Etiquette and tips for adjusting to China

Dining Etiquette:

- Take small portions of food instead of loading food on your plate.
- Don’t pick up serving plate to shove food onto your plate.
- Don’t spin the lazy Susan to get a dish you want; wait until it comes to you. Look before you turn it.
- Host and senior member sit opposite the door; junior members are closer to door.
- Wait for honored guest or senior member to start eating before you eat.
- Wait for toast before drinking beer, wine, soda; tea is okay to drink.
- Pour beer, tea for a senior, who should not have to pour for himself/herself.
- Never pour tea for yourself without first pouring for those around you.
- Make sure spout of teapot does not point towards someone.
- In toasting, senior member’s glass is higher.
- If someone is too far away to tap glasses, tap lazy Susan and toast will go around to other side.
- It is fine to politely spit food on edge of table or plate.
- Wait until dinner is finished. Fish/soup is often near the end; filler (rice, bread) and fruit will always be the last items served.
- At formal banquet, don’t ask for rice. Rice filler indicates food not sufficient.
- At regular meal, if you want rice with meal, you need to ask for it.
- Don’t stick chopsticks into rice like incense sticks on the altar.

Gifts:

- Typical gifts for holidays and special occasions:
  - Moon cakes for Moon festival.
  - Food, Drink or Red Envelope for Spring Festival.
  - Red envelope for wedding, birthday, and funeral.
  - Don’t give money in odd numbers except 9 (long life). Never give 4 (make 380 instead of 400), 6 and 8 is always good. For funerals more sensitive; ask staff member.
- If you visit a home, bring small gift: food, flowers, etc.
Bring gifts if visit a friend in hospital.
If you stay with a family, bring gift when you come back from long trip.
Give gift in gratitude for special favors.
Chinese will often refuse gift repeatedly, keep offering for 3 or 4 times.
Keep received gifts unopened until you’re alone.
If you want to open a gift on the spot, please ask if it is fine to open.

Dress:

Dress modestly. You are guests. Do not steal the thunder.
Dress more inconspicuously in suburbs.
More inconspicuously when you visit temple or revered place.
Shorts usually are fine as daily outfit.
For guys, please be careful of being topless in public places. This is considered inappropriate for college students.

Relationships:

If you take your Chinese friend, roommate, tutor out to bar or restaurant, you should pay. They have little money. Although they will refuse your offer, try and insist.
Remember that Chinese dorms are locked at 11:00pm.
Join their activities; they are different than yours, and that is how you learn about China.
Visit their dorms; remember they will often be embarrassed because not as good as yours.
Remember that traditionally friendships and relationships are expected to be permanent. Be mindful of what you are getting into.
In China, friends feel comfortable asking friends for favors. Don’t be surprised if you new Chinese friend asks you for a favor.
A teacher’s role is not just in classroom. “Laoshi” teaches and nurtures; they have a personal concern for you.
Remember “face” (mian zi) is important. Do not publicly confront. Don’t make others feel dumb in public.
Don’t raise your voice, don’t get upset – this is considered to be a character flaw.
Practice humility; do not be personally assertive; think of group; think of others.
Respond to compliments with denial. If you are told “Your Chinese is excellent”; the correct response is “Bu Hao, bu hao.” or “Na li, na li.” Modesty is important.
Praise the appearance of children; be careful in praising looks of people in opposite sex.
Be wary of certain topics: Fa Lun Gong, Taiwan, Xinjiang & Tibet independence, Communist Party control of China. It is fine to talk about religion if others bring up and in mutually respectful circumstances.
Do not use a direct “NO”. Disagree indirectly. “Let me consider it”. “I will get back to you on that”. These mean “no”.

Laughter does not necessarily mean funny. It can indicate he/she is not sure how to respond; it can mean embarrassment. Don’t be upset if you are being laughed at. It could mean something very different than you think.

Smile at stares. Especially with rural people. They will usually be bewildered at first, then return big smile. It will provide story for an otherwise boring day.

Address seniors with title and name: Teacher Wang.

Enter a room in protocol order – seniors, higher ranking first.

If you are offered something with two hands, receive with two hands, e.g. business cards.

If applauded, clap back politely.

Technically, tipping is illegal in China. In small restaurants, waiters can get fired for accepting tips. In Western restaurants and bars, it seems to have growing acceptance.

Classroom:

Don’t wear sandals or slippers to class; shorts are fine.

Teacher should be called by Title and Family name, like Dr. Zhou, Prof. Yang, and Teacher Wang.

Don’t bring food into class without express permission.

DON’T BE LATE FOR CLASSES. If unavoidable please excuse yourself. Get there early if necessary.

Don’t put head on table to sleep.

Don’t read other materials.

Don’t interrupt when others are speaking.

Don’t have conversation on the side during lectures or presentations.

Don’t sleep on the floor in hallway.

Cycles:

1. You will go through cycle of (a) being excited about China - “This place is so cool!” (b) Reality and day to day grind - “What am I doing here? Can’t understand the people. Don’t like the courses. Friends and home are so far away.” (c) Making friends, feeling at home.

2. With Chinese customs: (a) “They are doing it wrong.” (b) “They are doing it differently.” (c) much later - I understand why they do it that way and why we do it our way, and I think...