

# Culture Wise CHINA

The Essential Guide to Culture,  
Customs & Business Etiquette

**Leo Lacey**





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& Business Etiquette

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First published 2011

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.  
A CIP record for this book is available  
from the British Library.  
ISBN: 978-1-907339-27-1

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Printed and bound in Singapore by Stamford Press

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my many friends, family members and colleagues who provided information for this book. In particular, I wish to thank my wife, Guo Zhao Li, for her patience and assistance, and my sons for their encouragement. My heartfelt thanks also go to Su Su Gao, Han Fule and the very helpful Ms Zhong of the Zhengzhou Public Security Bureau for their assistance, together with Brian Merifield and David Leffman.

Thanks are also due to Robbi Forrester Atilgan for editing; Lilac Johnston for proofreading; Peter Read for final editing and proofing; Di Bruce-Kidman for desktop publishing and photo selection; and Jim Watson for the cover design and maps. Finally a special thank you to all the photographers (listed on page 270) – the unsung heroes – whose beautiful images add colour and bring China to life.

## THE AUTHOR

Leo Lacey was born in the UK, where he trained as a civil engineer, and has lived and worked in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and the Pacific islands. In the '70s he became a citizen of Australia, where he also served as a Justice of the Peace. He first visited China shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution to work on the construction of offshore oil platforms and in the late '90s began work on the building of a dam on the Yellow River. A widower, he met his second wife Guo Zhao Li while working on the dam project and they married in 2000.

Leo now acts as a consultant to an engineering design company in Henan province and teaches English at local schools and at one of Henan's universities. He has had a number of articles published in Australia and the UK, and has also been a regular contributor to the Chinese press, as well as writing for Lonely Planet and Rough Guides. In 2003, he was awarded the 'Friendship of the Yellow River' – the highest possible accolade for a foreigner – by the provincial government of Henan in recognition of his contribution to life and education in the province.

Leo and Zhao Li divide their time between China and Australia, spending summers in Zhengzhou, the principal city of Henan province, and winters by the beach in Manly, New South Wales. Leo's other passions, besides China, include rugby football – he used to play for London Irish – and motorcycle racing.

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**France in Print**

"The ultimate reference book – Every conceivable subject imaginable is exhaustively explained in simple terms – An excellent introduction to fully enjoy all that this fine country has to offer and save time and money in the process."

