

## Guanxi

*Guanxi* is a very important concept in China, and is alive and well in Shanghai. *Guanxi* is partly networking and partly personal connections. It is based on relationships, and involves the reciprocal giving of gifts and favors that can go on over the length of the relationship. The use of these connections, personal networks and ties create a form of mutual dependence (*hui bao*).

*Guanxi* has developed historically from the need to share limited resources, and comes from a long tradition of struggle and hardship. Even in today's society it is a key element for business and social success. This means that Chinese people devote a lot of time, money and energy to maintaining and developing their networks.

These networks are firstly personal ones: family, friends, fellow students, teachers and co-workers. These ties create a basis from which the connections grow and spread, and so become useful in work and business. Foreigners are also expected to behave by, or at least show some understanding of, the rules of *guanxi*.

The level of difficulty or energy involved in the giving of the favors is what determines the resulting amount of *guanxi*. Helping a colleague to get a visa, or finding a job for one of his or her relatives or close friends is much more likely to foster *guanxi* than business dinners or karaoke nights. These may generate mutual goodwill, but not *guanxi*.

This does not necessarily fit with Western standards of business, so you need to be aware of this practice, in order to understand the many Chinese business people you deal with.

The exchange of gifts can be one important sign of *guanxi*. So if a Chinese client in a work situation starts to give you gifts, then it is polite to offer reciprocal gifts. These gifts can demonstrate that you have listened to their conversation and developed an understanding of their likes and dislikes. You could perhaps give them wine if they have expressed an interest in Western wine.

Gifts from your home country that reflect your cultural background are also highly prized. On the other hand, failure to reciprocate with gifts can be considered a rejection of closer relations and potential *guanxi*.

A related notion to *guanxi* is the importance of the family network, especially with the present limitation of family size. A couple made up of two single children will take responsibility for 4 parents, their own children and possibly grandparents and grandchildren, as Chinese people tend to have children early and live a long time! Thus networks and connections also become important in the care and support of the extended family.

### Mianzi (Face)

The concept of 'face', as in the Western expression 'to lose face', refers to a person's status in the eyes of others. It is linked to reputation, honor and hierarchy. The concept of 'face' is intimately related to the hierarchical structure of Chinese society, and to the desire to appear as high up that hierarchy as possible.

'Gaining face' is illustrated with visible signs of economic success such as clothes, cars and houses, as praised by someone who has more 'face' (or status).

Loss of 'face' can be caused by failure or shame in the presence of others, so in a work environment, criticism and setbacks are taken very seriously. An important element in saving 'face' is the desire to avoid embarrassment in front of other people. 'Face' is an essential part of an employee's motivation in the workplace and so the desire to 'save face' can sometimes affect what information is conveyed or not conveyed, as 'face' can be more important than 'facts'.

The hierarchical element of 'face' is strong in the workplace. While in a Western office it might be normal for the boss to take his turn going downstairs to buy coffee for other staff, even quite junior staff in China can resent such a request because they think it is beneath

their station.

The best method for dealing with any misunderstanding is by setting the example yourself.

To maintain a happy and productive work environment, both Western employees and employers need to deal with 'face' related issues with tact, resolving them privately, offering a way out if possible, and never bluntly saying 'no'.

### Ren ching wei

'Ren ching wei' refers to kindness, sincerity and consideration. For example, in the gift giving process, it implies that a person will gently and repeatedly refuse a gift that is offered, while the giver will continue to insist until their gift is accepted. So please do not give up and withdraw your gift too early in the process! The offer of a gift should be accompanied by protestations from the giver as to its modesty and lack of value.

If the person does not open your gift it doesn't mean they are not interested or appreciative, it is just not considered polite to open a gift in front of the giver. This can be confusing for Western parents when they go to Chinese children's parties for the first time and a pile of gifts remains unopened on a table. From the Chinese perspective, this is considered to represent good manners as it shows a lack of greed and avoids a situation where somebody could be embarrassed if the value of their gift seems inadequate in comparison with others.

### When yes does not mean yes

'Yes' can have many meanings in China apart from the one Westerners are accustomed to. Your Chinese friend, colleague or business partner may merely be being polite, may want to hear more from you or may be saying they have heard your message. They may be trying to hide a weakness, or avoiding loss of 'face' or embarrassment by agreeing.

On the other hand, there are also many ways to say 'no' in China. Chinese people find it difficult to say no directly, as it is considered rude and can make the other person lose 'face'. So the answer to your question could be delayed, or the person you are talking to may want to 'think about it'. They may remain silent, or look elsewhere, especially if confrontation is involved.

When combined with strict emotional control and a lack of gestures, as well as uncertainty as to the meaning of smiling or laughing (which can also mean discomfort or anger in China), here is fertile ground for misunderstanding.

### When 'Thank you' is impolite

One way in which some foreigners surprise or shock Chinese people is in their perceived lack of modesty. The common Chinese response to a compliment is polite refusal or 'na li na li', which can be translated as 'not so', and can come in response to anything from a personal compliment to comments about one's house or family. To accept a compliment with a polite 'thank you' as many do in the West is considered most immodest.

