with you and send you off, as far as they can go. They will never shut the door behind you when you leave, and you should remember the to do the same when you have a guest.]

Concern for someone's hard work

When a Chinese person is grateful for a co-worker's diligence or a loved one's labors, it may feel too awkward to thank them directly. However, there are many other ways to show that you notice and appreciate their hard work.

One method is to acknowledge that someone has had to toil by saying “辛苦你了 xīn kǔ nǐ le – You've worked hard.” The phrase, 辛苦 xīn kǔ, is a bit difficult to translate, but it is generally used as a verb or an adjective to describe a challenging time or a difficult struggle.

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Demonstrate humility

Humility is one of the most valued virtues in Chinese culture. This is why, when discussing an accomplishment you are bursting with pride about, you might negate it and say that it's actually nothing. And when you give a presentation, you may precede it with statements of how unexpected it is to have the honor of speaking or apologies for any inadequacies in your knowledge.

Even when you do have lots of knowledge and experience, it is good to ask for guidance from others. This is especially true when you are introducing yourself to a new group of co-workers or colleagues.

Reciprocate favors and gifts

Reciprocity is another important concept for some Chinese people. The rules of reciprocity mean that if someone buys you a meal or a gift, you should do the same for them at some point in the future. This applies also to favors, such as job referrals, loans, or other benefits derived from a friend.

Reciprocation forms the basis of that famous Chinese social currency known as 关系 guān xi. Guān xi, meaning connection or influence, can often determine one's professional and political success in China. If you are working on building relationships in China, don't forget to reciprocate. Among friends, failure to reciprocate can be interpreted as a snub or a sign that you are not interested in maintaining the relationship. In business, it can determine your accomplishments and failures.

<http://www.yoyochinese.com/blog/6-Secrets-Impress-Chinese-People-Your-Manners>

Discussion Questions

1. What kinds of behaviors have you already seen or experienced in China that would be considered rude in the West? What was your reaction (emotionally, mentally, or physically) to the behavior?
2. What do you think about the idea that you could hurt your Chinese friends by saying "please" or "thank you" too much? How is that possible?
3. How do Chinese attitudes and behaviors toward elders differ from ours?
4. What do you think about the idea of reciprocating in relationships? Do we have anything similar in our culture?
5. People directly commenting on weight, body shape/size, etc., is often very difficult for Westerners when they spend time in China. Why do you think this is? Why do you think it's okay for the Chinese?
6. If you are visiting a Chinese friend but really need to leave, what do you think you should do when they say "Don't go - stay a little longer!"?
7. What are some ways you can demonstrate humility when you start working at your school?