**American Club of Zurich**

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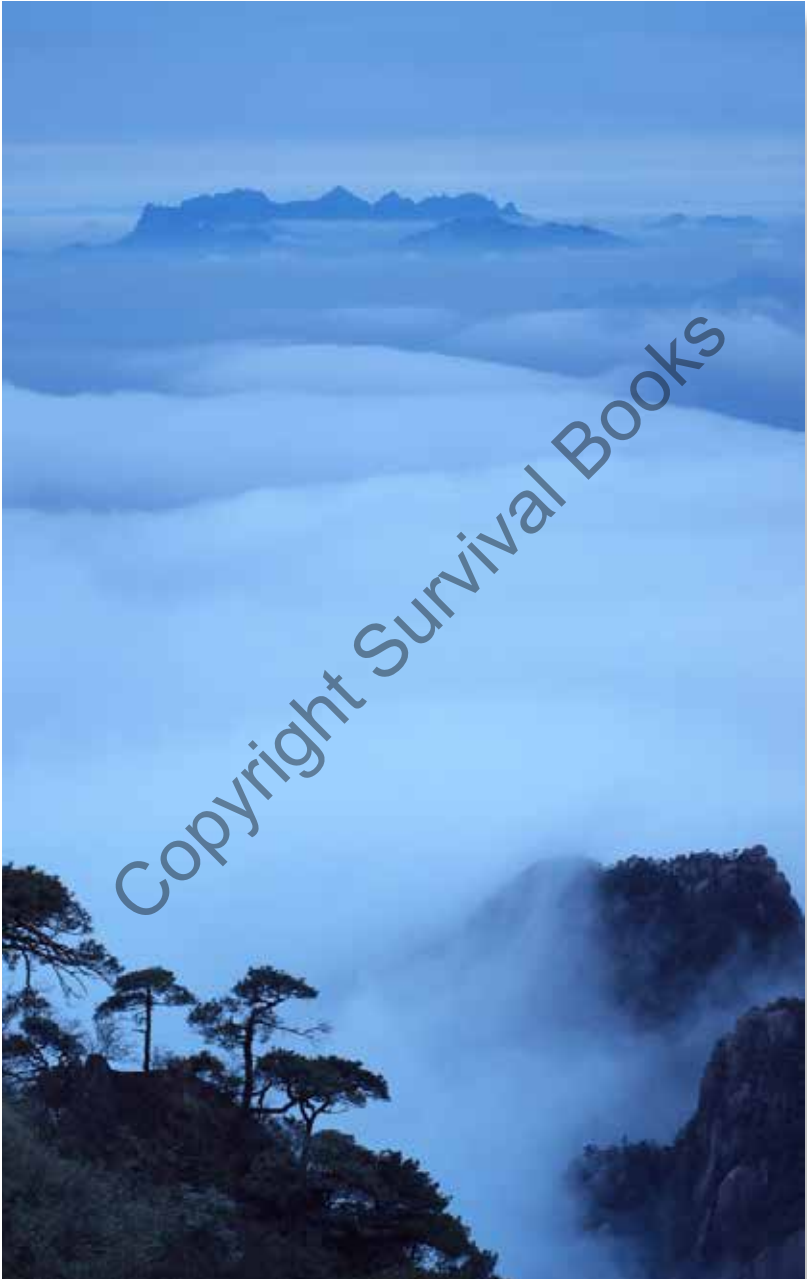
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Mt Sanqing, Jiangxi

## INTRODUCTION

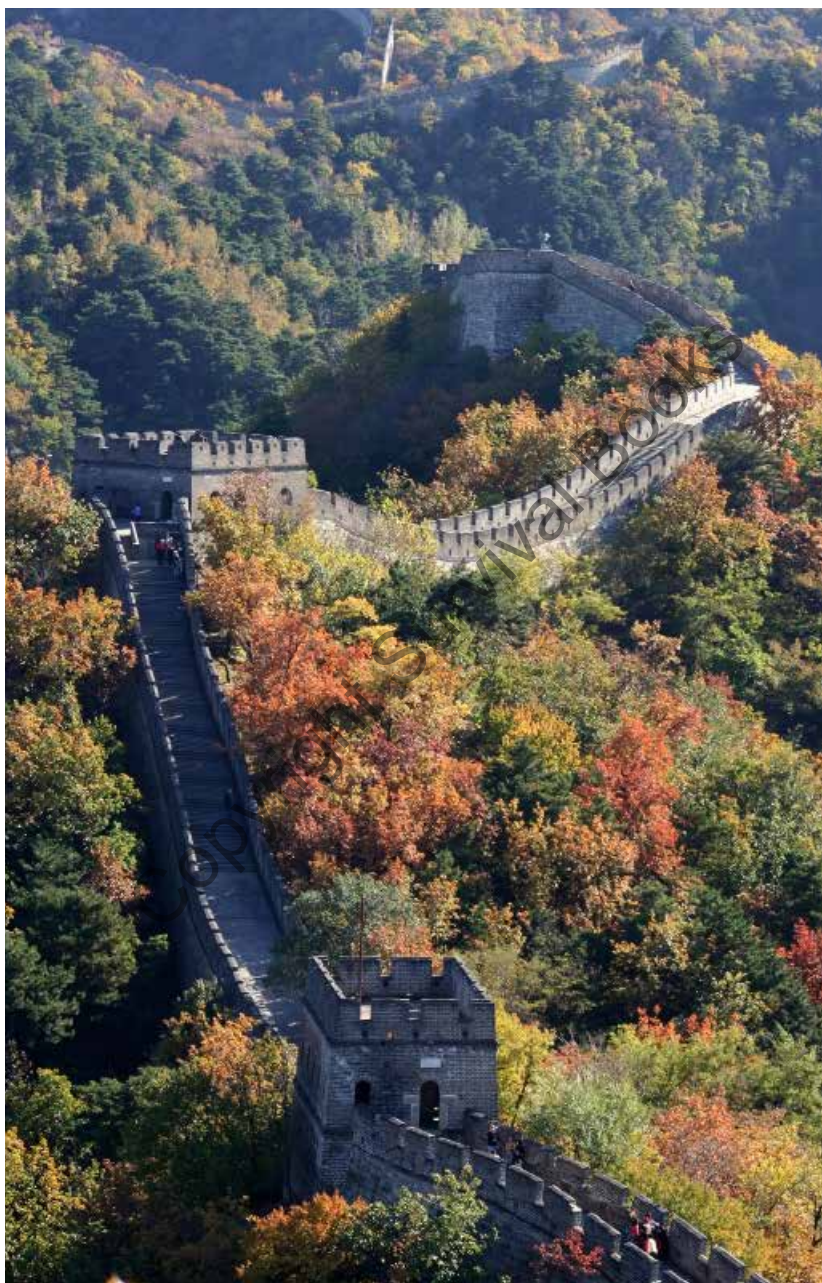
If you're planning a trip to China or just want to learn more about the country, you'll find the information contained in *Culture Wise China* invaluable. Whether you're travelling on business or for pleasure, visiting for a couple of weeks or planning to stay long term, Culture Wise guides enable you to quickly find your feet by removing the anxiety factor when dealing with a foreign culture.

