

## Korean Social Etiquette



1. Greetings and salutations, handshaking, bowing among family, among close friends, among colleagues, first time meeting, casual meetings, formal situations, etc.

Greetings follow strict rules of protocol.

The Korean word for greeting is InSa.

- Bows are traditional and common in Korea. With your legs together, and your arms straight at your sides, bend forward at your waist and do not maintain eye contact.
- Many Koreans shake hands with expatriates after a bow, thereby blending both cultural styles.
- The person of lower status bows to the person of higher status, yet it is the most senior person who initiates the handshake.
- To show respect when shaking hands, hold your right forearm or elbow with your left hand.
- Do not shake hands with a hard squeeze.
- Korean women usually nod slightly but do not shake hands with Western men.
- The person who initiates the bow says, “manasuh pangap seumnida” , which means “Pleased to meet you” .
- In business, information about the other person will be given to the person they are being introduced to in advance of the actual meeting.
- If this was not done, provide a detailed introduction of yourself.
- Wait to be introduced at a social gathering.
- Never touch, pat, or backslap a Korean who is not a very close friend or a relative of yours.
- Never point with your index finger, it is rude.
- Always take a gift with you to meet elder family members, and others for the first time. Fruit, flowers, alcohol, rice, etc. are appropriate.

- When you leave a social gathering, say good-bye and bow to each person individually.
- Some young people wave to one another.

2. Dining etiquette - seating, utensils and glass use, who orders first?, Who pours first for whom? When do we eat, when do we talk?

If you are invited to a Korean' s home:

- It is common for guests to meet at a common spot and travel together.
- Try your best to arrive on time. However, you will not offend if you are a little late.
- Remove your shoes before entering the home.
- Hosts greet each guest individually.
- The host pours drinks for the guests in their presence. The hostess does not pour drinks.
- The host usually accompanies guests to the gate or to their cars when they are leaving because Koreans believe it is insulting to wish your guests farewell indoors.
- Send a thank-you note the following day after being invited to dinner.

Table manners:

- Wait to be told where to sit. There is often a strict protocol to be followed.
- Always agree to allow the host of your dinner to seat you. The seat of honor is the one that is facing the front door. If you get seated there, it is polite to protest slightly.
- The eldest is served first. The most senior person is the one who starts the eating process.
- Never point with your chopsticks.
- Do not pierce your food with chopsticks.
- Chopsticks should be returned to the table after every few bites and when you drink or stop to speak.
- Do not cross your chopsticks when putting them on the chopstick rest.
- Do not leave your chopsticks sticking out of a bowl of rice. This is reserved for ceremonies for the dead. It is very disrespectful for your hosts.
- It is polite to pass or accept food or drink with your right hand while your left hand supports your forearm or wrist.
- Do not hold your spoon and chopsticks together in the same hand.
- Do not pick up food with your hands. Fruit should be speared with a tootpick (or small fork).



- Bones and shells should be put on an extra plate.
- Try a little bit of everything. It is acceptable to ask what something is.
- Refuse the first offer of second helpings. But if you want more, accept the second offer. It is a compliment to go back for more.
- Finish everything on your plate.
- Indicate you are finished by placing your chopsticks on the rest or on the table.
- Never place them parallel across your rice bowl.



### Drinks and Drinking:

- These practices may date back hundreds of years or more as Korean history dates back just over 2500 years.
- Do not pour your own drink, but do offer to pour others' drinks. It is common in Korea to share a bottle and refill each other's cups.
- If someone offers you an empty glass, you are expected to hold it out toward the giver (with two hands) and accept a full glass.
- To refuse this is an insult.
- Juniors always keep the glasses of seniors full.
- Juniors should accept the glass with both hands and consume the drink with the head turned to one side so as not to face the senior directly. This prevents exposing the bottom of the glass to your host.

- When pouring for anyone, cup your right arm or elbow with your left hand while pouring with your right hand.
- Women pour men' s drinks, but never another woman' s drink. A woman may pour her own drink.
- If you want a refill, drink the contents of your cup; otherwise leave some of the drink in the cup.

#### Conversation, etc.:

- Do not talk too much during a meal. Koreans appreciate silence during meals.
- One person may pay for everyone' s meal. Most people take turns doing this but you should always bring enough money to pay because you should offer to pay at least once.
- Prepare to sing a solo after your dinner no matter how well you sing. Any song is acceptable to sing, so long as you do it with spirit.
- Wherever you see a "no tipping" sign, do not tip.
- Don' t talk with food in your mouth. Cover your mouth to laugh.

