

CHINA ADOPTION SURVIVAL TIPS

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Customs and practices that are considered perfectly appropriate in one culture may be seen as totally unacceptable in another. The truth is that what is “appropriate” and “acceptable” are all culturally relevant. Understanding cultural differences is beneficial to acquiring a positive spirit and respectful attitude, and most of all, a sense of tolerance. The following are a few cultural differences between the Chinese and Americans that you might want to be aware of before you go to China.

Personal Space

China is an overpopulated country with 1.3 billion people, more than four times the population of the U.S.A. Therefore, getting around in a large crowd of people is a daily phenomenon. When you are on the street with your child, you are a novelty to the curious and kind Chinese. Ten, twenty or thirty people wanting to see your baby will quickly surround you. This could be intimidating or annoying to Americans who like to be left alone; but remember, these on-lookers mean no harm at all. It is their way of saying “hi” or finding out what is going on. So when you are tired of being surrounded, simply move on and walk away cheerfully.

You will encounter the same kind of crowd every day at the elevator in your hotel. In America, if we see six or seven people already in an elevator, we would wait for the next one; but in China, seven or eight more people will rush in to catch the ride. You may feel it is hard for you to breathe and you want to get out as soon as possible, but after a couple of days, you will get used to the crowd.

Finger-pointing

When a Chinese person is talking about something with his friends, he may point his finger at the object of his conversation. That object just might be you or your child. Americans generally consider such behavior very rude, but it is perfectly acceptable in the Chinese culture. So if you run into the finger-pointing situation, please understand that in most cases they mean no disrespect at all. You can either ignore it or walk away from it.

Clothes Police

Americans are very independent people. We trust our ability and judgment. We do not want others to interfere or intrude upon our personal life. However, Chinese believe in the need of interdependence. They respect and accept advice and help from others: the youth from the elderly, or the first-time mom from the experienced mothers. As a result, when you walk on the street or are in the shops in China, you will often be approached by middle-aged or elderly Chinese ladies who will gesture to you to cover up your baby. They may even, without asking for your permission, go ahead and cover the baby for

you. Are they questioning your parenting ability? No. It is the Chinese way of saying, “I care about you.” If you don’t like it, just smile and walk away.

Table Manners

In America, parents always remind their kids to “keep your mouth closed when you eat” or “don’t talk with your mouth full.” It is seen as terrible manners to make noise when you eat or show the food in your mouth when you talk. Generally in China, it is no problem all if one makes noise at the dinner table or carries on conversations with food in one’s mouth. It may be disgusting to you, but to Chinese it is just a part of their happy life.

Pedestrian Rights

Pedestrian rights are a big deal in this country. Vehicles stop for pedestrians at the airport, around the school, or in your neighborhood. We see that as our legal right and obligation. It is respect for human life. However, stopping for pedestrians is not something on the mind of most drivers in China, as they are not legally required to do so, unless they are driving on clearly marked major streets.

Of course, you will also be amazed by the “bravery” of Chinese pedestrians or bike riders. It seems that they manage to get around in the middle of traffic chaos very easily. In fact, they break traffic rules all the time by running across streets that they are not supposed to cross. The amazing thing is that you don’t see many car accidents in China either.

China is a developing country. The behavior of the people is influenced by their economic conditions and living standards. For example, clearing one’s throat and spitting in public is not uncommon in China. But like breaking traffic rules, these behaviors have nothing to do with the culture—they are simply bad habits. Practices in a culture are not unalterable; as the culture changes, so do the practices. It is more and more common for Chinese to eat with their mouths closed. You will also get a ticket if you are caught spitting on the street.

Overall, China is a great and fascinating country. Its people are kind and caring. The adoptive families that experience the least stress and have the best time in China are those who are willing to educate themselves and accept cultural differences with an open mind.