Adjusting to a different environment and culture in any foreign country can be a traumatic and frustrating experience, and China is certainly no exception. You need to adapt to new customs and traditions and discover the Chinese way of doing things, whether it's letting off firecrackers to celebrate the New Year or toasting someone's success with copious glasses of *baijiu*, learning how to cultivate your *guanxi* at work or deciphering the rules of *mah-jong*. China is a land of surprises and contradictions, where mountains are holy and crickets are kept as pets; where a smile can signify acute embarrassment and comparing someone to a turtle can cause great offence; where people burn money to honour their ancestors and wear pyjamas in the street.

China is so vast that the climate, customs and even the food vary enormously from one part of the country to the next. The way of life differs also, depending on whether you live in one of China's fast-growing metropolises or its still traditional countryside. In addition, you must grapple with the Chinese language which sounds and looks completely different from Western tongues. The key to living happily in China is to keep an open mind and cultivate your patience.

*Culture Wise China* is essential reading for anyone planning to visit China, including tourists (especially travellers planning to stay a number of weeks or months), business people, migrants, retirees and transferees. It's designed to help newcomers avoid cultural and social gaffes; make friends and influence people; improve communications (both verbal and non-verbal); and enhance your understanding of China and its people. It explains what to expect, how to behave in most situations, and how to get along with the locals and feel at home.

A period spent in China is a wonderful way to enrich your life, broaden your horizons, and hopefully expand your circle of friends. We trust this book will help you avoid the pitfalls of visiting or living in China and smooth your way to a happy and rewarding stay.



Great Wall of China

## 1.

## A CHANGE OF CULTURE

**W**ith almost daily advances in technology, ever cheaper flights and knowledge about almost anywhere in the world at our fingertips, travelling, living, working and retiring abroad has never been more accessible, and current migration patterns suggest that it has never been more popular. But, although globalisation means the world has in effect ‘shrunk’, every country is still a world of its own with a unique culture – and China is no exception.

‘There are no foreign lands. It is the traveller only who is foreign.’

