



**ichingo.app**

## **Red Means Lucky, White Means Run — China's Color & Table Secrets**

Colors · Gifts · Dining Etiquette

Everything a first-time visitor needs to know  
before arriving in China

ichingo.app · Your China Travel Toolkit

**ichingo.app**

## Introduction

China is one of the most fascinating destinations in the world — but its culture runs deep, and some everyday customs can catch first-time visitors completely off guard. From the colors on a gift bag to the way you place your chopsticks, small details carry big meaning. This guide covers two of the most important cultural areas for any traveler: **color symbolism** and **dining etiquette**. Get these right, and you'll earn instant respect and warmth from locals. Get them wrong, and you might accidentally cause offence without knowing why.

This is part of the **ichingo.app China Culture Series** — your go-to toolkit for traveling China with confidence. Visit **ichingo.app** for app guides, city tips, and more cultural explainers.

## Part 1: Color Culture in China

Colors in China are far more than aesthetic choices. They carry centuries of meaning rooted in history, philosophy, and superstition. What looks like a simple color choice on a gift, outfit, or decoration can send a powerful cultural message — positive or negative. Here's what every visitor needs to know.

### The Lucky Colors 🍀

#### ● Red — The Color of China

**Red is China's most important color**, and perhaps the most universally recognised symbol of Chinese culture. It represents good luck, happiness, prosperity, and celebration. You'll see red everywhere: at weddings, during Chinese New Year (Spring Festival), at grand openings, and in temple decorations.

- Red envelopes (红包, hóngbāo) filled with money are the standard gift at weddings, New Year celebrations, and birthdays.
- Brides traditionally wear red — not white — for Chinese wedding ceremonies.
- Red lanterns hang outside restaurants, temples, and homes to attract good fortune.

💡 **Tip:** Wear something red when visiting China during a festival or celebration. Locals will appreciate it and may even comment positively on your 'lucky' color choice.

#### Gold & Yellow — The Imperial Color

**Gold and yellow** were historically reserved for the Emperor alone — commoners were forbidden from wearing yellow. Today, gold still signals wealth, prestige, and royalty. You'll see it heavily used in temples, imperial architecture (like the Forbidden City), and high-end gift packaging.

- Gifting something in gold wrapping immediately elevates its perceived value and respect.
- Gold decorations are especially prominent during Spring Festival.
- The term '黄金' (huángjīn) literally means 'yellow gold' — the two concepts are deeply linked in Chinese culture.

### Purple — Noble and Spiritual

**Purple** carries connotations of nobility, spirituality, and good fortune in Chinese culture. It appears frequently in Buddhist temple art and has historically been associated with high-ranking officials. Unlike in some Western cultures where purple can signal mourning, in China it is generally a positive and auspicious color — making it a safe and elegant choice for gifts.

### Colors to Be Careful With ⚠️

#### ❑ White — The Color of Mourning

**White** is primarily associated with death, mourning, and funerals in traditional Chinese culture. This is the direct opposite of many Western countries where white symbolises purity and celebrations (like weddings). White flowers — especially white chrysanthemums — are specifically used as funeral offerings.

⚠️ **Watch Out:** Never give a bouquet of all-white flowers as a gift. Always mix in red, pink, or yellow blooms. Avoid arriving at a celebration dressed entirely in white.

#### Green — The Hat Exception

**Green** itself is not an unlucky color in Chinese culture — it represents nature, growth, and harmony, and is widely used in eco-branding and health products. However, there is one very specific exception that every visitor must know about.

⚠️ **Watch Out:** Never give a green hat to a Chinese man. The phrase '戴绿帽子' (dài lǜ màozi) — 'wearing a green hat' — is a well-known idiom meaning a man's partner has been unfaithful. Gifting a green hat, even innocently, will cause immediate awkward silence or laughter at your expense.

#### ■ Black — Traditionally Inauspicious

**Black** has historically been considered an inauspicious color in Chinese culture, associated with bad luck and negative energy. In modern urban China — especially in fashion and business — black is widely accepted and fashionable. However, in traditional contexts (gifting, festivals, celebrations), it's best avoided.

- Don't use a black envelope for gifting money — red is always the correct choice.
- Avoid wearing all-black to a wedding or traditional celebration.

