

# Qingke

Qǐngkè 请客

**The proper treatment of guests has been an important duty and source of cultural pride for the Chinese for many centuries. A special term, *qingke* (guest hospitality), was, and continues to be, used to define this social phenomenon. *Qingke* refers both to a straightforward goal to maintain *guanxi* (interpersonal relationships) and, more generally, to social occasions that involve entertaining friends and guests.**

In Chinese culture positive feelings of fellowship and individual and group identity are associated with the hospitality offered to guests. Since the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE), *daike* (the proper treatment of guests) has been an important Confucian value. The Chinese refer to their country as *liyizhibang* (the kingdom of etiquette) and use words such as *reqing* (warm) and *haoke* (hospitable) to describe themselves. The opening passage of the *Analecets* reflects the Confucian attitude toward entertaining friends and guests: “Is it not delightful to have friends come from afar?”

Hospitality remains central to the flow of everyday social life in present-day China, and the treatment of guests has become a highly developed and ritualized art form. On the down side, there is intense social pressure to uphold this cultural standard. During the 1980s and 1990s, as large sums of state, corporate, and personal funds were spent on lavish banquets and elaborate entertainments,

*qingke* had come to also be associated with excess, waste, and corruption.

## Invitations

*Qingke* can denote an invitation or a polite gesture of goodwill. *Qingke* can express an acceptance of the responsibilities of a host (“I will make you feel at home”) or the desire to maintain harmonious social relations (“Let’s get together sometime”). Contextual cues—such as stating specific times and locations, and repeating offers—enable listeners to distinguish a sincere invitation from a simple courtesy. As a genuine invitation, *qingke* is a display of friendliness, openness, and a desire to deepen the bonds of the relationship. *Qingke* is also a way to confer face (respect) to the receiver of the invitation.

## Entertainment of Guests

*Qingke* is associated with numerous events, occasions, and outings: holidays, festivals, weddings, birthdays, promotions, tea dates (or coffee dates), sharing a meal, seeing someone off or welcoming someone back from a journey, and, most important, maintaining *guanxi*. The type of *qingke* activity is prompted by the closeness among participants, with distinctions observed between in-groups and out-groups. In-group occasions tend to be private, relaxed, and focused on the exchange of feelings. They generally celebrate something good that has happened to the host. Typically, there is no strict adherence to ritual etiquette in

these occasions involving close friends. Out-group occasions are more formal and take place in restaurants, hotels, teahouses, and other public places. These occasions, frequently motivated by personal gain, involve large amounts of resources and are governed by adherence to traditional codes of proper etiquette.

## Tradition of Proper Etiquette

During the Zhou dynasty, discourses on ritual, protocol, and etiquette governed the way people were to act. Works such as the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*), the *Yili* (*Book of Rituals and Etiquette*), and the *Zhouli* (*Zhou Rituals*) were taken quite seriously because without an understanding of ritual and etiquette, one could not become a functional member of society. Each member of society had a specific role with social responsibilities and expectations for behavior. Culturally defined customs of etiquette have created a complex web of social roles, defined the responsibilities associated with those roles, and shaped public behavior in China. In Zhou China, for example, *binke* (guests) were defined as one of the seven most important relationships but a category distinct from the category of friends.

As China becomes more integrated into the international community and social relationships become more

complex acknowledging hierarchy, knowing one's place in society, reciprocating, exchanging *ganqing* (feelings), and maintaining social harmony are behaviors still valued and maintained through the Chinese system of etiquette. These behaviors constitute a large part of the set of skills that socially competent Chinese draw on to manage interpersonal relationships. They are an integral part of hospitality. Most Zhou rituals have been simplified or have evolved over time, and much of the formal language associated with those rituals is no longer used. Nevertheless, guests (out-group members) and friends (in-group members) continue to have distinct roles in contemporary Chinese society, roles that have radically different responsibilities associated with them.

Guests are referred to as *guibin* (literally, esteemed guests), *jiabin* (distinguished guests), *guike* (esteemed visitors), and, more generically, as *binke* (guests), *laibin* (visitors), or *keren* (visitors). Social distance is maintained when interacting with guests and relaxed when meeting with friends. Guests receive special treatment and significant status. They are treated with courtesy marked by honorific titles and polite speech. Politeness mechanisms, such as the use of phrases such as *please* and *thank you*, are directed toward guests. In addition to these readily observable distinctions, guests are afforded more turns to speak, offered the right of way at doorways and elevators,



**An example of *qingke*; a family treats some friends to dinner at a restaurant. PHOTO BY TOM CHRISTENSEN.**





**Friends gather around a table for tea and conversation in this illustration from an ancient Chinese painting manual.**

and praised with compliments. In general, guests hear what the host thinks they want to hear. Because guests are to be taken care of, hosts feel a sense of burden associated with their role, but most of these behaviors are dispensed with when interacting with friends.

