

HONG KONG UNVEILED

A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY THROUGH
THE HIDDEN WORLD OF CHINESE
CUSTOMS AND CULTURE

Clare Baillieu & Betty Hung

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FOREWORD

When talking with Chinese friends or colleagues, many foreign visitors to Hong Kong will hear them say “We Chinese” do this, or “We Chinese” believe that. It is a constant source of surprise that Chinese people can speak of the habits and beliefs of all their millions of compatriots with such certain knowledge that they are right. But generally they are.

To be “Chinese” is much more than belonging to an ethnic grouping. The thousands of years of cultural development, much of it under the same basic national and organisational structure, have developed an enormous set of understandings and procedures that tend to be a total mystery to the majority of non-Chinese. And nowhere is this more true than in tradition-loving Hong Kong. To be a foreigner in any environment is a challenge. But in Hong Kong it seems even more so, given the feeling that all the local population have already been fully briefed in the club rules.

How often do foreigners try to say something in their faltering Cantonese only to have all the Chinese within earshot burst out laughing? When asked why, the answer is usually that one mispronounced a word to a degree that is not discernible to

the Western ear, but gives a totally different and often amusing meaning to the Chinese listener.

The Cantonese love their language, and the proper and effective use of it is something they treasure and admire in others, be they fellow Chinese or foreigners. On the one hand they delight in puns and symbolism, with much clever and witty use being made of words that sound like others. On the other hand, for the same reason there are words that should on no account be used in the wrong situation for fear of causing enormous embarrassment or worse.

But this book is more than just a study of the nuances of language. There is much here about Chinese culture. As a foreigner, one can be sure to be the only person sitting at a banquet table who does not know the link between one of the Four Beauties of Chinese history (and yes, there were exactly four) and the place where a waiter stands to serve the food. Do many of us know that it causes more offence to refuse the auspicious roasted pig that is often served at a celebration than not to turn up at all? And what does one do when given a gift by a Chinese – open it or not open it? You can be sure that there is a right way, and a wrong way to behave.

The authors of this book, the one locally-raised and the other a long-term foreign resident, have brought together an insightful blend of instructions and experiences that will be sure to help new arrivals to this city hit the ground running. But even to this expatriate of close on 30 years residence there is much that is informative and extremely useful. Even after such a long time

here it is all too easy to put one's foot in it. But reading this book will certainly minimise the risk.

Robert Nield
Past President, Royal Asiatic Society
Hong Kong

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

This book is written from a Hong Kong point of view – mainly because the authors have both lived for many years in the territory. It should not be taken, however, to apply solely to Hong Kong but rather a broader view needs be applied.

China is a vast country containing 56 official ethnic groupings or nationalities. Even so, many of the underlying aspects of the culture and customs that are so peculiarly Chinese are common throughout China, crossing all boundaries of race, colour, and creed.

Hong Kong was divided, but not completely divorced, from mainstream Chinese influence during the years of British colonialism. Many of the customs which fell into disuse in some parts of China were faithfully adhered to in Hong Kong. The Chinese have a great inherent sense of homeland and mother country and this adherence to custom, even in the face of scientific and technological evidence to the contrary, is part and parcel of the oneness of Chinese society.

The inscrutable Chinese is just one way in which Westerners seek to explain this oneness. It is more like shared memory, or

inherited memory, than anything else, and is lacking in most Western societies.

There are many people we would like to thank for their help in putting this book together. However, we must respect the request for anonymity of so many who freely offered their knowledge and experience. They know who they are and that this book could not have been written without them. Thank you.

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