#### Restaurants and homes:

- Depending on the restaurant, you should remove your shoes. Place them near the door or on a shoe shelf. You shouldn' t have to worry about anyone stealing them; no one ever does.
- Korean restaurants usually have a public section with tables, although private rooms are available where guests sit on the floor. Sitting on the floor with your legs crossed for at least an hour' s dining can be a pain, but it will give you a glimpse of traditional Korean dining.
- Men sit with their legs crossed in front of them; women sit on their legs, bent at the knees, or to one side with their knees bent.
- Koreans usually use a spoon for eating soups and sometimes rice, and chopsticks for noodles, rice and side dishes.
- Only the right hand is used to hold a spoon or chopsticks.
- Blowing your nose during a meal can be one of the most embarrassing things you can do during a meal in Korea. It is very disrespectful.
- If your nose is running from eating spicy foods, simply wipe. Blow your nose in the bathroom.
- For each place setting starting from left to right: place rice, then soup, then spoon, and then chopsticks.
- Main dishes like beef, stews, and side dishes are in the center of the table for all to share and this is quite common even today. Koreans

believe that sharing food brings people closer together and in all reality that seems to work. Some Korean restaurants will offer separate bowls and plates.

- Unlike the Chinese, Koreans do not hold their bowls or plates in their hands while eating.

- Korean families usually eat rice and kimchee at every meal, along with some soup and maybe 3- 5 side dishes. 12 side dishes are historically reserved for very formal occasions, and at tables of royalty years ago.



3. do you rise when a woman enters the room? Do you rise when your boss enters the room or the president of your company? Do you stop the meeting briefly to say hello or nod when a late arrival enters?

- Do not stand when women enter the room. But do rise when your boss or senior representative enters the room. Don't make a big deal over late-comers, and don't interrupt the meeting to introduce them. They are no doubt trying to be inconspicuous as they enter the room.

4. Do you smile and say, "Hello" to the clerk at a store you go into for the first time? Do you stop and chat with a friend you run into on the street even if you are in a hurry?

- Store clerks and particularly shop owners are very friendly and willing to have a conversation, if they are not too busy.
- All employees are extremely knowledgeable and helpful.
- You will find many assistants in department stores and grocery stores. Sometimes there is one at each isle. This is not meant to pressure you into making a purchase, as it may be in Western stores.
- A quick “hello” is acceptable between two friends or business partners who are in a rush to their next appointment.

5. If making a presentation for a groups of Korean business people, do you have to introduce yourself before the presentation begins and how do you do it?

- In business, information about the other person will be given to the person they are being introduced to in advance of the actual meeting.
- If this was not done, provide a detailed introduction of yourself.
- Avoid direct eye contact between junior and senior business people.
- Call ahead if you are running late.
- If the other person makes you wait for up to 30 minutes, it is not a sign of disrespect. It is more a sign of how pressured Korean people are with time. However, you should always be on time for your appointments.
- Never show anger or unhappiness about having been made to wait.



Strictly Business:

- Appointments are required and they should be made 3 to 4 weeks in advance.
- You should arrive on time for meetings as this demonstrates respect for the person you are meeting.
- The most senior Korean generally enters the room first.
- It is a good idea to send both an agenda and back-up material including information about your company and client testimonials prior to the meeting, if they are required.
- The main purpose of the first meeting is to get to know each other.
- Meetings are used to understand a client’ s needs and challenges. They lay the foundation for building the relationship.
- Do not remove your jacket unless the most senior Korean does so.
- Have all written materials available in both English and Korean.

### Business Dress:

- Business attire is conservative.
- Men should wear dark-colored, conservative business suits with white shirts.
- Women should dress conservatively and wear subdued colors.
- Men should avoid wearing jewelry other than a watch or a wedding ring.



### Business Cards:

- Business cards are exchanged after the initial introductions in a highly ritualized manner. The way you treat someone's business card is indicative of the way you will treat the person.
- Have one side of your business card translated into Korean.
- Using both hands, present your business card with the Korean side facing up so that it is readable by the recipient.
- Examine any business card you receive carefully.
- Put the business card in a case or in a portfolio.
- Never write on someone's business card in their presence.



6. How do you stop a stranger to ask for directions without them running away?

- To approach someone on the street, simply get their attention with a polite "excuse me" , or "shillyae hamnida" .

7. If the whole family (grandparents, uncles, kids, mom & dad) is sitting around watching TV, where is everybody sitting?

- Stand when elders enter the room to acknowledge them and welcome them.
- Show respect to those in the room even when you are just passing through.
- Do not make eye contact with elders when they are correcting you.
- Give up your seat to elderly or handicapped people.
- It is OK to sit on the floor along with everyone else. Enjoy their company!
- No one will try to sit between a couple (ie.: husband and wife).

8. Modesty and chivalry. Who opens the door for whom? Who smokes cigarettes who doesn't? How to laugh out loud at a business meeting?

- In business, juniors open doors for seniors.
- Smoking is very common in Korea and throughout Asia. These days more and more offices are becoming non-smoking areas, so smoking is taken outdoors.
- Chivalry is a Western idea. It isn't found too commonly in Asia.
- Socially, men and women walk together, but women remain to the side and slightly behind men.
- Cover your mouth to laugh out loud in meetings and at meals.

9. Foreigners: what can foreigners get away with that Korean born people cannot?

- Because you are foreign, Koreans will be very forgiving.
- Remember common courtesy and manners.
- Treat everyone with respect.
- If you are not sure of something, ask.