## Regional Variations

Because of its vast size and enormous population, contemporary China is characterized by tremendous cultural and regional diversity. Traditional protocol in the entertainment of guests is adhered to in developed urban centers, such as Beijing and Shanghai, much differently than it is in conservative rural areas, such as Shandong and much of inland China. Moreover, China's numerous ethnic and cultural subgroups often maintain distinct social practices. Although notions of hospitality differ across region and subculture, most Chinese share an intense pride in their complex systems of etiquette and hospitality.

What can differ from location to location in China includes, of course, what regional specialties are served—the choice of staple foods, for example (wheat, millet and sorghum-based noodles and dumplings in the north and rice or rice-based foods in the south)—as well

as a number of other details: the order in which dishes are served (soup last in the north and soup first in the south), the amount of food served (copious amounts in the north and small exquisitely prepared portions in the south), where guests and hosts sit (host facing the door in some regions, back to the door in others), the size and shape of the table (square, rectangular, or round), the number of ceremonial toasts (usually an auspicious number such as three or six), host and guest responsibilities, and what certain behaviors signify. For instance, in Shandong, if glasses are tapped when toasting, it is an indication that whatever beverage is being consumed should be completely consumed to display sincerity; in other areas tapping glasses may simply be a kind of salutation that does not require draining the contents of one's glass. In northern China, eating events are characteristically raucous gatherings in which all guests are expected to contribute to the mood, while elegance and refinement are valued by southern Chinese. Surface level appearances, saving face, and ceremonial actions take on greater significance in these northern-style events, while thriftiness and style are key in southern events. In large urban areas in the south that have been exposed to more international contact, such as Shanghai, hosts tend to allow guests to order what they wish to eat or drink and tend not to put

as much pressure on guests to consume large amounts of food or drink. In northern China, however, it is still the host's responsibility to take care of all guests' needs, which includes ensuring that they are provided with the best foods and sufficient amounts of food and drink. Thus, northern hosts often order for their guests, place food on their plates, fill their glasses, and spend significant energy urging guests to consume more food and drink.

## Private and Public Contexts

The level of intimacy of the people involved in a social gathering determines how a particular *qingke* occasion unfolds. Invitations to visit private homes, for instance, signify the trust and closeness of a relationship that has either existed for a long time or has just taken on a new significance. Hosts spend tremendous amounts of time and energy cleaning, cooking, and preparing food and spirits before the arrival of their guests. Despite the initial efforts made to prepare for the event, these *qingke* occasions are relatively relaxed because they occur in the private setting of the home, involve small numbers of intimate friends and family, and are normally focused on strengthening existing bonds.

In the public arena, *qingke* occasions range from the least formal level, perhaps with an invitation to attend a movie or concert with a friend, or to gossip over a cup of tea and catch up on the latest news, to the most formal level, as with an invitation to a banquet. Informal *qingke* occasions are viewed as opportunities for friends to deepen *ganqing* through chatting, eating, drinking, or doing something interesting together. Formal banquets, on the other hand, are large-scale cultural performances involving vast quantities of food and drink and serve as means of interacting socially and maintaining *guanxi*. Banquets are a microcosm of Chinese society and are conducted with an emphasis on conforming to the proper norms of etiquette, with themes of modesty, sincerity, and mutual respect framing behavior.

## Pattern of Occasions

In-group, out-group, private, and public *qingke* occasions are all social occasions that frequently involve eating and

drinking and all tend to proceed according to a similar four-step pattern:

- 1 Yingke (welcoming guests)
- 2 Jingcha (offering guests tea, alcohol, or cigarettes)
- 3 Yanqing (treating guests to a meal)
- 4 Songke (seeing guests off)

In traditional China, important guests were ceremoniously welcomed by setting off firecrackers. Protocol dictated specified distances at which to meet guests, depending on their social rank. Phrases such as *jiefeng xichen* (“receive from the wind and wash off the dust”), still used colloquially to describe the welcoming of guests, reflect these traditional practices. These rituals have been replaced by the hosts' meeting of guests at doors of restaurants or at train stations, airports, or harbors.

After greeting guests, the primary host, usually a man, begins the occasion with *hanxuan* (small talk) that may take place on a couch in a sitting room or anteroom. While one host, usually the lady of the house, prepares the meal, a second host offers tea, cigarettes, fruit, and candy. Although what is offered to guests during this period has changed—with candy, melon seeds, and bottled water replacing tea and cigarettes in some contemporary urban settings—most *qingke* occasions still begin this way.

The offering of tea is typically followed by a meal. Even if a guest visits at a time outside of normal meal times, the good host is expected to *liuke* (ask a guest to stay for a meal). When not arranged in advance, an offer to remain for a meal places a burden on a guest to decide whether the host actually has the time to continue the interaction or is simply being polite. Because of the cultural importance of food and eating, meals are most often the focal activity of *qingke* occasions.

When the meal is completed, hosts escort guests to a more comfortable setting to relax, chat, smoke, eat fruit, or sing karaoke. *Qingke* occasions end with the hosts' seeing off of guests while urging them to stay longer and to visit again. Hosts are expected to escort their guests to their transportation and to wait until they are out of sight. For positive beginnings and endings that leave guests with good first and last impressions, particular emphasis is placed on welcoming and seeing guests off.

