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Asian Etiquette

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About the same time you are reading this, I will be escorting a group of chiropractic and medical physicians to the People's Republic of China on what will be my 11th visit. So far I have escorted more than 500 people throughout Asia on acupuncture study tours.

As I look around the chiropractic profession, we see a number of trips to exotic lands are offered to us in harmony with a seminar or on-site learning experience. The chances of you one day going with me or some other group to China to experience first hand Asian manipulation, Chi Gong, acupuncture, herbal application and a host of other techniques are probably in your favor, since you are reading this article and obviously have an interest.

Every nation has its own rules of etiquette and particular quirks. If you are conducting international business, it is absolutely essential you know how to behave. Should you unintentionally break a major rule of etiquette, it may affect your relationship with your host country severely. Since you no doubt one day will want to visit the People's Republic of China, or Japan, Korea, or Hong Kong, let's take a look at a few things you absolutely should know.

In virtually every Asian country, the act of exchanging business cards is paramount. When presenting your card, it should be done with both hands and a slight bow, it is vitally important that you accept their card likewise with both hands. Once the card is in your hands it should be examined for a few seconds, not just shoved into your pocket and never into your back pocket. If at a formal dinner function, the card should be placed on the table in front of you in the position to which the person is sitting in relation to you. When presenting your card, the printing should be facing the person who is the recipient, and if you are a veteran traveler or international business person, the card should be printed in both your language and theirs.

It took me seven trips to Asia before I figured out the Chinese are highly offended if you do not have your card printed on one side in their language. Now all of my business cards are printed in both English and Chinese.

The Chinese are enthusiastic applauders. When a person is introduced to your group, applause is in order. It is the custom of the person who is being applauded to return the applause. I always enter a clinic or hospital room with an appropriate applause upon entering and leaving. In almost every case after we have witnessed surgery with acupuncture analgesia, surgeons will return the applause our group has given them showing our appreciation.

Hugging and kissing when greeting are very uncommon.

For years, I was dismayed when at banquets with Chinese dignitaries there was dead silence. I felt I was not being a proper host to our invited guests as they were not involved in the conversation. I learned later that silence is a form of respect and contemplation. This is so different than our American habit of talking incessantly while at dinner.

In China, the open hand is used for pointing, not one finger.

To beckon someone, the palm faces down and the fingers are moved in a scratching motion.

Never begin eating until the host picks up his or her chopsticks.

At meetings, the chief guest is always seated at the head of the room.

Never stick your chopsticks upright in your rice. This is a superstition which could bring bad luck. The Chinese are very serious about this one.

Because of the high regard for graciousness, in all Asian nations, one should never shout or exhibit any excessively demonstrative behavior.

The senior person offers to shake hands first, but the junior person bows first.

If you are in Korea having a conversation, another person may pass between the two of you instead of walking around. It is impolite to make someone walk behind your back. Don't be offended if this should occur.

Don't be concerned if you are in a group or a store and there seems to be quite a bit of pushing and shoving, this is just the Asian way. Apologies are neither offered nor expected.

It is the Chinese way to decline gifts two or even three times, even when they want to accept as a matter of etiquette.

Before taking photographs of local people, ask their permission first.

The Chinese are not a touch-oriented society and this is especially true for visitors. Refrain from touching other than the customary handshake.

Bones are usually placed on the table next to your plate.

Offering toasts at dinner is a very common gesture and is often done frequently and repeatedly throughout a dinner.

Try to refrain from touching children on the head in many Asian nations, as this is believed to be the area in which the spirit resides.

Great respect is afforded to the elderly, make your actions reflect this. One gesture of special respect is to cover your left fist with your right hand and raise both hands to your heart.

Be extremely careful of not pointing at anyone with one finger and never beckon someone the way we do in North America with the index finger and palm upward. In Asian countries, this is how animals are called.

As our world becomes increasingly smaller, these little tidbits may very well help you in your daily life with your new found Asian friends.

In the meantime, think about getting to China one day to experience what you learned here first hand.

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