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Red Means Lucky, White Means Run — China's Color

Colors · Gifts

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

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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**. 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.



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