

# China – people, culture, language

## A guide for businesses



### The country

**China today:** China's official population stands at 1.29 billion, though it is reckoned that the true number lies closer to 1.5 billion. That makes China the most populous country on earth.

Population control has been very successful, and the growth rate is below 1%. This has, though, resulted in an ageing population, and a phenomenon of a generation of 'little emperors' who are adored and spoiled by two parents and four grandparents.



The Tian'anmen Gate Tower, Beijing

**Environment:** China's climate and terrain are very varied, ranging from desert conditions in the northwest, through huge mountains and the Himalayan plateau in the west, to hot, tropical rainforest in the southwest. Most of the main population centres are clustered around the two great rivers, the Yellow River (*Huang He*) and the Yangtze (*Chang Jiang*), together with the Pearl River in the south.

The level of development varies greatly. The coastal cities are all uniformly filled with skyscrapers and white-tiled buildings. The country gets poorer as you move west, and away from the cities there is still subsistence farming and high levels of illiteracy.



The Assembly Hall of Shanxi, Shaanxi and Gansu, Henan Province

### Business culture and etiquette

#### Establishing relationships:

- **Guanxi.** Broadly speaking, *guanxi* (pronounced 'gwan-she') means 'connections'. To do business in China you have to make the right connections. This means meeting the right people, developing long-term relationships with them and making sure that favours and generosity are reciprocated. *Guanxi* is probably the most important single asset of any foreign business in China.
- **The concept of 'face'.** In business and social relationships, Chinese people will almost always seek to preserve harmony, save face and avoid conflict. It is important to avoid other people 'losing face' if possible, and it is a good idea to 'give face' to others, for example by letting your Chinese colleague speak English, complimenting them, asking after their families, commenting on their office/house – and definitely by not contradicting a Chinese person publicly. Bear in mind that if the truth is uncomfortable, someone may not want to 'lose face' by telling it.
- **Effective performance management.** The Chinese are highly pragmatic and will respond to effective performance management systems. Set out clear goals, clearly-stated expectations and norms of behaviours. Give effective monitoring and relevant feedback, allowing Chinese colleagues to recognise the need to change behaviours without 'losing face'. Offer training and development opportunities and do not be afraid to use the 'carrot and stick' approach: rewards can reinforce desired behaviours if applied consistently and equitably.
- **Making use of local expertise.** The comparatively young framework of laws and the inexperience of those who wield them, coupled with traditional bureaucracy, can make China's business environment seem like a maze. The best way through is often to use reliable local people – consultants, agents, employees, lawyers or just people who have been there a while.

### The people

- **Ethnic make up:** all but 100 million are *Han* Chinese, *i.e.*, not from one of the ethnic minorities. The largest minority groups are the Tibetans, Mongolians and Uighurs. Most minorities live in the north, south and west, away from the coast.
- **Informed and curious:** the Chinese are very easy to get to know, warm, generous, interesting, curious, wise and thoroughly rewarding people to have as friends and business contacts. Society is also changing very fast. The younger generation, raised in a society where China is increasingly integrated with the rest of the world, are outward looking and well informed. You will find that you will be asked quite a lot of personal information (Are you married? and so on). Do not be offended, under any circumstances, by this friendly curiosity.
- **'Foreigners':** the Chinese government is eager for foreigners to come and spend as much money as possible. Your 'special' status means that you may receive extra help from government employees: for example, workers in train stations may come up to you to offer help and let you skip queues and sit in waiting rooms. The division between Chinese people and foreigners is breaking down steadily. Foreigners are far less of a curiosity than they once were, especially in the cities. The Chinese are keen to learn and absorb from the West and have adapted many aspects of Western living into their own lives – without sacrificing what is best about Chinese culture.
- **Free time:** though traditional arts are regaining their former importance, most Chinese spend their free time quite differently. The Chinese devote a large amount of time to eating and drinking, and also enjoy watching TV, which is an unusual mix of minority festival displays, soap operas and patriotic singing contests.

#### Meeting and greeting:

- **Be smart and punctual.** Business meetings start on time and it is a good idea to arrive early. Jackets and ties should be worn for meetings, and when invited out for meals.
- **Shake hands.** The Chinese always shake hands when being introduced to someone new. It is usual to be introduced to the most senior person present first.
- **Business cards.** These are always exchanged and this should be done with two hands, as a sign of respect. The business card is considered to represent the person to whom you are being introduced so it is polite to study the card for a while and then put it away somewhere safe. Your business cards should be bilingual even if the people you are meeting read and write English (see the *Resources* section for translation services).
- **Refreshments.** Green tea is usually served, boiling hot and in a porcelain mug with a lid. To avoid a mouthful of tea leaves, let the tea stand for two minutes so that the leaves sink to the bottom.
- **Negotiating.** If it has not been made clear to you who the most senior person is, try to establish this by asking about their relative roles in the organisation and then address your remarks to that person. Once the substance of the meeting commences it is important to make sure you are clear about everything that is said. Both sides may well be using an interpreter, so double-check anything which does not seem to have been interpreted properly (see *Using an Interpreter*, overleaf).
- **Be patient.** The Chinese are tough and highly-skilled negotiators and part of the reason for this is the ability to think longer term than their western counterparts. It is advisable to enter any meeting adequately prepared and with your key points firmly in mind.

