Cultural Bytes: Norms and Practices in China

China is a large country, with rich and diverse culture and traditions. Chinese people are also very aware of the Western culture and have adopted many Western ways of doing things.

Greetings and meetings etiquette in China
In China, the most appropriate and common business greeting is a firm hand shake with the words Ni Hao. Ni Hao, colloquially translates to ‘Hello’, and sometimes you may also hear variations such as, Ni Hao Ma, meaning ‘How are you?’ and Ni Hao Ba meaning ‘How do you do?’

For male to male greeting, you can emphasise that you really value the person you are greeting by a double-hand shake, where you place your left hand over their right hand. This is not advisable for greeting females, as it can be misinterpreted for being overbearing or forceful.

As a lecturer you do not need to shake every student’s hand. A general group greeting from the front of the class is sufficient.

If you are meeting someone in an office or meeting room, don’t just take a seat. You should always wait for gestures indicating for you to be seated. Your host will usually show you to your seat. Sometimes your host may say ‘sit down’. This is not a command or an order. It is a simple and most direct translation, meaning for you to take a seat.

Titles and names etiquette in China
When addressing someone it is more appropriate to use Professor, Dr, Mr or Ms. Never use Miss as it has negative connotations associated with it. The Chinese do not generally use the term Mrs.

Exchanging gifts etiquette in China
When it comes to giving gifts, the Chinese most appreciate souvenirs and products from your country or organisation. ECU has many gift items made from Australian materials, with the university’s logo on them, most suitable for business situations.

For personal gifts, you may consider items made from Australian natural products such as emu oil, lanolin and lamb placenta, which is a rich source of skin nutrients.

There are some products that are not suitable for giving as gifts to a Chinese person; these are:
- Umbrella – the Chinese word for umbrella sounds similar to being separate or to depart
- Clock or time devices – as it symbolises death or end of life
Books – as it can sometime symbolise losing; however, books about ECU or Australia are considered appropriate. Never give a Chinese person, items that are made in china.

When exchanging gifts or business cards, always use both hands to give and receive. If you are giving a business card, make sure to face the card the right way such that the person receiving can read the card without turning it around. Similarly, when you are handed a business card, receive with both hands, pause, read the card and put it away in your business card holder, wallet or purse, or somewhere respectable, such as inside your compendium. Never put a Chinese person’s business card in your trousers pocket, especially the back pocket.

In China, tradition suggests that the recipient should not appear greedy. Therefore, sometimes, particularly with a very traditional person, when you offer a gift, they may decline. If this is the case, offer it for second or third time, until it is accepted. Usually, after a third time they will accept.

Similarly, to appear not greedy, once accepted, they may not open your gift. So when you give a Chinese person a gift and they don’t open it immediately, do not be offended by this, and do not suggest that they open it in front of you. Most Chinese, are aware of Western culture and tradition and they may ask, “Shall I open this?”, in which case indicate accordingly so that they feel comfortable to open the gift.

When you have been offered a gift, it is not necessary to refuse as the Chinese are aware of Western traditions. It is up to you, if you’d like to open it in front of them. If you do, you will need to show appreciation. If you decide not to open the present in front of them, make sure to acknowledge and thank them the next time you see them.

Taboo and sensitive subjects etiquette in China
Death is generally not openly talked about in China, so to avoid accidentally offending anyone, do not say phrases such as “my mobile phone is dead” or “my watch just died”. Rather rephrase by saying “my mobile battery is not charged” or “my watch is not working”.

On the other hand, the Chinese tend to build relationships and show they care for you by asking what may be deemed too personal by westerners. The Chinese may sometime ask about your personal details, such as how many children you have, their age, if you are married, what your spouse does for work. Do not be offended by such questions and equally do not offend by not responding to such questions. If you are not comfortable to give detailed information, answer in general, and ask them about them and their family. This will indicate to them that you also care for them, and that you want to build relationships with them.
It is best not to talk about religion, politics, sex and sexual orientations in general. Sometimes, the student may challenge you by asking your opinion on controversial or political hot topics. Acknowledge their question, take a neutral position and do not get into discussion about the subject. Some subjects to avoid are Japan, Taiwan, Tibet and Dalai Lama. The local newspaper, China Daily is a good guide for Westerners, as it provides the country’s position on many issues.

