



# **Protocol Tips for China**

*Prepared by the Minnesota Trade Office  
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### GREETINGS AND NAMES

- Chinese generally shake hands when they greet guests. However, the handshake should be gentle. Sometimes, as an expression of warmth, the Chinese will cover the normal handshake with their left hand.
- It is acceptable to bow slightly when greeting someone. However, the bow is essentially a nod – do NOT bow from the waist like Japan.
- As a sign of respect, Chinese sometimes lower their eyes slightly when they meet others.
- Except for shaking hands, do not touch anyone unless you know them very well. Do NOT embrace or slap Chinese on the back.
- The order of Chinese names is family name first, then given name. Thus, Zhang Wenqiang should be addressed as Mr. Zhang.
- Unless you are good friend or have been asked to do otherwise, you should address your Chinese associates as Miss, Madam, Mr., or by their job title, followed by their family name. Rarely, if ever, do Chinese use first names on business occasions. The Chinese are quite formal and prefer using someone’s title. For instance, if Mr. Zhang is the Director of an organization, he typically would be referred to as Director Zhang.
- Never call anyone “comrade.”

### BUSINESS CARDS

- Business cards are an essential courtesy in China – keep a supply readily available.
- Ideally, have your business card translated into Chinese on one side and English on the other.
- Use two hands to present your business card with the Chinese version facing up. Your name should face the person you are presenting the card to so he can read your name.
- Use two hands to accept a business card. Study the name for a few seconds when you receive the card.
- Do NOT write on someone else’s business card.

### GESTURES

- Do NOT point with your finger. Chinese point with an open hand rather than with one finger.

### EYE CONTACT AND FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

- Chinese will often avoid eye contact during conversations, especially when talking to the opposite sex or to strangers.
- Traditionally, it was considered impolite and aggressive to look directly into another’s eyes while talking.
- Chinese typically have a “blank” facial expression during introductions. This is not a sign of unhappiness, dissatisfaction, or unfriendliness, but reflects the belief that there is virtue in concealing emotions.

### RANK AND HIERACHY

- The Chinese have a great respect for fixed hierarchical relationships. Rank or position is extremely important.
- At meetings and banquets, the most senior guest or the oldest person is introduced first and is seated in the position of honor immediately to the right of the host.
- The most senior or oldest person generally sits in the center of the negotiating table, facing the door.
- Age and position are seen as signs of wisdom and rich experience. Older foreign business people have an advantage, and generally receive more attention than their younger colleagues. Whatever your age, always show respect for the opinions and suggestions of your Chinese counterparts who are senior in age and position. Such an attitude will be viewed by Chinese both as a gesture of respect and as a sign of sincerity.

### DRESS AND APPEARANCE

- For both business meetings and entertainment, loud colors and showy jewelry should be avoided. Women should also avoid low necklines, mini skirts, and solid red or white colors (red is reserved for brides and white for funerals).

### CONVERSATION

- Good topics for discussion include differences between China and the West, and the advances the Chinese have made.
- Expect questions about your age, marital status, salary, and the price of personal items. Although your answers need not be detailed, trying to avoid answering will only invite suspicion and misunderstanding. For the Chinese, the specifics of your answers are not as important as your willingness to respond.
- Avoid mentioning Taiwan and do not criticize Chinese leadership.
- You should refer to the country as the “People’s Republic of China” or simply “China,” rather than “mainland China.”
- The Chinese use silence as a way to avoid saying “no”. Silence also implies, “There are still problems, and we would like to reconsider the main issues.” Since the Chinese do not like to say no, you should avoid asking them questions that require such a response.
- Another way the Chinese avoid a negative response is to say “We will do some research and discuss it later.” Don’t be too encouraged by the word “research”. In many cases, it means “We are not interested”. As a foreigner, you can best size up a situation by paying close attention to facial expressions, gestures and overall body language.
- Chinese communication is ambiguous, indirect and highly contextual. In conversation, the real meaning, especially if it’s negative, is often implied. What has not been said can be as important, or more important, than what has been.
- Refrain from loud, boisterous speech and actions.
- Laughing loudly is not polite or suitable in China when people meet each other for the first time.
- Try not to be too talkative, and be sure to take an interest in what your host has to say.

## PROTOCOL TIPS FOR CHINA

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- Give your host a chance to bond with you, but expect your host to be more reserved in a business setting than would be the norm in the U.S.
- When meeting someone for the first time for a business meeting, you should engage in general conversation before turning to business.

