

# that's SHANGHAI

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## 10 tips for doing business in China

by Anne-Laure Monfret



## What you need to know to succeed

### 1. Learn from Chinese masters.

“A little impatience can ruin great projects”  
Confucius

“Know that you don’t know, that’s superiority.” Lao Tse

“The man who moves a mountain begins by

carrying away small stones.” Confucius

### 2. Use humor to lighten the mood – but the appropriate kind of humor.

Irony: forget about it! Teasing someone, even gently, can be taken as criticism and cause a serious loss of face.

Blue jokes: make sure it’s the right moment, preferably after everyone’s had plenty to drink. And please, never in front of women. These indelicate jokes are considered to be very rude!

Jokes that mock foreigners – not funny at all. You do not make fun of the face of another country (even your own country, and needless to say China).

Just be natural, and best to avoid all of the above.

### 3. Resist the temptation to jump in if your Chinese counterpart remains silent.

Silence is the true friend that never betrays.

### 4. Make an effort to speak a little bit of Chinese.

Learn to use and understand the basic Chinese survival vocabulary.

Don’t say an abrupt “no” to your Chinese staff or counterpart, but instead say “I will consider it.”

Usually understand “mei wenti, no problem” is “you wenti, there is a problem,” and “yes” is “yes, you are the boss,” not necessarily “yes, I agree with you.”

If you don’t want to say “yes” or “no,” which may cause a loss of face, simply answer “maybe.”

Make sure that what you say is not completely misunderstood: state, ask your listener to restate, ask information questions rather than yes-no questions, confirm, clarify, check.

Don’t try to understand everything. It’s just impossible. Accept that sometimes there are things you cannot explain. Instead, just move on and keep your eye on the ball.

### 5. Give gifts, but the right gifts.

Avoid inexpensive Chinese gifts.

Don’t give a red envelope with RMB250: you are clearly insulting the Chinese! Offering money may be perceived as an insult, except for certain occasions (weddings and Chinese New Year). On top of that, saying to someone “250” is like saying that he is an idiot.

Are you planning to offer a clock? Not a good idea. “Clock” (“zhong”) also means “being on one’s death bed,” in other words, “the kiss of death.”

A typical present from your own country, especially famous brand items, accompanied by a short personalized speech is perfect.

### 6. Adopt a positive attitude.

To view China as an underdeveloped country is the best way to fail. Just a short reminder: China is the second biggest economy in the world.

If you think you can change everything (by ignoring Chinese customs say) you are fooling yourself. Don’t forget you are a guest, and an individual cannot change 5,000 years of Chinese history.

Approach China with lots and lots of humility.

Smile! Have you noticed that the Chinese always smile when they have something unpleasant to tell you? Smiling makes the situation less dramatic and keeps you from losing your cool. The next time you are having a hard time, think of this tip and turn that frown upside down.

### 7. Spend time giving face. You can be sure it will be returned one day.

Welcome your visitors with great care.

Invite your guest to an expensive restaurant and order plenty of food. By the same token, always accept an invitation to a restaurant and enjoy the food offered. If you don’t want to eat certain types of food, it’s better to help yourself and leave food on your plate than to say “Oh no! No thanks,” which would really offend.

Instead of sending an assistant, meet the top dog personally to “show your face,” especially to close a deal.

### 8. Drink. But don’t get drunk.

Ask for small glasses or opt for beer, if you can. A glass of beer has way less punch than a glass of Chinese rice wine. Your liver will appreciate it too.

Always make sure you have some aspirin handy.

If you don’t want to drink, make up a good excuse (“I’m taking antibiotics,” “I’m driving tonight”). The Chinese won’t be fooled, but at least face is preserved.

Or hire a professional to drink in your place – a “secret” Chinese method.

\*If you are a woman, there’s less pressure. Sorry, gentlemen!

### 9. Don’t think for a minute you can do it all by yourself.

Do you know that men get lost on the road more often than women? It’s true, because they don’t want to ask for directions. Don’t hesitate, ask for advice. Find the right interpreter, the right contact, the right partner, the right assistant, the right decision maker. Like it or not, you need them.

### 10. Make your negative remarks and comments in private, one-to-one, discreetly, not publicly, behind the scenes, internally, away from eyes and ears, when there’s no one around... have I emphasized that enough?

This is the number one rule in China!

Anne-Laure Monfret is the author of Saving Face in China: A First-Hand Guide For Any Traveller To China, available at Garden Books and from Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com