Understanding Chinese business etiquette

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China: Pop Quiz

• Population?
  • 1.35 billion
  • (Approximately 20% of the world)
  • Biggest in the world

• Which countries are (geographically) bigger?
  • Russia (and Canada, US if ‘total area’)

• Name of the ruling party?
  • Communist Party of China (CPC)

• Name of the President?
  • Xi Jinping

• Largest city (urban population)?
  • Shanghai

• Which Chinese year is it now?
  • Horse
It’s all Chinese to me…

- Mandarin
  - *Lingua Franca* of PRC China and ROC (Taiwan)
  - One of 4 official languages of Singapore
  - One of 6 UN languages
- Cantonese
  - Hong Kong
- Other dialects
  - Up to 250 (e.g. Shanghainese)
- Top to bottom?
- 1956: Traditional vs. Simplified
Business cards

• Two hands
• Read it
• Put it on the table
• Don’t write on it
• Don’t put it away until the end of the meeting
• Get cards printed in Chinese on one side
  • Include your title
  • Colours can work against you (but gold is good)
  • Get a cardholder (not pocket / wallet)
Greetings

- Shake hands
- Greet oldest / most senior person first
- Address people by their title + surname
- Keep it formal
- Dress conservatively
- Use your Chinese!
Meetings

• Make an appointment
• Get an introduction
• Punctuality
• Set an agenda (so that both parties can prepare)
• Expect a group
• Bring an interpreter
• Written material in both languages (if possible)
• Presentations (colours)
• Be patient and listen for subtle messages
• Keep it non-confrontational
• Hierarchy and decision-making
• Low-pressure, slow-paced decision making
• Don’t worry about the mobile phones!
Concepts: ‘Face’ and ‘Guanxi’

• ‘Face’ (prestige, dignity, honour, respect, reputation, status, self-esteem)
  • Have it
  • Give it
  • Gain it
  • But don’t lose it
  • And never cause anyone else to lose it

• ‘Guanxi’ = connections / relationships
  • Valuable
  • Individuals / network
  • (Does not generally relate to family)
  • Western perception ‘guanxi’ → nepotism/cronyism
  • Culturally important
Superstition: Numbers & Colours

Numbers

• 13 (Unlucky for some…)
• 4 (Sounds like death)
• 8 (Sounds like wealth)
• Mobile phone numbers
• House / floor numbers
• “Good things come in pairs”

Colours

• Red = blood / life / good fortune / wealth / China
• Black = evil / disaster / bad fortune / winter
• White = mourning
• Yellow = beauty / Imperial China / Buddhism / (pornography)
Superstition: Gifts

Etiquette

• Present with both hands
• You may have to offer it multiple times
• Give a single group gift from your organisation to the most senior member of their delegation at the beginning of the meeting / ceremony
• If multiple gifts then consider value and hierarchy
• Avoid anything too expensive or any connotations of bribery
• Wrap in red / pink / gold (not black, blue or white) - get gift-wrapping service!
• Don’t expect them to open it in front of you

Avoid

• Flowers (only for funerals)
• Anything sharp / knife-like / scissors
• Clocks / shoes / handkerchiefs (sounds like ‘funeral’ / ’death’)
• Sets of 4
• Writing in red ink
• Green hats!

Do give

• Pens / watches / wallets / something representing your organisation / handicrafts / book
• Boxed whiskey or cognac / chocolate or other nicely presented food items
• Pairs or sets of 8
Dining: 1

General etiquette (watch and copy!)
• Arrive on time and dress smartly
• Wait to be seated (special order)
• Host will choose dishes and pay
• Don’t be the first to start
• Dishes are usually shared, try everything!
• Compliment host on dishes
• Help to serve others first / rotate the lazy Susan

Chopsticks and toothpicks
• Try to use chopsticks. But…
  • …only for your own food (use serving spoons for dishes on table)
  • Don’t play, point, skewer, stand them in food or lay over the bowl (return them to their rest)
  • Cup hand over mouth when using toothpicks between courses
Dining: 2

Alcohol
- Baijiu (rice wine) give it a try (or have a good excuse e.g. health)
- “Gan bei!”
- Allow others to serve your drink
- Drink together
- Know your limits and stay professional

Other drinks
- Tea (not water)
- Table tapping
- Juice / Coke / Sprite

Toasts
- Host will give first toast. You should reciprocate later.
Dining: 3

Don’t:
• Turn over a whole fish
• Cut noodles (longevity)
• Ask for condiments or add soy sauce to rice
• Be offended by slurping or belching!
• Indicate that you don’t like something. Just leave it!
• Tip the staff
• Hang around afterwards

Do:
• Lift your rice bowl (but not your plate)
• Leave a little in your bowl if you are full / place your hand over your bowl / say that you are full
• Offer to pay but don’t split the bill
• Reciprocate, but don’t exceed!
• Stick to Chinese restaurants
• Order plenty (an even number) of dishes
Thank you for listening

Any questions?

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