**Sacred animals etiquette in China**

Dragons are highly revered creatures in Chinese culture. They are regarded as heavenly creatures, considered helpful and wise and seen as a sign of good fortune.

Another animal, highly admired in China is the Panda. Apart from being cute and adorable, traditionally Panda represents peace because it does not feed on living creatures. As such Pandas have a long history as Chinese gifts, presenting symbol of peace and friendship.

There are a number of animals that you should not mention in conversations. Snakes and cats are seen as being untrustworthy; and a sparrow can represent stealing or theft. Under any circumstances do not compare anyone to a dog, even if you mean well, by saying they are a cute as a puppy.

**Hygiene etiquette in China**

In China, people are able to smoke everywhere, even in restaurants. They will also ash and throw cigarette butts on the ground. Do not be surprised or offended by this.

You will also find, some Chinese hawk to clear their throat, spit, pick their nose or ears in public. Whilst these may be unacceptable social behaviours in Western culture, they are all acceptable practices in China. Again, don’t be surprised or offended by this. It is unlikely that any of your colleagues will display such behaviours during your business encounters. You may see some of this behaviour in your class perhaps. If this is the case, it’s an opportunity for you to advise and educate your Chinese students of Western culture and practices. If you see this in wider general public, you may not have much choice other than to look away.

**Social etiquette in China**

When visiting someone’s home in Asia, it is often the practice to remove your footwear and leave by the front door. This isn’t always necessary, particularly in business settings, so it is advisable to observe what your host is doing and emulate this.

**Food etiquette in China**

The Chinese will most often use a round dining table to host a meal or banquet. In formal and business settings, the host will sit at the head of the table and have their
VIP on their right and second VIP on their left. At the opposite end of the table, the second host will usually sit with third VIP on their right and forth VIP on their left. As a guest, always wait to be seated so you that you don’t have to guess where you should sit.

In most cases, if you are the VIP, the host or a waiter will put some food in your plate or bowl, sometimes with their own chopsticks. Typically, until the VIP has been served or taken the food from the middle, the food will not be passed to the other diners. When you have finished what’s in your bowl, the host or the waiter may offer more. Generally, take a little bit to show appreciation of the food. If you are full, politely indicate that you are full and compliment the food.

When you are recommended to try something you are not used to, try a little bit. You may offend the hosts if you plainly refuse. When you've tasted that food, your colleagues will usually ask for your feedback. Try to say something complimentary. If you are not fond of the food, then suggest that you will help yourself, so that the host won’t put any more in your bowl/plate.

It is recommended to use chopsticks when dining with your Chinese colleagues, even if there is knife and fork available. This indicates that you appreciate the Chinese culture and that you are making an effort. Remember not to place your chopsticks in your plate or bowl. When not in use, place them on the chopstick rests on the side of your bowl, or rest them across the bowl. Be aware that guests around the table may use their own utensils to serve from the main dishes that are placed in the middle. Lastly, do not burp at the table or in front of your hosts – this is not a sign of appreciation in China.

**Alcoholic beverages etiquette in China**

In China, at most social gatherings, whether pleasure or business, alcohol is usually consumed. It is not only acceptable, but expected that you would consume alcohol when offered to you. If you are not a big drinker, still accept the offer and only take small sips. If you really don’t wish to consume alcohol at all, refuse the offer politely by providing a reason, such as you are on medication or detoxifying your liver.

When drinking with your Chinese colleagues, you will often hear the word ganbei!. Ganbei!’s direct translation means drink up or bottoms up. But, in the context of social drinking, the word is used to toast drinks, same as Cheers!. This does not mean you need to drink up.

When toasting, your Chinese colleague may lower their glass to level with the bottom of your glass. This is a sign of respect to show that they have hold in you in regards, or you hold a higher rank or status than them. To show mutual respect and rank, simply put your hand underneath theirs so that both your glass and theirs are at the same level. Then lightly touch the glasses to toast.
You may find that Chinese consume large amounts of alcohol, particularly spirits. Wine and beer are considered as supplementary drinks. If your Chinese colleague is drinking much more and faster than you, do not feel that you need to keep up. Take small sips regularly to show that you are being social and enjoying their company.

**Teaching and learning in China**
As a teacher or a lecturer, the Chinese students will expect that you are an expert in your field and they will trust your teachings. As such they may not ask many questions in class. It is important for you to provide clear guidelines and set boundaries from the beginning, on matters such as asking questions, group participations and plagiarism.