

Homestay Guide

Living with your own family can be tough, but living with someone else's family doesn't have to be! China Study Abroad has carefully screened and selected our host families to offer our students the best possible homestay experiences. There's no better way to meet local people and really get a sense of what Chinese culture is.

Still, it can be a bit unnerving living with a host family, so we've gathered a few tips from our students and host families. What seems like common sense to Chinese people, might be anything but for you.

As the old adage goes, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Follow this advice (bearing in mind the obvious fact you're not actually in Rome) and you'll ensure a harmonious stay with your new family.

Most of the time, it boils down to two things: respect for others, and the Chinese concept of "face", which is a mix of reputation, appearance, and opinion. Be respectful of your host family and their way of life, and don't put yourself in situations where you might offend or embarrass anyone.

Before you arrive

Bring your new family a small gift and present it upon arrival. It is a traditional gesture that Chinese people do when arriving at someone's home for the first time. Chocolate, local snacks, or wine are simple gifts that are always appreciated. Be aware that though they will appreciate the gift, it is rare that they make a big deal about it, so by our standards it often feels it went unappreciated. We would like to reiterate, it is very much appreciated by them!

General Etiquette

For safety reasons, please ensure you lock the door when leaving your apartment, even when only leaving for a short amount of time. It's also a good idea to keep the apartment locked when inside – ask your host family about their habits.

Chinese people like to be punctual, so when they have arranged things for you (such as dinner plans or outings), aim to be on time or even early.

Please don't bring strangers or unknown guests into the home unless you have asked permission from your host family first. It's usually ok to have visitors; you just need to let your hosts know in advance so they can be prepared.

Be respectful with your personal attire around the house. While you may see the local Chinese men bare their bellies trying to avoid the summer heat, be sure to cover up when walking around in the apartment. Avoid prancing about in your underwear or skimpy clothes as it will make your host family rather uncomfortable!

"If it ain't broke – don't fix it!" As you will probably see throughout your time in China, Chinese people tend not to replace things like appliances if what they have is still functioning fine. Please take this into account before complaining about the condition some appliances may be in.

Bathroom Etiquette

Chinese people can be a little apprehensive when it comes to sharing personal items, such as toilet paper, towels and common bathroom items (such as body wash, shampoo, etc) so be sure to stock up on these items. The family may have a new towel prepared for you on arrival, so make sure you stick to using just that one.

When using a shared bathroom to shower, it is polite to ask if anyone would like to use it soon or even before you, if you plan to take a while. Be sure to think of others in your living space!

Use toilet paper sparingly when in China! The Chinese plumbing systems are not the same as what you may be used to, and more often than not, they will not be equipped to handle toilet paper being flushed on a regular basis. You will probably find a bin placed next to the toilet, so dispose of all the paper there to avoid blocking the toilet! Having to call the plumber every few weeks could get very embarrassing for you and may upset your hosts!



Kitchen Etiquette

If you like to cook for yourself from time to time, ask your host family where you can stock up on ingredients (supermarkets, foreign goods stores) and where to place them in the kitchen. Avoid using your family's food in the fridge without permission.

Keep your host family's kitchen tidy if you decide to use it. This simply means washing all the dishes you use in a timely manner and giving the area a quick cleanup.

If you have items in the fridge, make sure you keep an eye on their condition. Don't let your food spoil or go moldy!

Food and Drink Etiquette

Your host family will be providing you with breakfast and dinner from Monday to Friday. Remember, these meals will be authentic Chinese dishes, so don't be disappointed when there is no cereal and milk in the mornings! Your host family may ask what types of food you prefer, so be sure to take the opportunity to let them know any particulars – just keep in mind they are including you into their daily lives and home cooking routines.

It is expected you will be home to eat with the family during these provided mealtimes and to be punctual. While you don't have to be present for every single meal, attend as many as possible and alert the family in advance when you think you may not be able to attend.

Most families will have big water dispensers installed in their homes for drinking (as it's not recommended you drink water from the tap). Water from the dispenser is for the whole family to share, so if you are about to finish the water, alert your host family that you need more water to be ordered. You could also use the opportunity to practice your Chinese and call the waterman to order yourself!

Electricity Usage Etiquette

Remember to switch off all lights and appliances when you are not using them. Chinese people dislike the idea of wasting power (and as a result, money!), so please be aware. Always switch off the air conditioning when you leave the house.

Your Chinese host family may offer to do your washing for you, but don't expect it! Ask your family how to use the washing machine, where to hang your clothes and which washing detergent to buy.

When you move out

When the end of your homestay time has come, it's a nice gesture to take your hosts out dinner to say thank you. You don't have to go for an expensive meal or banquet but treating your hosts at the end of your time is polite and respectful and will show how much you appreciated your time staying with them!

Student Experiences:

Looking for an even more challenging but at the same time even more rewarding Chinese experience? So choose to live with a homestay family!

By the time I decided to come to China in order to learn Chinese I initially was very much tempted to pick the international dormitories on BLCU campus as my place to live. Having experienced an exchange semester as part of my bachelor's degree almost 10 years ago it was not easy to resist the temptation to be part of the vibrant campus life again. The main reason why I finally decided to live with a homestay was my determination to take as much out from the three months given as possible. I was sure that if I stayed in the international dormitories on campus, I would only speak Chinese during class and switch to English for the rest of the time. I also found it appealing to be able to encounter the everyday life of a Chinese family in times of fast economic changes in China and to get to know how they deal with those challenges.

In the meantime my language studies in Beijing have almost come to an end and I am happy to say that I would make the same decision again. Although there were constant up and downs and also sometimes jealous looks at my classmates nice single room apartments I would definitely recommend staying in a homestay instead of the dorms on campus. There are just a few things you have to be aware of. They might be quite obvious but I like to mention them nonetheless.

Although you have your own room and therefore your own privacy you will most likely share a small apartment that asks for courtesy towards each other. Having lived in my own apartment for over five years I struggled with that in the very beginning, after a while though I got used to it again. Be aware that although you have all the necessary things and a good standard of living you cannot expect to have a fully Western standard. This of course depends on the family you are appointed to but just be ready to accept that things might be taken care of a bit differently that you would like to have them. Neither can you expect to experience a life you may have seen in movies with people doing Taichi every morning in the backyard of their house or sharing a daily tea ceremony with you. It's kind of a modern life now and people are also busy with their everyday life. On the other hand you can be sure to experience some other traditional things like preparing dumplings together or being invited to a birthday party. Especially those little things make the homestay way of living a memorable experience. Especially the fact that you are not only able to get to know the family but also their circle of friends and to make real Chinese friends after a while is definitely another big advantage of living with a homestay family! I don't want to miss the chance to express my gratitude towards my homestay family for their big efforts to make my stay so worthwhile!

After all, it mostly depends on yourself and on how much you are willing to interact with the family. I found it extremely helpful to be able to practice the things I have learned at school and to experience the everyday life of a modern Chinese family. It is a big advantage to be able to avoid the Western bubble and to dive into the real Chinese life. I guess it was especially because of this that I made quick progress with the language. It is tiring and exhausting but this is why I came here for in the first place, wasn't it?

- Marco