Robert Louis Stevenson  
(Scottish author & poet)

Some people find it impossible to adapt to a new life in a different culture – for reasons that are many and varied. According to statistics, partner dissatisfaction is the most common cause, as non-working spouses frequently find themselves without a role in the new country and sometimes with little to do other than think about what they would be doing if they were at home. Family concerns – which may include the children’s education and worries about loved ones at home – can also deeply affect those living abroad.

Many factors contribute to how well you adapt to a new culture: for example, your personality, education, foreign language skills, mental health, maturity, socio-economic conditions, travel experience and family and social support systems. How you handle the stress of change and bring balance and meaning to your life is the principal indicator of how well you’ll adjust to a different country, culture and business environment.

‘The Chinese have created the single most extensive and enduring civilisation in the world. Their language, spoken and written in the same form for some 4,000 years, binds their vast country together and links the present with the past, expressing a unified culture unmatched elsewhere. In contrast, the land of China is one of great geographical diversity. Bordered by mountains, steppes and deserts, the immense central plains are watered by great rivers, supporting a dense population, a large part of which has always been tied to the land, but which has proved extraordinarily skilled in the production of industrial goods of a high quality.’

(notice in the British Museum, London)

## CHINA IS DIFFERENT

Many people underestimate the cultural isolation that can be experienced in a foreign country, particularly one with a different language. While most foreigners have no problem accepting that China will be different from their own country, they may be surprised at just how different it is. Even if you've studied Chinese at length before arriving, you'll still find you have an awful lot to learn about the way the language is used, while dialects vary enormously throughout the country. If you speak no Chinese at all, you may feel at first as if you've just landed on the moon.

For foreigners, there are two very different Chinas. Firstly there are the four principal cities of Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Shenzhen, where expatriates have formed communities and where some aspects of life are similar to that of major cities around the world (except that all signs are in Chinese script). And then there's the rest of this huge country, from provincial capitals down to rural hamlets, where life is more thoroughly 'Chinese' – altogether unlike anything you may have experienced before.

At the same time, **you** are very different from the Chinese. There aren't, as yet, that many foreigners in China and they comprise a tiny minority. Even in a major city, if you venture away from the main shopping areas and tourist haunts, you can expect to be stared at and commented on. Your Chinese colleagues may ask a lot of inquisitive, relentless and sometimes very personal questions as they attempt to get to know you. Add to this the noise and the crowds of people you encounter in most public places – for such a large country, China

can be incredibly congested – and you may find it physically and mentally exhausting.

China has many extremes of climate and weather, and you mustn't underestimate the effects that these can have on you. The heat of summer can lead to a lack of energy, poor sleep and dehydration; in some parts of the country, temperatures can rise to 38°C (100°F) and the humidity makes it feel even hotter. In the subtropical south of China it rains almost incessantly – far more than in Manchester (England) – and while winters aren't that cold, you'll certainly feel chilly and damp. Housing in southern China often lacks good insulation and central heating is rare anywhere south of the Yellow River. Further north it's fitted as standard, but is sometimes linked to a local government control centre which switches it on in November and off



again in March, leaving you freezing if the weather changes early or late.

Wherever you live in China, you'll be faced with a host of challenges – such as a new job and a new home – which can be overwhelming before you even begin to encounter the local culture. You may have left a job in your home country where you were in a senior position, competent at your job and knew everyone with whom you worked. In China, you may feel that you're initially almost a trainee, and don't know any of your colleagues or the local way of doing things. The sensation that you're starting from scratch can be demoralising.

Even if you move to a major city, many things that you're used to and take for granted in your home country may not be available, e.g. certain kinds of food (decent cheese is a rare treat), opportunities to enjoy your favourite hobby or sport, and books and magazines in your own language. International television is limited – you cannot use a satellite dish to beam in foreign channels – and most cinemas show films dubbed into Chinese. And if you're used to a media that reports everything, including amusing critiques of the government, you may find Chinese newspapers stuffy in the extreme.

