

A Culture of Gratitude

By Sean Robertson

It may be one of the first words that Westerners learn, but in China a simple “thank you” is rarely all that simple.

I first began to notice China’s uneasy relationship with those two little words on my very first day in Beijing. I emerged from the airport, wearing just about every piece of clothing I owned, and found myself in the teeth of one of Beijing’s blisteringly cold winter mornings. Feeling lost, bleary-eyed and more than a little out of my comfort zone, a cab driver rushed to my aid, sweeping up my suitcases and throwing me into his taxi. Given my current state, I was overcome with gratitude, erupting into a chorus of *xiexie xiexie* (Thank you! Thank you!).

While I was perhaps a little overzealous in my appreciation, I was quite taken aback by how uncomfortable I had made the cab driver. He covered away, denying that I had any reason to be thankful and meeting my outpouring of *xiexies* with a slightly embarrassed refrain of *nali nali nali* (which roughly translates to “it was really nothing”).

I was similarly surprised when I discovered that not only are the Chinese opposed to receiving thank yous, they also don’t much like handing them out either. Whether you’ve fetched them a drink, held open a door or picked up some groceries, the default Chinese response seems to be keeping your *xiexies* to yourself.

Having grown up in Australia, where the idea of verbalizing our gratitude has been drilled into us since infancy, China’s aversion to saying thank you struck me as somewhat impolite. And while I came up with a number of explanations (maybe it’s cultural shyness? Is it because I’m a Westerner?), the reality was a whole lot more complicated than I had initially realized. In fact, the mere act of expressing gratitude taps into a complex tapestry of social norms and relations that goes to the very heart of China’s Confucian system of values.

What I have learnt is that in China, when you say “please” or “thank you,” you are basically erecting a barrier between you and whomever you are speaking to. For the Chinese, politeness or such *keqi* (standing on ceremony) is associated with formality. As such, when you say “thank you” to a friend what you are actually saying to them is that there is some need for formality between us. If you drop the “thank you” you shorten the social distance between you and

your friend. And so, from a Western point of view, the blunter and more direct you are, the more friendly you are actually being.

In the West, over-politeness has always been our fallback position. Whenever we find ourselves in uncomfortable social situations, we retreat into a cacophony of pleases and thank yous, as this is what we have been programmed to do. We do it without thought or hesitation, such that it has become more of a reflex than an expression of actual gratitude.

The Chinese have therefore always rejected the Western approach. Westerners “thank” so often, and for such trivial things, that their appreciation often appears artificial and false. And much of the time, it probably is.

The Chinese, on the other hand, have dispensed with the unnecessary niceties, and instead, they seem to have developed a culture that values genuine gratitude.

This can be seen quite clearly in the tradition of giving thank you gifts. If you receive a gift in Australia, you will usually show your appreciation by writing a card or a letter of thanks. In China, however, this would be seen as totally insufficient. In China, the expectation is that you return the favor, by getting your gift-giver a gift in return.

This tradition has its roots in the Confucian principle of “reciprocity” or *bao*. Reciprocity is basically the Chinese equivalent of the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have done unto you.” Unlike in the West, however, where the golden rule is often seen as a fairly aspirational ideal, *bao* is maybe the most pervasive force in Chinese society.

It is a hard thing to get your head around as a Westerner; the idea that if someone does something kind for you, there is an unspoken expectation that you will return the favor. This is primarily because the vast majority of Western society is so fiercely individualistic.

In China, the collective is always more important than the individual, and so develop-



ing and cultivating relationships is seen as far superior to pursuing personal advancement or growth. As such, if you are looking to grow as a person, your best approach is to develop relationships with others.

The bottom line is that *bao* is ingrained into the very fabric of Chinese society. And it is because of *bao* that the Chinese are never content with a mere “thank you.” If you want to express your gratitude in China, you are going to have to show it. Loving your neighbor is not just something that the Chinese write on a bumper sticker.

Thus, once I overcame my initial confusion, I found the Chinese culture of gratitude to be hugely refreshing and a very welcome alternative to the rampant individualism of the West.

The universality of *bao* manifests itself in countless daily interactions. Chinese people never ask for their money back, they will give you a lift without question and they are always happy to open their doors to you, irrespective of any personal expense they might incur. Most importantly, however, is they will never expect a thank you in return, because they know that one day, you will return the favor.

It seems fair to say that when I finally jump a cab to head back to the airport, I will be limiting myself to just one *xiexie* for the trip. But what I have come to realize is that when in China, a mere thank you will scarcely suffice. ■

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