## Chinese festivals and holidays

Although China does observe some of the holidays from the Western calendar (such as January 1st), the local and traditional festivals and holidays are much more important. In 2008 the Chinese Government changed the holiday schedule to place more emphasis on some of these traditional festivals. For the actual dates of these holidays see *Chapter 6* ➡.

Chinese festivals often involve gift giving and the eating of traditional foods. People participate in the traditional activities associated with these festivals, which often revolve around the family and the home.

### The Spring Festival (chun jie)

This is the first day of the lunar new year and is the most important festival for Chinese people. It celebrates the beginning of the New Year and also the time to start working the fields and sowing crops. All work basically stops and many people are on the move around China to return to their homes, as this is often the only opportunity during the year for China's huge migratory worker population to see their families.

Chinese New Year's Eve is a spectacular all night fireworks display with all fireworks regulations being completely ignored, and there are regular outbreaks of fireworks throughout the 15 days of the Spring Festival. The New Year's Eve dinner is an important family get together and celebration, although in recent years many Shanghainese have taken to eating out in restaurants instead of at home.

Chinese New Year is also the time for gift giving, in particular *hong bao*, or red envelopes. This is a red envelope containing money that symbolizes luck and wealth. These are usually given to younger people and children by their parents and grandparents but employers often give their employees a bonus at this time. Crisp new notes are the best type to give.

### The Lantern Festival (yuan xiao)

This is on the 15th day of the month of Chinese New Year, and marks the end of the New Year celebrations. Chinese celebrate the first full moon of the year on this day. *Yuan xiao* is a kind of dumpling made of sticky rice with a sweet stuffing which is eaten at this time, and which symbolizes the family staying together.

### Tomb Sweeping Holiday (qing ming)

This takes place in April and is traditionally a time for families to pay their respects to their ancestor, travel to the family gravesite and place flowers. It is also a time to celebrate the arrival of spring. It became a public holiday in 2008.

### Dragon Boat Festival (duan wu jie)

The dragon boat festival is another that became a public holiday in 2008. It takes place on the fifth day of the fifth month in the Chinese lunar calendar. There are dragon boat races, and the traditional food is glutinous rice dumplings (zongzi). This festival dates back 2300 years.

### The Mid Autumn Festival (zhong qiu jie)

This is a more subdued festival traditionally celebrated outdoors in the moonlight, as it celebrates the time of year when the moon is at its lowest, largest and brightest. The actual dates vary slightly but it takes place in September. Hundreds of varieties of mooncakes are produced. Fillings range from the traditional (egg, red bean paste, lotus seed paste) to modern varieties such as chocolate or mooncakes sculpted from ice cream.

### National Day (guo qing jie)

This holiday marks the founding of the People's Republic of China, and became a national holiday in 1949. It is usually a week-long holiday taking place around October 1<sup>st</sup>, and many people in China take the opportunity to travel back to their families or travel around China. Transport, hotels and holiday destinations are very crowded, and prices can rise dramatically.

### Women in society

Communism and Chairman Mao's widely promoted statement that 'women hold up half the sky' have gone a long way to correcting a

formidable cultural legacy of female inferiority, due in no small part to Confucianism.

There are many women in executive positions in Chinese business, and most Chinese women work. Particularly in Shanghai, in traditional households it is usually men who look after the children and cook, and if one partner has to stop work to take care of the baby it is often the man.

The grandparents also play a big role in childcare, often minding the child when the mother returns to work, and grandparents out and about with the grandchild are a frequent sight in Shanghai.

Birth and children are very important to the Shanghainese, even more so since the one child policy was put into place. Traditionally the Chinese custom (Zuoyuezi) is for the mother to basically stay in bed for a month, being cared for along with her child, in order to nurture both herself and the child. This is seen as crucial for the mother's long-term health as many believe that if physical damage is done during this time it will be permanent. Cold, wind, dirty air, and tiredness are said to have a bad effect on the mother's health.

### Gifts, gift giving and luck 🚫 *back to Chapter 7*

Gifts are an important courtesy in Chinese culture. It is essential to give a gift of an appropriate value, as a cheap gift can lead to a loss of *face*, and likewise if the gift is too expensive the receiver cannot reciprocate equally.

On occasions such as festivals, weddings and birthdays or when visiting a sick person, a gift is appreciated. If you are invited to a family function, small gifts such as tea, wine or sweets are a good choice. Fruits and flowers are also a safe choice for many occasions.

Some gifts are better avoided, as Chinese people have had such a long time in which to develop many superstitions. A gift of a clock is considered a reference to death because the Chinese word for clock is similar to that for death. Also mind you do not give a gift of a green hat

to a man, as this traditionally signifies adultery on the part of his wife!

Black and white are also connected with death and sorrow, they are not suitable colors for gift wrapping. The best colors to wrap gifts in include red and gold for prosperity, and pink and yellow for happiness.

In Chinese traditional culture odd numbers are considered unfortunate so wedding gifts and birthday gifts for elderly people are sent in pairs. Four is considered a very unlucky number because it's pronunciation is similar to death in Chinese. In contrast eight is considered to be a very lucky number (consider the Olympics starting date in 2008 which was 8.08.2008 at 8:00pm!).