This lack of 'home comforts' can wear you down. You'll also need to cope without your local support network. At home you had a circle of friends, acquaintances, colleagues and possibly relatives you could rely on for help and support. In China there's no such network, which can leave you feeling lost. You can and will make friends. There's likely to be a welcome from other expatriates and the Chinese

will want to get to know you also, but first you must overcome the barriers of language and culture.

The degree of isolation you feel usually depends on how long you plan to spend in China and what you'll be doing there. If you're simply going on a short holiday, you may not even be aware of many of the cultural differences; although if you are, it will enhance your enjoyment and may save you from a few embarrassing or confusing moments. However, if you're planning a business trip or intend to spend an extended period in China – perhaps working, studying or even living there permanently – **it's essential to understand the culture, customs and etiquette at the earliest opportunity.**

**'If you reject the food, ignore the customs, fear the religion and avoid the people, you might better stay at home.'**

James A. Michener (American author)

## CULTURE SHOCK

Culture shock is the term used to describe the psychological and physical state felt by people when arriving in a foreign country or even moving to a new environment in their home country (where the culture and, in some cases, language may vary considerably by region and social class). Culture shock is a common experience among those who travel, work or study abroad, when in addition to adapting to new social rules and values, it's necessary to adjust to a different climate, food and dress. It manifests itself in a lack of direction





and the feeling of not knowing what to do or how to do things, or what's appropriate or inappropriate. You literally feel like a 'fish out of water'.

Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all familiar rules of behaviour and cues to social intercourse – the thousand and one clues to accepted behaviour in everyday situations; for example, when to shake hands and what to say when you meet people; how to buy goods and services; how to use a cash machine (ATM) or the telephone; when to accept and refuse invitations; and when to take statements seriously and when not to. These cues, which may be words, gestures or facial expressions, are acquired in the course of a lifetime and are as much a part of our culture and customs as the language we speak and our beliefs. Our peace of mind and social efficiency depend on these cues, most of which are unconsciously learned and recognised.

The symptoms of culture shock are essentially psychological. However, there are also physical symptoms, including an increased incidence of minor illnesses (e.g. colds and headaches), and more serious psychosomatic illnesses brought on by depression. Culture shock can even cause physical pain. You shouldn't underestimate the consequences of culture shock, although the effects can be lessened if you accept the condition rather than deny it.

The high levels of pollution in many Chinese cities are compounded by damp and humidity, resulting in poor air quality. As a result the Chinese are prone to coughs and colds, and you will be also, particularly if you suffer from a respiratory disease such as asthma. Just walking down the street can leave you feeling breathless, and that's before you try to cross the road or drive your car.

### Stages of Culture Shock

Severe culture shock – often experienced when moving to a country with a different language – usually follows a number of stages. The names of these may vary, as may the symptoms and effects, but a typical progression is as follows:

1. The first stage is commonly known as the 'honeymoon stage', and usually lasts until a few days or weeks after arrival (although it can last longer, particularly if you're insulated from the usual pressures of life). This stage is essentially a positive (even euphoric) one, when you find everything an exciting and interesting novelty. The feeling is similar to being on holiday or a short trip abroad, when you generally

experience only the positive effects of a change of culture (although this depends very much on where you're from and the country you're visiting).

2. The second (rejection or distress) stage is usually completely opposite to the first and is essentially negative and a period of crisis, as the initial excitement and 'holiday' feeling wears off and you start to cope with the real conditions of daily life – a life that is nothing like anything you've previously experienced. This can happen after only a few weeks, and is characterised by a general feeling of disorientation, confusion and loneliness. Physical exhaustion, brought on by a change of time zone, extremes of hot or cold, and the strain of having hundreds of settling in tasks to accomplish, is a symptom of this stage.