## Quick Reference: China Color Guide

| Color | Chinese Name    | Meaning                                    | Common Use                             | Tip for Visitors                                                    |
|-------|-----------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ●     | 红色 (Hóng sè)    | Luck, joy, prosperity                      | Weddings, CNY, grand openings          | Wear red at celebrations — locals will love it!                     |
|       | 黄/金色 (Huáng sè) | Royalty, wealth, power                     | Imperial decor, temples, festive gifts | Gold wrapping on gifts signals respect and generosity.              |
|       | 绿色 (Lǜ sè)      | Growth, harmony — but beware!              | Nature, eco branding, health           | Never gift a green hat to a man (symbolises infidelity).            |
| □     | 白色 (Bái sè)     | Mourning, death, purity                    | Funerals, hospitals                    | Avoid gifting all-white flower bouquets.                            |
| ■     | 黑色 (Hēi sè)     | Elegance (modern) / bad luck (traditional) | Fashion, business                      | Traditionally inauspicious; black envelopes are not used for gifts. |
| ●     | 蓝色 (Lán sè)     | Calm, trust, wisdom                        | Porcelain art, corporate branding      | Safe choice for professional settings — no cultural taboos.         |
|       | 紫色 (Zǐ sè)      | Nobility, spirituality                     | Imperial art, Buddhist temples         | Purple is auspicious — a good color for gifts.                      |

## Gift Color Rules at a Glance

### ✓ Safe gift wrapping colors:

- **Red** — always appropriate, especially for celebrations
- **Gold / Yellow** — signals respect and generosity
- **Pink** — warm, celebratory, great for birthdays
- **Purple** — elegant, auspicious, appreciated

### ✗ Avoid for gifts:

- **White** — associated with funerals and mourning
- **Black** — traditionally inauspicious in gift contexts

**💡 Tip:** When in doubt, go red. You simply cannot go wrong with a red gift bag or envelope in any Chinese celebration context.

## Part 2: Dining Etiquette in China

Sharing a meal in China is one of the most important social rituals in the culture. Food is not just sustenance — it is **an expression of hospitality, respect, and community**. Understanding the unwritten rules of the Chinese dining table will help you make a great impression and fully enjoy one of the world's greatest food cultures.

### Before the Meal

#### Seating Matters

In formal settings, seating is not random. The seat facing the door is the most honourable position, traditionally reserved for the most senior or respected guest. Wait to be directed to a seat rather than choosing your own at a banquet or formal dinner.

 **Tip:** If you're unsure where to sit, simply wait. Your host will guide you to the right seat — and being guided there is itself a gesture of respect toward you.

#### The Lazy Susan (Rotating Turntable)

Most Chinese restaurants — especially for group dining — use a **large rotating turntable in the centre of the table**. All dishes are placed on this and shared by everyone. The host typically rotates dishes toward the guests of honor first. Spin it slowly and always check nobody is currently serving themselves before rotating.

#### Chopstick Etiquette //

Chopsticks are far more than utensils in China — how you use them communicates your respect for both your host and the culture. Several specific behaviors are considered deeply rude or even offensive.

 **Watch Out:** Never stick chopsticks upright into a bowl of rice. This mimics the incense sticks burned at funerals as offerings for the dead, and is considered extremely bad luck and disrespectful.

- **DO:** Rest chopsticks horizontally on the chopstick holder or across your bowl when not using them.

- **DO:** Use serving chopsticks (公筷, gōng kuài) if provided on the table — these are specifically for taking food from shared dishes.
- **DON'T:** Point at people with your chopsticks — this is considered impolite.
- **DON'T:** Spear food with chopsticks like a fork — pick up and grip.
- **DON'T:** Pass food directly from your chopsticks to another person's chopsticks — this mirrors a funeral ritual and should be avoided.
- **DON'T:** Wave chopsticks around while talking or deciding what to eat.

## Tea Culture at the Table 🍵

**Tea is the lifeblood of Chinese dining.** It is almost always served, often before food arrives, and is continuously refilled throughout the meal. There is a beautiful, subtle etiquette surrounding it that most foreigners have never seen.

### The Two-Finger Thank You

When someone pours tea into your cup, you **lightly tap two fingers on the table** as a silent gesture of thanks. This custom dates back to the Qing Dynasty, when Emperor Qianlong would travel in disguise and pour tea for his servants. Not wanting to reveal his identity by bowing, his companions would tap two bent fingers on the table to secretly mimic a bow — symbolising '**thank you, Your Majesty.**' The gesture survives today as a common and charming part of Chinese dining culture.

💡 **Tip:** Try the two-finger tap the next time someone pours you tea in China. Locals will be pleasantly surprised and impressed that you know this custom.

