

10 Cultural Differences Between China and the US (1-5)

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Ultimately, Chinese and American people will find they have more similarities than cultural differences. People are motivated by the same things: comfort, money, providing for the family, job satisfaction and security. But each culture reaches these goals via different routes and on the surface, can sometimes seem poles apart. Understanding why people are driven to behave the way they do can go a long way to successful intercultural communication.

1. Chinese society is all about the group, while Americans celebrate the individual. The United States is a meritocracy in which individuals can shine, while in China, any success is regarded as a success for the company, or the family, or the team. A Chinese person will consider how their actions may affect the group as a whole rather than looking out only for themselves.
2. Hierarchy is important to the Chinese and respect will be shown to those higher up in the structure. American companies tend to have much flatter structures, with workers at all levels having access to those at the top. In China, a worker low down the pay scale would not expect to have direct contact with their superiors. Everybody knows their place in the structure and abides by the rules that come with it.
3. Conversation in China can feel somewhat direct to Americans. Even though Americans like to place people in context in the search for common ground, small talk about age, income and marital status, all favoured by the Chinese, can feel intrusive and overly personal to an American. Having said this, Chinese visitors to the United States can find the language and tone used in American workplaces rude and uncomfortable. Thinking before you speak is important to the Chinese, as is showing respect for those higher in the hierarchy. Communication style is indirect and Americans doing business with Chinese counterparts will need to learn to read between the lines.
4. China treats its seniors in a different way to Americans. Elders are held in great respect and treated as such, both in business and socially. Many families live with several generations under one roof. Even the dead are honored. Americans, on the other hand, expect their offspring to be independent. The older generation can live hundreds of miles away from their children and isolation of old people is a social issue. The American workplace can seem ageist to older people, too, as youth culture is celebrated.
5. Chinese people are inclined to foster deeper friendships than Americans. They may see Americans as initially gregarious but difficult to get to know in a deeper context. A friend in China is someone to whom you feel deeply obligated and for whom you will do favors when necessary. This translates into business, where the Chinese will try to forge relationships and connections, known as *guanxi*. Trust is essential before doing business. Colleagues tend to socialize together as part of relationship building and business entertainment is lavish. Americans, on the other hand, tend to keep work and personal life separate.

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6. Chinese in urban areas are used to a lack of personal space. Cities are densely populated, polluted and crowded, especially on public transport. Americans are more accustomed to physical space and will become territorial if they feel crowded, snapping at people who push in line and staking out little kingdoms for themselves, whether it's their car, desk or aeroplane seat.
7. Americans see freedom of speech and access to information as a right. China has heavy censorship of media and of the internet. Social media networks that Americans take for granted, like Instagram, YouTube and Facebook are not accessible in China, while many Western newspapers are blocked online. In Chinese companies, information is shared on a need-to-know basis, rarely filtering down from the top, while American corporate culture is generally much more open, with considerable effort being made to embrace transparency.
8. Chinese people will avoid confrontation wherever possible with a view to saving face. Shouting at someone causes both parties to lose face and if face is lost in business, a relationship can be permanently damaged. As such, Chinese executives will often avoid giving a straight answer in order to save the other person's face. Americans, who tend to be very direct and literal, can find this confusing and frustrating. The worst thing you can do in negotiations with Chinese colleagues is to go out of your way to prove a point, regardless of the effect it has on others. But to Americans, the end result is more important than reputation or even the relationships.
9. In China, humility is revered and people tend to downplay their achievements. America is almost the exact opposite; in a meritocracy, you need to make the most of yourself and let people know about your successes. The Chinese can see this as crass and boastful, while in the United States, humility can be regarded as a sign of weakness.
10. Business in the United States moves at a different pace from China. Americans focus on speed and efficiency and will hurry to get things done quickly. Time is money, in other words. People are expected to turn up on time for meetings and to meet deadlines. The Chinese, on the other hand, can be slow decision makers, preferring to build consensus and foster relationships before plunging into anything. Deadlines may only be met when the time is right and the project is considered complete. Americans can find this attitude to punctuality frustrating and time-wasting, while in negotiations, the Chinese will take advantage of the American need for speed, playing a waiting game to secure a better deal for themselves.