## Hosting

During formal *qingke* occasions, hosts are divided into primary hosts, assistant hosts, and escorts. Guests are hierarchically differentiated as main and secondary guests. Participants must conduct the ritual behaviors and fulfill the responsibilities associated with their roles. Recognizing the hierarchy of an occasion and displaying mutual respect are keys for all participants. The standard rule that underlies all hospitality events in China is *ke sui zhu bian* (guests follow the host's wishes). Hosts have assumed the responsibility to take care of guests during a particular occasion, which means that while during *zuozhu* (serving as host), one has the responsibility to arrange everything and to provide for needs of all guests without their having to ask for things.

Hosting involves a significant responsibility and provides an opportunity for enormous influence. Prestige, honor, and social status are associated with good hosting skills. Hosts are responsible for arranging a suitable location, sufficient food and spirits, interesting and amicable guests, transportation, seating assignments, and entertainment. Hosts are also responsible for maintaining the hierarchy of the occasion, creating a festive atmosphere, leading the conversation, maintaining harmony, facilitating the exchange of feelings, and ensuring a pleasant experience for every guest. While accomplishing all of this, hosts are expected to project humility, which is usually

expressed through self-deprecating remarks about the inadequacies of hosting abilities, the location, or the amount and quality of the food and drink provided.

Hosts bear all costs, arrange everything, and accompany guests at all times, a practice many Western visitors to China find stifling but most Chinese guests expect. Hosts arrive early, welcome guests, lead toasts, order dishes, issue self-deprecating remarks, serve food, pour drinks, and control every aspect of the occasion. Hosts frequently offer hospitality with particular gusto because the assumption is that guests will politely decline, even if they plan to accept.

## Guesting

The practice of *zuoke* (serving as guest) also carries responsibilities. Guests are expected to shower hosts with repeated compliments on the quality of the site; the interesting group of guests; the host's hosting skills; the host's thoughtfulness and attention to detail in preparation; and the amount, taste, and quality of the food and drink provided. Guests are further expected to remain humble, to avoid eating or drinking to excess, to avoid imposing upon the host or infringing upon the host's time in the spotlight, and to give the host every opportunity to make a good impression (save face) while participating in the occasion.

**A convivial business lunch in Guangzhou, intended to welcome a first-time visitor to the city.**

PHOTO BY BERKSHIRE PUBLISHING.



These expectations frequently impose upon guests the burden of doing things that they may not wish to do in order to avoid damaging their host's face (reputation). In formal situations Chinese guests work hard to convey the notion that they are enjoying themselves, thanks to the host's efforts, even when they are not. Guests also frequently decline initial offers of food and drink and frequently apologize to hosts for burdening them.

*Qingke* occasions are participatory occasions. Neither guests nor hosts drink or eat alone. Participants toast and drink with each other; everyone eats together; and everyone participates through eating, drinking, toasting, complimenting, storytelling, telling tasteful jokes, playful verbal jousting, singing, and dancing. Failure on the part of any guest to actively participate in at least one of these activities is a direct insult and signals to all participants that the host has failed in his or her hosting responsibilities.

Western participants in *qingke* events need to adapt to certain protocols for eating and drinking as a group, and those differ from acceptable customs while eating as individuals. Dishes are served family-style, and it is also impolite to eat or drink if other participants present haven't started yet or have finished with the meal. Chinese events tend to be highly structured; guests only eat when the host indicates, either with words or gestures, that it is time to eat. The controlled nature of such events, combined with a host's incessant urging to eat and drink to one's fill, leads to impressions among Western participants that the focal activity of *qingke* events is drinking and, in particular, getting guests drunk. In fact, the urging is not meant to be coercive—it is rather the host's attempt to fulfill the responsibility associated with *qingke*, and drinking is merely one mode of interaction involved. The primary goal of the host is to create a mirthful atmosphere that facilitates the exchange of feelings among participants.

In addition to these confusing points, Western participants typically have difficulty in determining who pays the bill because guests and hosts frequently have heated arguments over the check. But face plays a critical role in *qingke* events, and details such as “who pays the bill” are nearly always determined prior to the event: Hosts pay, or

they delegate the task to their assistant hosts so as not to have to leave their guests alone. Guests should offer to pay but should not steal the host's limelight. That is, guests follow the host's lead in all situations; failing to allow a host the face gained through paying can cause more damage to a relationship than such apparent generosity would bring. Hospitality demands reciprocity, but reciprocity at a subsequent event is the best rule to follow.

## Centrality of *Qingke*

*Qingke* occasions hold special significance in a culture where strict norms of etiquette dictate public interaction, human relationships are emphasized, and a balanced social ledger is the ideal. Entertaining guests is a crucial element of participating in social, political, and economic life in China. *Qingke* is the means for maintaining the flow of social capital, exchanging feelings, opening a relationship, repairing relationships, and paying back favors. *Qingke* is a method for affirming existing friendships, expressing gratitude, displaying status, conferring respect, and learning more about a person to determine whether further investment in feelings is warranted. And *qingke* is a way of accessing the group, managing social relationships, balancing social harmony, and celebrating special occasions.

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## Further Reading

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