## Language

- **Official language:** Mandarin, based on the Beijing dialect. In Guangdong Province, in the south and in Hong Kong, Cantonese is spoken. Written Chinese is based on pictograms or 'characters'. You have to know between 2,000 and 3,000 of them just to read a newspaper, and each character can comprise up to 25 different strokes.
- **Speaking Chinese:** the Chinese language is often considered the single most difficult aspect of doing business in and with China. At first hearing, Chinese seems impenetrable and impossible to master. But invest some time in learning to speak it, and your investment will be amply rewarded. It is fun to learn, as well as being challenging, and your status will shoot up in the eyes of your Chinese partners. Chinese people believe that anyone who makes an effort to speak Chinese is showing admiration and respect for their country. And why not?
- **English:** very few people in China know any English word apart from 'hello', which is often called out repeatedly to anyone foreign who walks past! Chinese people especially like teaching this trick to small children. Most Chinese are desperate to learn and practise English. Although a large proportion of the educated classes can speak English, it is very seldom fluent.
- **Finding translators/interpreters:** in the UK, you can search for local, quality-assured providers on **BLIS Professionals** ([www.blis.org.uk/professionals](http://www.blis.org.uk/professionals)). In China, translators and interpreters are readily available – the best place to enquire is at the British Embassy.

## Basic Chinese phrases

The positive impression you will make by learning to speak a few basic Chinese phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases – if you are interested in learning the Chinese language, you can search for quality-assured trainers and courses at [www.blis.org.uk/courses](http://www.blis.org.uk/courses).

	<b>Mandarin</b>	<b>Pronunciation</b>
Hello	您好	<i>Nín hǎo</i>
Good day/ morning	早安	<i>Zǎo ān</i>
Good evening	晚安	<i>Wǎn ān</i>
Goodbye	再见	<i>Zài jiàn</i>
Yes / no	是/不是	<i>Shì/Bù shì</i>
Thank you	谢谢	<i>Xiè xiè</i>
That's all right	还可以吧	<i>Hái kě yǐ ba</i>
Excuse me	不好意思	<i>Bù hǎo yì si</i>
My name is...	我的名字叫...	<i>Wǒ de míng zì jiào...</i>
What's your name?	请问您贵姓 ?	<i>Qǐn wèn nín guì xìng</i>

## Gifts

Small souvenirs are often exchanged. Any difference in value should reflect the status of delegation members. It is usual to wrap the gift in red paper. Never give clocks because the pronunciation of the words "to give a clock" sounds similar to a phrase that means "sending somebody to the grave". Avoid presenting white flowers or any form of chrysanthemums as these symbolise death. Giving a green hat is an insult to the receiver as this implies that he/she may have an unfaithful partner!

## Sources

Research and text: Eliza Quek, Global Excellence [www.global-excellence.com](http://www.global-excellence.com)  
Yu-San Chan and Francine Pickering, San Translate Ltd. [www.santranslate.com](http://www.santranslate.com)  
*The China Business Guide*, by R. Porter and M. Robinson. Keele University China Business Centre and the China-Britain Business Council, 1994.  
The China-Britain Business Council [www.cbbc.org](http://www.cbbc.org)

Photographs: *China Through a Lens*, at the China Internet Information Center [www.china.cn.org](http://www.china.cn.org)

## Using an interpreter

- **Before the assignment:** firstly, define the type of interpretation required (whispering or simultaneous). Fully explain the goals and objectives of the meeting or presentation. If you are making a speech or presentation, let your interpreter have a copy of the text in advance. Explain any important or difficult concepts and points. If you are part of a group, make sure they understand that only one person should speak at a time.
- **At the assignment:** appreciate that interpretations may take much longer than the original speech (when interpreting from English to Chinese, the Chinese version is usually about twice as long). Speak clearly and slowly, and pause regularly – every minute; after a thought is complete; or after you have made a major point.
- **Make sure you avoid:** long or complex sentences; slang, jargon, or colloquial expressions; jokes and humorous stories (humour seldom travels well and risks creating misunderstanding or causing offence); and interrupting the interpreter (unless it is really necessary, this can be confusing and appear rude).

## Banquets

**An essential part of doing business.** Banquets can be very enjoyable and a valuable opportunity to establish a good rapport with your potential partners. They should be regarded as an essential, not an optional, part of doing business in China. Very senior people may be present at a banquet whom you have not met before. They may be key to the approval of your business. The banquet is your opportunity to impress them and get a feel for how things are going.

**Eating and drinking.** It is a Chinese custom for the host to serve the guest, and this is a way for your hosts to 'increase face'. In the interests of hygiene, communal chopsticks are often provided for this purpose. It is wise to inform the interpreter of any special dietary requirements beforehand, although if you don't like something that is served, just leave it and it will disappear with the next change of crockery! There will usually be several toasts during the banquet, starting with the main host early on in the proceedings. It is customary for you to respond to the first speech (and possibly others, depending on how many are in your team). These should not be long or detailed responses but should include some positive and encouraging statements about your hopeful prospects for business cooperation.

**Ending the banquet.** The Chinese do not normally sit around with drinks and coffee after the meal, and an entire banquet will typically last for around two hours. Once the last course has been served and everyone has had an opportunity to taste it, UK visitors will be expected, as guests, to bring things to a close by taking leave of the Chinese hosts.

**Returning the favour.** UK visitors should be prepared to host and pay for a return banquet. This may be a good opportunity to resolve a sticking point in negotiations, or to elicit answers to any outstanding questions. Remember to place interpreters at appropriate points around the table, to aid communication (see *Using an interpreter*).

## Signposting and resources

- **BLIS Professionals** ([www.blis.org.uk/professionals](http://www.blis.org.uk/professionals)) – an on-line, quality-assured database of translators, interpreters, language trainers and cultural consultants in your area. You can search for BLIS providers offering Chinese language services in the East Midlands.

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