You may also experience regression, where you spend much of your time speaking your own language, watching television and reading newspapers from your home country, eating food from home and socialising with expatriates who speak your language. You could also spend a lot of time complaining about the host country and its culture – not a good idea in China where loudly-voiced negative comments about politics, in particular, can attract the unwanted attentions of the Public Security Bureau. Your home environment suddenly assumes a tremendous importance and is irrationally glorified. All difficulties and problems are forgotten, and only the good things back home are remembered.

### What Foreigners Dislike About China:

- the people – there are just too many of them;
- having to bake your own bread – only an addict of tasteless white bread could stomach Chinese bread;
- pollution of the air, the water and even the land;
- spitting – by both men and women;
- alcohol – the local Chinese spirit, *baijiu*, is vile and getting people drunk is considered fun;
- the struggle to find somewhere peaceful;
- being stared at.

3. The third stage is often known as the 'flight' stage (because of the overwhelming desire to escape) and is usually the one that lasts the longest and is the most difficult to cope with.

During this period you may feel depressed and angry, as well as resentful towards the new country and its people. You may experience impatience and frustration at not being understood, and feelings of discontent, sadness and incompetence. These feelings are inevitable when you're trying to adapt to a new culture that's very different from that of your home country, and they're exacerbated by the fact that you can see nothing positive or good about the new country but focus exclusively on the negative aspects. You may become hostile and develop

an aggressive attitude towards the country. Other people will sense this and you'll find it even more difficult to communicate: Chinese people, especially, react badly to confrontation, equating it with a loss of face on both sides, and may respond by doing their best to avoid you.

You may have difficulties with the language, your house, job or children's school and transportation – even simple tasks like shopping may be fraught with difficulties – and the fact that the local people are largely indifferent to these problems only makes matters worse. Even if they try to help, they may be unable to understand your concerns, and you conclude that they must be insensitive and unsympathetic to you and your problems.

Relinquishing your old customs and adopting those of your new culture is difficult and takes time. During that time there can be strong feelings of dissatisfaction. The period of adjustment can last as long as six months, although there are expatriates who adjust earlier and a few who never get over the 'flight' stage and are forced to return home.

**'Small ills are the fountains of most of our groans. Men trip not on mountains, they stumble on stones.'**

Confucius (Chinese philosopher)

4. The fourth (recovery or autonomy) stage is where you begin to integrate and adjust to the new culture, and accept the customs of the host country as simply another way of living. **The environment doesn't change – what changes is your attitude towards it.** You become more competent with the language, and you also feel more comfortable with local customs and can move around without feeling anxiety.

You still have problems with some of the social cues and you won't understand everything people say (particularly colloquialisms and idioms). Nevertheless, you've largely adjusted to the new culture and start to feel more familiar with the country and your place in it – more at home – and begin to realise that it has its good as well as its bad points.

5. The fifth stage is termed 'reverse culture shock' and occurs when you return to your home country. You may find that many things have changed (you'll have changed, too) and that you feel like a foreigner in your own country. If you have been away for a long time and have become comfortable with the habits and customs of a new lifestyle, you may find that you no longer feel at ease in your homeland. Reverse culture shock can be difficult to deal with and some people find it impossible to re-adapt to their home country after living abroad for a number of years.





The above stages occur at different times depending on the individual and his circumstances, and everyone has his own way of reacting to them, with the result that some stages last longer and are more difficult to cope with than others, while others are shorter and easier to overcome.

### Reducing the Effects

Experts agree that almost everyone suffers from culture shock and there's no escaping the phenomenon. However, its negative effects can be reduced considerably and there are a number of things you can do before leaving home and immediately on arrival.

- **Positive attitude:** The key to reducing the negative effects of culture shock is to have a positive attitude towards China (whether you're visiting or planning to live there). If you don't

look forward to a trip or relocation, you should question why you're going. There's no greater guarantee of unhappiness in a foreign environment than taking your prejudices with you.

