

## A Guide to Customs and Etiquette

china

**Kevin Sinclair**  
**with Iris Wong Po-yee**

# **CULTURE SHOCK!**

*China*

**Kevin Sinclair  
with Iris Wong Po-yee**

**TIMES BOOKS INTERNATIONAL**  
Singapore • Kuala Lumpur

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Illustrations by TRIGG  
Photographs by Kevin Sinclair  
Cover photographs by Luca I. Tettoni

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To Kit, my wife and companion on journeys along the China Coast.

And to Iris Wong Po-yee, who has been with me to ports, paddyfields, coal mines, steel works, kindergartens, factories, vegetable farms, plantations and shipyards in every province between Guangdong and the Mongol border.

And to Lui Kamwing in Hongkong, He Zhiquan in Guangzhou, Shen Dexiang in Shanghai, He Hualin in Beijing and thousands of other friends in cities, villages and farms throughout China with whom I have shared long conversations, pleasant meals and frequent toasts of *mao-tai*.

## PREFACE

When I first came to the China coast more than a half lifetime ago, it was a journey spurred by curiosity. As a boy in far-distant New Zealand, I had gone to school with Chinese. I hadn't taken much notice of them; they were just other kids in the class who happened to be a bit different from the white Anglo-Saxons, the Greeks, the native Maoris, the Indians and the Pacific Islanders. When I was 14 I withdrew a book from the mobile library which made weekly visits to the farm area where my family lived. The volume was called *Red Star Over China* and it was the epic account of how Mao Zedong and the starving, desperate Red Army had walked across China towards their vision of the future. By that stage, the mid-1950s, China was going through its turbulent course of struggling towards the utopia of perfect communism, towards a society in which everyone would be equal. It was a nice idea. Pity it never worked.

But that book had planted a germ which was to flourish a decade later when I arrived in Hongkong as a newspaperman. I came down the gangplank of the corrosive old liner berthed at Kowloon docks, looked around, smelled the fried bean curd, saw the stunning height of the cloud-wreathed pinnacle of The Peak—and promptly fell in love. My first job was on *The Star*. It was a bouncy tabloid, outrageous not in bare breasts but in taking on powerful enemies. The Cultural Revolution had erupted in China and the revolutionary fury had washed over into the streets of Hongkong. They were filled with tear gas, running with blood. The war was raging in Vietnam and down in Suzie Wong's neon world of Wanchai, the bars were heaving as young American soldiers took brief respite from the jungles of Vietnam. It was an exciting time to be a reporter.



But it was events over the border in China that held me in great fascination. From camouflaged spy posts atop mountain crests, I watched as Red Guards paraded down the dykes in the rice paddies and as unfortunates caught trying to escape to Hongkong were dragged away to a knoll known as Execution Hill to be dispatched by murder squads. What made this country tick? How could a people so civilised, so urbane, so talented fall victim to such mass insanity? Why did Chinese people act like this? What made these mysterious Chinese in China so different to the Chinese friends I had swiftly made in Hongkong and other Chinese I had known years earlier in New Zealand, Australia and Singapore?

It was to be many years before I first got permission to enter China and could start trying to answer such baffling queries for myself. Since then, I have made more than 80 visits to many provinces. Perhaps I am beginning to edge a little closer to the enigma of why going to China is such a culture shock for so many.



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# FOREWORD

*To learn what is good, a thousand days are not sufficient  
To learn what is evil, an hour is too long.*

The Chinese are different. Ask any of the 1,127,000,000 people who live in the world's most populous country and they will cheerfully agree. The vast sweep of Chinese history, the country's inward-looking culture, the ethnocentrism of the Han Chinese who make up 93 per cent of the population, have combined to produce a civilisation that regards itself as being not only culturally unique, but uniquely superior.

The poorest coolie humping sacks of rice on the Ningbo waterfront is convinced in his own mind of his inherent pre-eminence over any millionaire, professor or politician of any other nation. Why not? He's Chinese, isn't he? As such, he feels the direct cultural beneficiary of philosophers like Confucius and Lao Tzu, rulers such as Qin Shihuang—the great unifier who first brutally and efficiently forged the nation into one empire 2,200 years ago—and writers and poets like Li Bai and Do Fu.

The well-dressed westerner in the expensive clothes and holding the camera that costs more than the average Chinese earns in a year may be a neurosurgeon from a famous hospital. But he's only a foreigner, for all that.

## ***The Middle Kingdom***

China is not just a country. In the 5,000 years since the first recognisably Chinese agricultural-based civilisation formed in the great bend of the Yellow River, it has developed into a distinctive civilisation. Through invasions, revolutions, disasters, the rise and

collapse of dynasties, plagues, floods and famines, that civilisation has been kept more or less intact. A visitor from the Tang Dynasty whisked through time to the present could recognise his own rich legacy on the streets of any modern Chinese city. It is the world's oldest lifestyle.

China; the very name illustrates the Chinese outlook, the conviction of supremacy. The name comes from the two characters written in the *pinyin* modern version of Anglicised Chinese as Zhong Guo. This means, simply, the Central Nation, the Middle Kingdom of legend. To the Chinese, modern as well as ancient, their realm is the centre of the universe. Outside the pale of imperial domain dwelt the ignorant, slothful, pitied barbarians. These savages might intermittently swarm down over the Great Wall to subjugate huge swathes of China, to lay waste the land, to plunder its treasures, even to ascend for centuries to the Dragon Throne. But they were still outsiders, still to be looked down on because they were not blessed by being Chinese.

