

# Hong Kong Cultural Etiquette



## Meeting and Greeting

- Shake hands with everyone -- men, women and children -- upon meeting and leaving. Note that Hong Kong Chinese handshakes may be less firm than a Western handshake.
- Higher-ranking persons are introduced before those of lower rank. An older person comes before a younger person, and a woman before a man. Family members are greeted in order of age, oldest first and youngest last.
- It is polite to inquire about a person's health or activities upon greeting.

## Names and Titles

- Use family names and appropriate titles until specifically invited by your host or colleagues to use their first names.
- Address the Chinese with Mr., Mrs., Miss or professional title plus family name. Example: Lau Gan Lei would be Mr. Lau or Doctor Lau or Professor Lau.
- Chinese names have two parts: family name and given name. The family name comes first.

## Body Language

- Hong Kong Chinese may stand close when talking, however, they are reserved and uncomfortable with body contact. Do not hug, kiss or pat people on the back.
- Winking at someone is considered a very rude gesture.
- Request your bill by making a writing motion with your hand.
- To beckon someone, extend your arm, palm down, and make a scratching motion with your fingers.
- Never point with your index finger. This is used only for animals. Point with your hand open.

## Corporate Culture

Many Hong Kong businesspeople have been educated in Western schools and are well-heeled, well-traveled and possess an international perspective. The business climate in Hong Kong is "wide open," with a free market and limited government involvement. Hong

Hong Kong business activities are competitive, honest and quick. Making money is the main goal. The style of business is similar to that of the United States.

- Punctuality is expected and respected; be on time for all appointments. Allow "courtesy time" (30 minutes) if someone is late for an appointment with you.
- Tea is served at meetings. Do not drink until your host takes the first sip. A host leaving tea untouched signals the end of the meeting.
- Bring business cards printed in English on one side and Chinese on the other side. Make sure that the Chinese side uses "classical" characters, the written form of Chinese used in Hong Kong, and not "simplified" characters, which are used in the People's Republic of China. Upon introduction, present your business card with both hands and with the Chinese side up.
- Be sure to look at a business card upon receiving it. Do not write on a business card in front of the person who gave it to you.
- Lawyers are not included in negotiations until contracts are drawn up and signed.
- Negotiations may be slow and detailed, but very efficient. Send senior people with technical and commercial expertise prepared to function as a team and make decisions on the spot. Business deals may be sealed with a handshake alone. Be prepared to compromise.
- Banking contacts are very important. Use a bank to set up your meetings.
- Take time to build relationships. It may take several meetings to accomplish goals. Do business face to face. Courtesy calls and personal selling are vital to success.
- "Yes" may not mean agreement; it often means "I hear you." "No" is generally not said. Instead, you may hear "I will have to wait," or "This may be very difficult."
- Do not attempt to open an office in Hong Kong without hiring or consulting a "geomancer"/"feng shui" professional. A feng shui professional advises on facility, moving date, opening date, entrance, etc. and positions office furniture to be in harmony with cosmic forces. Do not ignore this custom. Many Chinese will not do business without feng shui approval for fear of trouble from spirits. Ask a Hong Kong businessperson for the name and number of a reliable feng shui professional.
- Make appointments for business meetings a month before arrival.

### Dining and Entertainment

- Tea is the customary beverage for all occasions. Your teacup will be refilled continually. Leave your cup full if you are finished. Chinese find adding sugar and cream to tea a very

strange Western habit. Place teapot lid upside down (or open if attached) to signal the waiter for more tea.

- Toasting is an important part of a Chinese dinner. If you are the guest of honor and are toasted, smile, raise your glass, make eye contact, drink, raise your glass and thank the host and guests.
- The guest of honor rises and thanks the host for everyone present at the end of dinner. Make a simple, polite, short toast to friendship, success and cooperation.
- The banquet host visits each table and makes a toast. A toast is often made in the middle of a banquet when the shark fin soup is served.
- Be sure to eat and show appreciation for shark fin soup if it is offered. This delicacy is offered only to special guests, and is very expensive.
- It is bad manners for a host not to keep a guest's plate full, and it is even worse for a guest not to continue eating as long as the plate is full. Always leave some food on your dish after you are finished with each course. Otherwise the host will continue refilling your plate or bowl.
- Be sure to reciprocate with a banquet of equal quality. Your hotel can assist you in preparations.
- Rice is served as a filler. Do not eat large amounts, which implies the host has not served enough food.
- Lay your chopsticks on your chopstick rest or neatly on the table when you are finished eating. Never stick them in a bowl of rice.
- Don't be afraid to dirty the tablecloth. Bones, shells, etc. are put on the table; do not put them in your rice bowl. A plate may be provided for this purpose.
- The Chinese find belching, slurping, clanging utensils and making loud noises at the dinner table acceptable, sometimes even complimentary.
- Oranges or other fruits are served to signal the end of the meal. Leave soon after the meal ends.
- Never refuse an invitation to lunch or dinner. If you can't make the date, suggest another date.
- Spouses are usually not included in business dining. Do not bring a spouse unless invited to do so. If spouses are present, business is generally not discussed.

## Dress

- Hong Kong residents are very style-conscious and dress well. Modesty and cleanliness are very important.
- All types of clothing are worn in Hong Kong. However, taste and fashion look more toward Japan than Britain or the United States. Clothing should be light for summer with sweaters and jackets for winter.
- For business, men should wear conservative and lightweight Western-style suits and ties. Women should wear conservative dresses, suits or skirts and blouses.
- Wear a good watch. It will be noticed.
- The Chinese tend to dress up when going out in the evening. Most European-style hotel restaurants require a coat and tie in the evening. Women should wear cocktail dresses or evening pants.

### Gifts

- Gift giving is a tradition in Hong Kong that communicates respect and friendship. Be prepared to present a small gift at the first meeting, such as high-quality cognac, brandy, candy or pens. Unlike other Asian countries, Scotch whiskey is not special in Hong Kong.
- Never go to a Chinese home without a gift.
- Present and receive a gift with both hands. Do not open a gift upon receiving it.
- The word for the number "3" in Chinese sounds like the word for "life," and the word for the number "8" sounds like the word for "prosperity." The Chinese word for number "9" is a homonym for the word "eternity." Give gifts in these numbers, if possible. Do not give gifts in a group of four; the Chinese word for "4" sounds similar to the word for "death."
- Avoid giving white or red flowers (white is a symbol of mourning, red is a symbol of blood); clocks are associated with death, but watches are suitable gifts.
- Every conceivable product can be purchased in Hong Kong. Try to bring something from your hometown or state.
- It is illegal to give a civil servant a gift.

### Helpful Hints

- The Chinese are famous for communicating by "Saying it without saying it." You will have to learn to read between the lines.
- Expect Hong Kong Chinese to ask personal questions.

- Compliment Hong Kong Chinese, but expect a denial. Politely deny a compliment to show humility. Do not say thank you.
- Do not speak loudly.
- You may be referred to as "Gweilo" (foreign devil). While perhaps insulting, it is generally not a personal attack.
- Hong Kong Chinese are very superstitious; mentioning failure, poverty or death offends them.

### **Especially for Women**

- Foreign businesswomen should have little trouble conducting business in Hong Kong.
- Chinese women generally do not drink alcohol. However, it is acceptable for Western women to drink alcohol in moderation.

Resource: [http://www.ediplomat.com/np/cultural\\_etiquette/ce\\_hk.htm](http://www.ediplomat.com/np/cultural_etiquette/ce_hk.htm)