It's important when trying to adapt to a new culture to be sensitive to the locals' feelings, and try to put yourself in their shoes wherever possible, which will help you to understand why they react as they do. Bear in mind that they have a strong, in-bred cultural code, just as you do, and react in certain ways because they're culturally 'trained' to do so. If you find yourself frustrated by an aspect of the local culture or behaviour, the chances are that they'll be equally puzzled by yours.

### Why Foreigners Love China

- the people, their attitude and friendliness;
- the strangeness of life compared to the West;
- respect for the elderly;
- the endless variety of the street markets;
- the pace of change, which is extraordinary;
- the beauty of the countryside, the ancient architecture and the women;
- the history;
- the food; you'll never get fat on a Chinese diet;
- the fact that even the most intolerant people learn to be patient.

- **Research:** Discover as much as possible about China before you go, so that your arrival and settling-in period doesn't spring as many surprises as it might otherwise. Reading up on China and its culture before you leave home will help you to familiarise yourself with the local customs and make the country and its people seem less strange on arrival. Being aware of many of the differences between China and your home country will make you better prepared to deal with them. You're less likely to be upset by real or imaginary cultural slights, or to offend the locals by making cultural gaffes. Being prepared for a certain amount of disorientation and confusion (or worse) makes it easier to cope with.

This book will help enlighten you about what to expect. For further information there are literally hundreds of publications and websites about China (see **Appendices B and C**). Some

websites provide access to expatriates already living in China who can answer questions and provide invaluable advice. There are also 'notice boards' and 'forums' on many websites where you can post messages and questions.

- **Visit China first:** If you're planning to live or work in China for a number of years, it's advisable to visit the country before making the leap, to gauge whether you think you would enjoy living there and be able to cope with the culture. If that's not possible, try to find people in your area who have visited China and talk to them about it. Some companies organise briefings for families who are about to relocate abroad. If you're planning to go to China to teach English, there are a number of websites dedicated to this which provide information and advice, and you can pose questions to people with experience of teaching there.
- **Learn Chinese:** Along with adopting a positive attitude,



overcoming the language barrier will be your greatest weapon in combating culture shock and making your time in China enjoyable. The ability to speak Chinese and to understand the local vernacular isn't just a useful tool that will allow you to buy what you need and find your way around, but is the key to understanding China and its culture. If you can speak Chinese, even at a basic level, your scope for making friends is immediately widened. You may not be a natural linguist, and learning Chinese can take time and requires a lot of motivation. However, with sufficient perseverance, virtually anyone can learn enough Chinese to participate in daily life.

Certainly the effort pays dividends, and expatriates who manage to overcome the language barrier find their experience in China is much richer and more rewarding than those who don't. The Chinese accept that their language is difficult for Westerners and are honoured that you have made an effort to learn it, and are far more receptive to your needs.

- **Be proactive:** Make an effort to get involved in your new culture and go out of your way to make friends. Join in the activities of the local people, from celebrating an important festival such as Chinese New Year to learning to fly a kite or pick up the intricacies of mah-jong. There are often local clubs where you can play sport or keep fit, be artistic, learn to cook local dishes, etc. Not only will this fill some of your spare time, giving you less time to miss home, but you'll also meet people and

make friends. If you feel that you cannot join a local club – perhaps because your Chinese isn't good enough – you can always participate in activities for expatriates, of which there are many in the major cities. Look upon a period spent in China as an opportunity to acquire new skills, attitudes and perspectives. A change of culture can also help you develop a better understanding of yourself and stimulate your creativity.

**Talk to other expatriates:** Although they may deny it, most expatriates have been through exactly what you're experiencing, and faced the same feelings of disorientation. Even if they cannot provide you with advice, it helps to know that you aren't alone and that it gets better over time. However, don't make the mistake of mixing only with expatriates, as this will alienate you from the local culture and make it much harder to integrate.