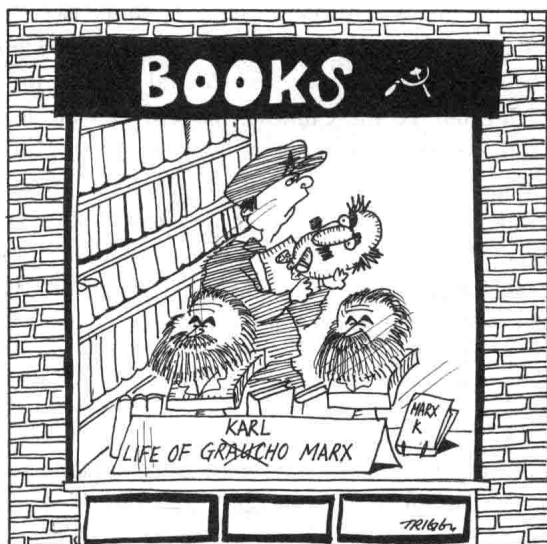
### ***The Onlookers***

It is to help those going to China to see the ancient land and to meet its engaging and often baffling people, that this book is aimed. Understanding China and the Chinese is never easy. The language barrier, for a start, stands awesomely in the way of most visitors from abroad. But, language aside, there are still significant differences in outlook, manner, work ethics, eating, entertainment, dress, ways of relaxing and even in such simple areas as saying hello that make Chinese different from much of the rest of the world.

Hopefully, this book will help unlock some of the loops in this complex Chinese puzzle.

— Chapter One —

# CHINA TODAY



*Once the dragon gate is crossed,  
One's status rises ten times.*

China is changing today faster than at any time in her long history. The pace is blinding. New economic policies are being implemented that the rulers in Beijing predict confidently will make the country one of the world's leading economic powers in the 21st century. The opportunities are great. So are the problems. The potential is enormous. So are the economic hurdles that have to be overcome. Even more daunting are the political chasms; hesitant moves towards

liberalism were crushed in June 1989, along with the bodies of students in Tiananmen Square.

Despite political upheavals, change is inevitably taking place in the world's oldest civilisation. A new generation of eager young technocrats is taking charge in China. It is like a marathon relay race; the old runners who have been carrying the baton since the time of the Long March in the 1930s are now handing it on to new leaders born since the establishment of Communist China in 1949. It is a transition spanning more than a generation; the flame is being passed from the revolutionaries who marched with Mao to men and women who learned to use computers while they studied for their MBAs in Stanford or Edinburgh. It's a whole new world.

Perhaps. But in huge swathes of China, the past lives on. No matter what policies are laid down in distant Beijing, despite the emergence of Guangzhou as one of the most vital manufacturing cities on earth and Shanghai throwing off the sloth of decades to become a powerhouse to generate industry for half a continent, down in the countryside, Chinese life remains basically uninterrupted.

### ***A Great Leap—Backwards***

The Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—two of the greatest man-made disasters in history—took millions of peasant lives. Like tidal waves, earthquakes and droughts, these calamities swept over the Chinese peasants who struggled once again to the surface to patiently rebuild their lives.

Since 1911, the nation has undergone enormous, fundamental changes. In that year, after decades of unrest, the Chinese people arose and overthrew the Manchus of the Qing Dynasty who had sat on the Dragon Throne since 1644. Instead of a brave new world of egalitarian rule leading towards prosperity and freedom from foreign oppression, the long-awaited revolution instead ushered in the convulsions of the warlord era. The country was weakened, split, fractured as squabbling local dictators imposed corrupt and selfish

rule on many parts of the country.

Dr Sun Yat-sen, inspiration for modern China, died before he could see his dream of a unified nation come true. The inheritor of his vision, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, grasped briefly at the chance to weld the country into one modern nation. In 1928, he led the Great Northern Expedition to unseat the warlords from Beijing. He conquered all that stood before him and, briefly, China had hope.

Then the Kuomintang (National Party) of Chiang Kai-shek split with another group of ardent reformists, the communists (or *gongchantang*) and the civil war started that was to drag on for two decades. Simultaneously, a much more brutal threat afflicted China. In 1932, the Japanese had driven into the rich industrial plains of Manchuria, seizing the three strategic provinces. Five years later, they struck into the heart of China. For eight more years, the country was torn apart by vicious foreign invasion and brutal occupation and by civil war. When Japan surrendered in 1945, the Kuomintang had largely discredited its mandate from the people; corruption, nepotism, inflation and greed had eaten away at its foundations.

In the final stages of the civil war, the communist armies hammered down the length of China from their northern strongholds, joining with local militias and underground bands in the rural areas and with workers and students who welcomed them in the cities. By 1 October 1949, Chairman Mao Zedong and his victorious marshals could stand at the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Beijing and proclaim to the world the birth of the People's Republic of China.

Once again, early hopes were soon to lose much of their lustre. The communists accomplished much good. The land was redistributed basically on the lines of the slogan that had helped carry the Red Army to victory: 'The land to the sower.' But then this promise was largely negated; the landlords had been purged (often executed) and dispossessed. Instead, there was collectivisation. At first, the communes worked. Over the years they became inefficient.





*Chairman Mao Zedong is remembered as a great leader. His successors admit his victories were tempered by 'many mistakes', but his statues still dominate many towns, his face still looks enigmatically out over Tiananmen Square.*

The legendary productivity of the Chinese peasant drooped. Politically and economically, the government blundered time and time again. A 'hundred flowers' of intellectual freedom were urged to bloom; when the flowers put their heads up in the thaw, they were swiftly plucked. A 'great leap forward' was proclaimed with peasants urged to forge foundries, feed furnaces in their rural plots. It was