

Chinese refugee students: Cultural background profiles



Language

Standard Chinese or Mandarin (official); Cantonese and several other dialects are spoken throughout the country.

Teaching in the classroom

The literacy rate among men and women in China is generally high, illustrating the importance of education in Chinese society. Since the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the development of the education system in China highlighted the importance of advancing economic modernization, which led to significant efforts to improve the education system. You may notice that Chinese children are aware of the importance of education.

However, due to the size of the country and the range of national minorities, education still varies throughout the country and can depend on proximity to cities or other factors limiting access to education.

Across Chinese society, punctuality, diligence and respect are common practices, and particularly for Chinese students. It is considered respectful to remain seated when the teacher is speaking. Principles of respect are important in Chinese culture and can be reflected in the classroom.

Family/school engagement

When greeting Chinese people, seniority takes precedence. This means it is polite to greet the oldest person before greeting others. It is also important to address Chinese adults by Mr., Mrs., Miss plus their family name, not by their first names. Women generally keep their maiden name when they marry. Chinese people are also addressed by their professional titles. For example, address Li Ziang using his title: Governor Li or Director Li.

Chinese culture is formal and you will find that ways of speaking show this. Greetings for men and women include handshakes, and in conversation there is little or no touching unless engaging with family or close friends. Generally speaking, Chinese dislike being touched by strangers. However, do not be surprised if Chinese people physically touch you as a form of expressing sympathy.

Close family ties and a collectivist culture means that families are closely involved in the lives of Chinese students. Furthermore, the emphasis on respecting one's elders means that Chinese students' parents are influential in their children's lives. This influence also happens with elder siblings and younger siblings. Therefore, when addressing an issue with students, it is wise to speak to family members to better understand the situation or seek insight into alternatives, solutions or ideas. You can talk first to elder siblings, because within a Chinese family, traditional family structure is rigid and hierarchical, so easing an issue into the family through the natural hierarchy may avoid problems.

Chinese conversation can be indirect, and you may need to interpret the meaning behind words. In conversation, someone may say the opposite to what they mean (perhaps to avoid giving offense or because of privacy), so it is important to pay attention to this and ask questions to understand the real meaning.

Direct eye contact shows respect, politeness and attentiveness, so it is important to recognize the speaker with eye contact. When speaking to elders or parents of children, lowering one's head is another sign of respect.

A gesture to avoid when engaging with Chinese students or family is to finger-pointing. Use your whole hand or flat palm rather than pointing with your index finger. Also avoid snapping your finger or whistling to get someone's attention. Use respectful modes of communication to avoid any disrespectful perceptions.

The Chinese generally avoid political-related conversations, such as criticisms of Chinese politics or the Cultural Revolution. It is best to make polite, positive small talk.

Culture, gender and family

There is a great deal of emphasis on community and collectivism, and traditional and religious customs are important in the life of Chinese.

The majority of the Chinese population practice a combination of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. A smaller minority of the population practice Christianity, Protestantism, Catholicism, Mormonism, Islam and Judaism. The predominant ethnic groups are Han Chinese, and a small percentage of the population comprises other ethnic groups including Zhuang, Uygur, Hui, Yi, Tibetan, Miao, Manchu, Mongol, Buyi, Korean.

Hierarchically, roles of men and women originate in more traditional views as Chinese society remains male-dominated, but because women are increasingly becoming more equal in society, views of women are evolving. However, although the proportion of



women in the workforce is growing, a woman is still expected to have domestic responsibilities.

Men and women tend to dress formally and conservatively, wearing dark colors and clothes that are not revealing.