- **Keep in touch with home:** Keeping in touch with your family and friends at home and around the world by telephone, email and letters will help reduce and overcome the effects of culture shock. The internet has made the world much smaller, and if you have access to a computer you can read newspapers from your home country online and even talk to friends in another country face to face.
- **Be happy:** Don't rely on others to make you happy, or you won't find true and lasting happiness. There are things in life which only you can

change. Every day we're surrounded by situations over which we have little or no control, but to moan about them only makes us unhappier. So be your own best friend and nurture your own capacity for happiness.

Culture shock is an unavoidable part of travelling, living and working abroad, but if you're aware of it and take steps to lessen its effects before you go and while you're abroad, the period of adjustment will be shortened and its negative and depressing consequences reduced.

## FAMILIES IN CHINA

Family life may be completely different in China and relationships can become strained under the stress of adapting to culture shock. Your family may find itself in a completely new and possibly alien environment, your new home

may scarcely resemble your previous one (it may well be smaller and have different amenities) and the climate may differ dramatically from that of your home country. The stresses of adapting to a new environment can strain family relationships – particularly an environment that's as different as China. If possible, you should prepare your family for as many aspects of the new situation as you can, and explain to your children the differences they're likely to encounter, while at the same time dispelling their fears.

**'And that's the wonderful thing about family travel; it provides you with experiences that will remain locked forever in the scar tissue of your mind.'**

Dave Barry (American writer & humourist)

Culture shock can affect non-working spouses and children more than the partner who works. The husband (it's usually the husband) has his work to occupy him, and his activities may not differ much from what he was accustomed to at home. On the other hand, the wife has to operate in an environment that differs considerably from what she's used to. She'll find herself alone more often, a solitude intensified by the fact that there are no relatives or friends on hand. However, if you're aware that this may arise beforehand, you can act on it and reduce its effects. Working spouses should pay special attention to the needs and feelings of their non-working partners and children, as the success of a family relocation depends largely on the ability of the wife and children to adapt to the new culture.



The fact that so many people live in high-rise apartments, and the lack of a neighbourly culture – the Chinese tend to keep themselves to themselves, at least initially – can make life very isolated for the partner who's left at home. There may be no garden for the children to play in and no familiar shops nearby. In China, perhaps more than in other countries, a network of expatriates who've been through the same experiences is vital, and you should ensure that the home-based partner has someone to turn to when the other is at work.

Good communication between family members is essential, and you should make time to discuss your experiences and feelings, both as a couple and as a family. Questions should always be invited and, if possible, answered, particularly when asked by children who will be going through a culture shock of their own, in an unfamiliar school and with playmates of different nationalities. However difficult the situation may appear in the beginning, it helps to bear in mind that it's by no means unique and that most expatriate families experience exactly the same problems, and manage to triumph over them and thoroughly enjoy their stay in China.

## A NEW LIFE

Although you may find some of the information in this chapter a bit daunting, don't be discouraged by the foregoing catalogue of depression and despair; the negative aspects of travelling and living abroad have only been highlighted in order to help you prepare for and adjust to a new life. The vast majority of people who travel

and live abroad naturally experience occasional feelings of discomfort and disorientation, **but most never suffer the most debilitating effects of culture shock.**

As with settling in and making friends anywhere, even in your home country, the most important thing is to be considerate, kind, open, humble and genuine – qualities that are valued the world over. Selfishness, brashness, anger and arrogance will get you nowhere in China – or any other country. Losing your temper will almost invariably be counter-productive in China, where patience and politeness will get you further than any other approach. Treat Chinese people with respect and they'll do likewise. Remember that people see you as a representative of your country, therefore you should try to be a good ambassador. It will pay dividends.

The majority of expatriates living in China would say that, overall, they enjoy living there. A period spent in China is a wonderful way to enrich your life, broaden your horizons, make new friends and maybe even please your bank manager. We trust that this book will help you to avoid the pitfalls of life in China, and smooth your way to a happy and rewarding future in your new home.

**'Twenty years from now, you'll be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.'**

Mark Twain (American author)