## SAVING, LOSING AND GIVING FACE

- Chinese go to great lengths to save face, while at the same time attempting to give face to others. Face is the principal measure of an individual's reputation and dignity. Preserving one's reputation and contributing to the reputation and prestige of others is one of the most important moral responsibilities of every Chinese.
- If you cause someone to lose face, you can be certain you've lost the chance to do business with his organization and perhaps others in his industry.
- Praising an associate to his superiors for his excellent contribution to the success of the group is one way of giving face. Accepting an invitation because it will show respect for the host is another. Anything you do to enhance another's reputation will eventually come back to you as an advantage.
- Since the Chinese do not like to say no, you should avoid asking them questions that require such a response.

## GIFTS

- After your meetings with the Chinese, it's a nice gesture to offer a small company-related or USA memento (e.g. pens, caps, paperweights, mugs.) Gifts of any great value can cause embarrassment and usually are not accepted by the Chinese.
- Present your gifts with both hands.
- The Chinese do not usually open gifts in front of the presenter.
- When wrapping, be aware that the Chinese ascribe much importance to color. Red is lucky, pink and yellow represent happiness and prosperity; white, gray and black are funeral colors.
- Chinese do not usually accept a gift, invitation or favor when it is first presented. Politely refusing two or three times is thought to reflect modesty and humility. Accepting something in haste makes a person look aggressive and greedy, as does opening it in front of the giver.
- When you are the recipient, remember that sincerity, appreciation and face are far more important than whether or not you accept what's being offered.
- The following gifts should be avoided: white or yellow flowers, pears, and clocks.
- Do NOT use red ink to write cards or letters. It symbolizes the end of a relationship.

## BANQUETS

### General Banquet Etiquette

- Formal banquets are the most popular form of business entertainment although business is not discussed directly at meals.
- The sponsoring Chinese organization generally hosts the welcome banquet.
- Foreign guest should reciprocate toward the end of the visit.
- Guest should plan to arrive a little early and should leave shortly after the meal.

## PROTOCOL TIPS FOR CHINA

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- If you are the host of a banquet or an event, you should be on hand to greet your guests upon arrival.
- Guests will be seated in protocol order with the most senior guest seated to the right of the host.
- Allow the host to begin eating before you begin eating.
- Your host often will serve you and will continue refreshing your dish if you clean your plate. When your finished with a course, always leave some food on your plate to indicate the meal was plentiful and that you couldn't possibly eat more. Otherwise, your host will continue replenishing your plate.
- Your teacup and/or drink also will be refilled constantly when emptied.
- During the meal, be prepared with toasts expressing thanks, pleasure and friendship.
- It is polite to sample every dish, and when eating rice, it is customary to hold the bowl close to your mouth.
- Attempt to use chopsticks.
- Chinese meals may have more than a dozen courses, depending on the ranking guest of honor.
- You may be offered food that you have never thought of eating before. Your hosts are sharing their friendship and culture with you. Rejecting food your host offers you is a sign of rejection to them personally. If you don't think you can possibly eat it, take very small bites and converse more.
- In China, people usually do not linger after a banquet. They usually depart immediately. However, no one should leave before the guest of honor.

### Chopstick Etiquette

- Chopsticks are used for all meals, and when finished eating, should be placed together neatly on the table. Be aware that it is not rude for a guest to be served with the same chopsticks that a host uses to eat with.
- Pick up chopsticks with your right hand, then transfer them to your left hand and take the proper grip with your right hand.
- Hold chopsticks between your fingers.
- Don't place your chopsticks on top of your rice bowl. Instead, return them to the chopstick rest with the tips pointing to your left.
- Don't point or gesture with chopsticks.
- Don't lick the ends of your chopsticks.
- Don't pick up a dish with the hand that is holding the chopsticks.
- Do NOT eat directly from the serving bowl. Place the food on your plate first before you eat it.
- Use the "handle end" of the chopsticks to take food from a common serving bowl.

### Toasts

- The host will make the first toast, which normally occurs after the first course. The guest of honor reciprocates after the next course. References of mutual benefit and "friendship between our two countries or increasing the level of mutual understanding" are some phrases that might be included.
- Don't drink until you toast others at the table. Chinese consider drinking alone to be rude.
- Toasts are often made after the arrival of a new dish on the table.

## PROTOCOL TIPS FOR CHINA

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- A toast to friendship among companies is totally appropriate and will help to cement the business relationship.
- It is acceptable for women to make toasts.
- If you want to avoid drinking alcohol, tell your hosts that your doctor has told you not to drink alcohol. If you do decide to drink during the evening, but want to stop, tell your hosts that you have reached your limit.