

Money > Tips on Tipping



It's a Western concept.

If you read various travel websites and guidebooks, you'll find conflicting information about giving tips in China. Older sources - pre-2005 - tend to say there is no tipping, ever (as is still the refreshing custom in Japan.) Sources aimed at upscale travelers imply that they should give similar gratuities as they would in the West. Most sources, however, tend to not give any clear advice.

It is true that Communist ideology as practiced up to the 1980s would have discouraged front-line workers from providing exceptional service for monetary reward. Standing out from the rest of the brigade would not have been smart, and there wasn't disposable income for that kind of behavior anyway. And across Asia, there is a strong cultural norm of selfless hospitality, which has discouraged the idea of tipping. However - and we haven't seen any tourist resources talk about this - Chinese society has indeed had a long tradition of giving small gifts to those who provide service. The twist on the idea is that the gifts have been given to business associates, government officials, or those of higher social class as a way to cultivate *guanxi*. (We talk about the kinds of small gifts you'll want to consider bringing in a separate article.)

Tipping for hospitality workers is a new idea to the mainland, and it has spread in direct proportion with the exposure an area has had with Westerners:

- In bigger cities, foreign chain hotels, fancy restaurants and expatriate bars, and "tourist traps," there will be more of a tendency for workers to expect gratuities from Westerners.
- In smaller towns further away, at Chinese-brand hotels for local travelers, and neighborhood cafes, workers may not have any expectation or familiarity with the concept of tipping.

Will workers refuse tips? Probably never. Will you have an awkward moment or two? Yes. Just like back home.

What to plan for

Your adoption agency will brief you on how much to budget for lump-sum gratuities which will be distributed to tour guides, drivers, and your local contacts. These people are providing specialized, highly-focused service, and we all want to make sure they are fairly compensated.

For bellhops, porters, room service, and laundry delivery, have 5 or 10 yuan ready to discretely hand out. (If you haven't had a chance to change currency yet, one or two US dollars will suffice.)

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At restaurants, a service charge is usually added to your bill. If you want to, you can leave 3 to 5% on the table. (Compared to the 15-20% customary in America, it feels like you're cheating, but there's no need to feel guilty.)

Fast food restaurants - no tipping, just like everywhere else. At coffee shops, however, keep your eyes open for a tip jar. If there is one, watch what other people are doing (a few coins is probably sufficient.)

Not that you'll see many, but when you inevitably go to the Friendship Store, you'll see a washroom attendant there in the restroom. Leave some small change or a small bill.

Taxi rides are very inexpensive compared to the US or Japan. While most guides say there's no need to tip, there's no harm in rounding your fare off to the nearest 5 or 10-yuan bill.

Should you tip in US dollars?

Older resources would say yes. We are saying no, use local currency. The dollar isn't worth what it used to be, and there's something kind of patronizing about it. Plus, while the hotel staff can readily exchange USD for RMB, your barista will have a hassle converting foreign money into something useful.

What do I say?

- Nothing, just a smile and nod. You're both probably a little nervous, anyway.
- "Keep the change" translates as *loo zhao ling chEEen bah*
- "Good service" translates as *lee-yung HOW deh foo woo*
- Or, just go with the all-purpose "thank you," *SHay shay*

What else works?

If you receive truly notable service, don't be shy about expressing your appreciation. Smile, especially in front of management! Tell your fellow travelers, and give the place repeat business if you can. Finally, post your recommendations on message boards, your blog, and with us at weninchina.com.