5 Business Rules of Etiquette You Have to Know When Traveling to China

Are you ready to become a professional highly qualified and successful business person? Making important decisions, being responsible for many people, leading next generation projects and traveling to countries around the whole world. Interested? Since China is one of the world’s leading economic countries, here are the top five most important business rules of etiquette when traveling to China:

1. What do you do for greetings?

As most other countries do too, Chinese prepare for their greetings. Collinsworth (2014) examined that when meeting for the first time a business partner from China, you do not have to bow down, as many international people would have suspected. There, it is usual to just shake hands with international business partners. Watch out though: do not use a strong handshake, but a soft one. Also pay attention not to look into their eyes for too long. Chinese can interpret it as being observed. For the beginning of the greeting, remember to share your business card with your partners. The business card should be in English on one side and in Chinese on the other side. Additionally, Broderick (2014) notes not to forget to give your card to the business partner with both hands and also to receive it with both hands. This way, you make clear that you are paying attention and that you show respect towards your partner. Malley (2012) points out that when you find yourself introducing to other people in a meeting room, do not be surprised when they start applauding. That is usual for them, you can just go with it and enjoy your personal applause.

Moreover, Nevison (2009) explains that Chinese tend to avoid physical contact with strangers. But as they meet with friends, they do not bother about the physical contact, because they usually have friends for a life time and take care of their friendships. As you are a stranger to them in the beginning, you should withhold yourself and, for instance, try not to tap shoulders. Besides that, Kwintessental, a guide to international business etiquette, emphasizes that if you need to point to a person, do not point with your finger, but use your whole hand to show respect. Another sign of respect is when Chinese nod their head, while someone is talking to them. This does not mean that they agree with you. It rather means that they understand you and listen carefully. So do not take the nodding as a sign of agreement, but as a sign of understanding.

2. Are you prepared for small talk?

Before talking about the business and getting right to the point, Chinese are more likely to make a little small talk in the beginning of your conversation as described by Kwintessental. The topics for small talk are simple, but can be
very personal: for instance, the topics can be about family, age and income. What your Chinese business partner will most probably like, is receiving compliments, especially about their country and food. They are proud of their country and like being praised about it. Usually small talk takes about 5 to 10 minutes. That way you give them a chance to get a better impression of you.

3. How should you communicate?

In China it is very important for the people not to hurt somebody’s feelings when talking to them. Therefore, Doctoroff (2010) states that it is better not to tell the truth or make it less harmful. During a dialog everyone should feel comfortable. That is why:

A “Yes” from your Chinese partner does not always mean a “Yes”!

It just means that they have understood what you were saying. Furthermore, they try to avoid the word “No” by saying “Maybe” or “We will see later on”. Often important topics are being repeated a lot of times, instead of emphasizing and stressing the voice. That is why you have to remain patient, even if the topic is being repeated a ridiculously amount of times.

4. In need of tips for negotiations?

Normally, the higher ranked people lead the dialog. Therefore sometimes they make extra-long pauses to emphasize their importance. But not only this makes the negotiations take a lot of time, the fact that Chinese believe in many supernatural activities, can result in even longer negotiations. For example, a specific moon configuration can be the reason for the delay of a meeting. The number four is an unlucky number, thus there are neither floors with the number four, nor rooms with this number. Also, Neidel (2010) explains that contracts take a lot of time because even though you might have found a compromise and agreed on the contract, it is typical for them to change it and add things next time, if they think it is necessary. When Chinese listen to you during a meeting, they might also have private dialogs, make phone calls and yawn really loudly. Do not take this behavior as a rude approach towards yourself. Being quiet basically means that the listener is falling asleep. Therefore, during a presentation, as a listener, it is normal and even recommendable to make some noise and show that you are paying attention.

5. What about business lunch?

The most important part of your negotiations with Chinese business partners is the business lunch as discussed by Broderick (2014). During lunch the most fundamental topic is the meal: The Chinese will ask you to try every single meal that is on the table and, of course, they will want to know your opinion about it. Stoller (2013) mentions to remain respectful and try to praise their food, because meals are very important to build relationships in China. While having the business lunches, Chinese also tend to drink a lot. The only chance for you not to drink is, if you say that you react allergic to alcohol or if you are a woman. That is, because in China it is not common and very rare that women drink or even smoke. Also, try to keep down talking about your business, rather use some small talk and a lot of compliments about their country as already mentioned above. When sitting at the table and pouring any drinks, make sure that you do not pour yourself something, but always the people, who sit next
to you at the table. Trust me, if your drink is empty, they will pour you more to drink as it is a big part of their culture to watch out for each other. After you finish your food and you want to leave the table, make sure that you leave some food behind, because otherwise the Chinese will think that you are still starving.

Last but not least an extra tip in case you meet people for the first time and want to make a good first impression: When handing over gifts to your Chinese business partner, they will be happy about international souvenirs and especially when the presents are wrapped in red paper, which is the color of luck.

Now that you are informed about the basic facts on how to behave while traveling on business occasions to China, make the best out of it and hopefully get as many agreements and contracts as possible.

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List of References