### Pouring Tea for Others First

It is proper etiquette to pour tea for everyone else at the table before filling your own cup. This gesture of placing others first reflects the Confucian values of respect and care for elders and guests that underpin Chinese social culture.

## Paying the Bill 💰

**The bill is one of the most culturally loaded moments** at a Chinese meal. Unlike in Western countries where splitting the bill is common and even expected, in China it is traditional for one person — usually the host or the most senior person at the table — to pay for everyone.

- **Expect a loud, energetic 'fight' over the bill** — this is completely normal and is a sign of warmth and generosity, not conflict.



- **Offer to pay yourself** — even if you fully expect the host to insist on paying. Making the gesture is important for maintaining 'face' (面子, miànzi).
- **Splitting the bill** (AA 制, AA zhì) is increasingly common among friends of the same generation in cities, but is generally not appropriate in a business or formal host-guest situation.

⚠ **Watch Out:** Never simply sit and wait for someone else to pay without offering. Even if your offer is immediately refused, the act of offering is an important social signal of your good character.

## Making Noise is Fine 🍴

**Slurping noodles and soup is perfectly acceptable** in China, and in some contexts is actually a compliment to the chef — signalling that the food is so good you can't slow down. Don't feel the need to eat in silence or suppress natural sounds of enjoyment. A loud, lively table is a happy table in Chinese dining culture.

## Toasting: Gān Bēi! 🍷

**Toasting (干杯, gān bēi — literally 'dry cup')** is an important part of formal and business dinners in China. When someone raises their glass for a toast, it is polite to hold your glass slightly lower than that of the most senior person as a sign of respect. The traditional expectation is to drain the glass completely — though in modern settings, sipping is increasingly accepted.

- If you don't drink alcohol, it's perfectly acceptable to toast with tea or a soft drink.
- You can initiate a toast yourself — raise your glass, make eye contact, and say '干杯!' (gān bēi!).

## Quick Reference: Do's and Don'ts at the Table

| ✓ DO                                                             | ✗ DON'T                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Wait for the host to sit and invite eating first                 | Start eating before the host signals to begin                   |
| Try every dish — refusal can seem rude                           | Stick exclusively to 'safe' Western-style dishes                |
| Accept food placed in your bowl by the host — it's affectionate  | Insist on serving yourself only                                 |
| Use the serving chopsticks (公筷) if provided                      | Use your personal chopsticks to serve others from shared dishes |
| Tap two fingers on the table to say thank you when tea is poured | Ignore when someone pours you tea                               |
| Let the host pay — it's a sign of respect and                    | Immediately split the bill Western-style                        |

|                                                                       |                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| generosity                                                            |                                                         |
| Offer to pay loudly — even if the host insists, it's proper etiquette | Simply sit and wait for someone else to pay             |
| Hold your bowl up to eat rice                                         | Leave rice in the bowl — finish it to show appreciation |
| Compliment the food — '好吃！(Hǎo chī!)' means 'Delicious!'              | Complain about flavors, spice, or ingredients           |
| Make some noise — slurping noodles is perfectly normal                | Assume silence at the table is expected                 |

## Useful Phrases for the Dining Table ✨

| English                 | Chinese | Pronunciation          |
|-------------------------|---------|------------------------|
| Delicious!              | 好吃！     | Hǎo chī!               |
| Thank you (for the tea) | 谢谢      | Xiè xiè                |
| Cheers! / Bottoms up!   | 干杯！     | Gān bēi!               |
| Please help yourself    | 请用      | Qǐng yòng              |
| I'm full, thank you     | 我吃饱了，谢谢 | Wǒ chī bǎo le, xiè xiè |
| This is very tasty      | 这很好吃    | Zhè hěn hǎo chī        |
| May I have the bill?    | 买单      | Mǎi dān                |
| Let me pay!             | 我来付！    | Wǒ lái fù!             |

## Final Tips from ichingo.app

Understanding Chinese culture goes a long way in making your trip more meaningful, respectful, and enjoyable. Most locals are incredibly warm and forgiving of cultural missteps from visitors — but making the effort to understand these customs will **earn you genuine appreciation and open doors** that would otherwise stay closed.

Here are three simple rules to remember above all else:

**1**

**When in doubt, use red.** For colors, gifts, and envelopes — red is always safe, always welcome, always appreciated.



2

**Watch your chopsticks.** The two rules that matter most: don't stick them upright in rice, and don't pass food chopstick-to-chopstick.

3

**Offer to pay — always.** Even if you know you won't win the battle. The gesture matters enormously in Chinese social culture.

