
UNDERSTANDING CHINESE CULTURE

All people are the same; it is only their habits that are different.

-Confucius

Everyone is aware there are major differences between Chinese and western culture. Despite this fact, westerners are still often frustrated and culturally shocked by the extent of the differences. But the more you learn and become aware of them, the better you will be able to cope as you go about your life and work in China.

If there is one single, all-embracing point to be made to a Canadian working in China, it would be to never assume anything, not even what you consider to be the most basic of understandings. Sometimes what you see as abnormal, the Chinese will see as normal. When you think you have an understanding or agreement, the Chinese will understand only that you have reached a particular point in the negotiations. Quite often, what you take for granted, based on *your* cultural bias, is interpreted differently by the Chinese, based on *their* cultural bias.

How then, do you survive in China? How do you cope? How do you even manage your daily life? Some expats simply ignore everything that does not fit into their cultural framework and, in effect, wall themselves off from China, the Chinese people, and the complications caused by cultural differences. It is an interesting reaction given that Chinese people, themselves, live within a system of personal walls that shut them off from strangers. Although these expats may manage to cope quite well, they miss the extraordinary benefits of developing and experiencing cross-cultural relationships. They learn nothing, or very little, about China.

Although many traditions were officially cast off during the Cultural Revolution, much of the basic framework of Chinese society remains. Some traditions are important to the social fabric of China, to the family, friendships and *danwei* (work unit) relationships, to the concept of hospitality and courtesy, and to values.