10. Names and Titles:

- Korean names are in reverse order from Western names. Korean names have the family name first, followed by a (usually) two part given name.
- It is impolite to call Koreans by their given (first) name. Always address a Korean using professional titles such as teacher, general, commissioner, president, etc. Use their professional titles until you are asked to use their given names.
- Outside of business, the title can be brother, sister, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, mother-in-law, father-in-law, etc.
- Westerners are expected to address Koreans with Mr, Mrs, or Miss plus the family name. But never call a person of high rank in this manner.

11. Respect for the living:

- Do not write a Korean's name in red! If you do, it means that they are dead. This is not recommended if you are trying to make friends.
- Another ritual reserved for the dead is to leave chopsticks sticking out of a bowl of rice. Doing this at the table is disrespectful.

12. Subways and Buses:

- Spaces can get tight, especially buses and subways at rush hour.
- Pushing and shoving: a light brush is understandable, but sometimes might shove with their hands, cut you off in line, or start pushing. It is

best to avoid an argument and let offensive people on first.

Alternatively, you may stand firmly in your place once you have it.

- Give up your seat to elderly or handicapped people. This shows respect and kindness.



### 13. Gifts:

- If you are someone who is accepting a gift, be sure to gently refuse it one or two times before actually accepting it. If you don't agree to take the gift a Korean will find this very insulting.

- When receiving a gift from an someone, be sure to use both hands.

- Gifts express a great deal about the relationship and are always reciprocated. Never give expensive gifts. Koreans will give a gift back to you at the same value. Be sure the receiver can afford to make a good return.

- Be sure to wrap the gift in brightly colored paper. Wrap gifts in red or yellow paper, since these are royal colors. Alternatively, use blue or pink, since these denote happiness.

- Do not wrap gifts in green, white, or black paper.

- Always bring a gift for your hostess if you are invited to someone's home. Give small gifts like candy, cakes, cookies, flowers, or fruit.

- Do not give knives or scissors as gifts. This symbolizes the cutting off of a relationship.

- Do not give gifts with red writing on it, or in red wrapping paper. The color red symbolizes death.

- Wrapped gifts are never opened in front of the giver.

- The number 4 is considered unlucky, so gifts should not be given in multiples of four.

- Giving 7 of an item is considered lucky.

## Supplement: Gift Giving in Korea

\* Seol-nal (Lunar New Year) and Chuseok (harvest festival) gifts  
Truth be told, the gifts given during the two major holidays of Seol-nal and Chuseok can be a bit strange. Many of the more expensive gifts are nice and include boxes of delicious Korean pears (Asian-pears) or boxes of marinated beef for making delicious Kal-bi (Korean sliced roasted beef). On the other hand, the lower end gifts in the \$50 to \$100 range include sets of relatively common items like those pictured at right, such as olive oil gift sets, Spam gift sets, and tuna gift sets or some combination of the above. The expensive gifts are usually given to close friends and family or among those seeking favor like company representatives seeking contracts and such. The lower end gifts are given to those who are not so close, or to company employees.



### \* Weddings

Korean wedding lists often include hundreds of people that the bride and groom barely know, or don't know at all because one of the goals is to have as many people as possible attend to show the import of the wedding. And this, it seems, works out quite well for the parents who must foot the bill. Wedding gifts usually include an envelope with from \$30 to \$100 in it from mere acquaintances and the envelopes are checked into the guest register at the front of the wedding hall and given to the parents of the couple after the wedding to help pay for the wedding (weddings in Korea are really expensive). Close friends of the bride and groom, on the other hand, want their money to go directly to the couple and not to the parents so they sometimes give the envelope to the couple surreptitiously. Very close friends may also give personal gifts like sleepwear or other clothing.

### \* Funerals

At funerals, like weddings, an envelope with money is given but since they are not happy occasions mere acquaintances are not invited.

### \* Birthdays

Birthdays of the younger generation are mostly celebrated with friends who go out together for a night on the town and the evening almost always starts with dinner and a birthday cake. Birthday cakes are such an essential part of the scene that they can be readily purchased in every bakery, every day, anytime of the day or night. Gifts from the friends usually include personal gifts such as clothes.

### \* Business Gifts

Business gifts are pretty much dictated by the level of the relationship. Upper level managers will sometimes give some of the more expensive gifts listed above to their superiors during big holidays. The company or the boss usually gives money or the more expensive gifts to the upper level managers and the less expensive gift sets to the lower level managers. As mentioned above, the lowest level of company employees usually get the cheapest gift sets or cultural gift certificates, which are redeemable for movies, books, and other cultural events and are really quite a nice and flexible gift.

### Phone Fobs

As we have said before, Korea is probably the most wired country in the world and Koreans have been slaves to their cell phones (we call them handphones) for a very long time. As such, the handphone has become a fashion statement and having the right phone fob is very important. Handphones in Korea sometimes hand-painted, covered with stickers or colorful plastic cases to get the look just right and the right phone fob is essential to the overall look.

Pictured at right is a bok-ju-meo-ni (fortune bag) phone fob from [Korean-Arts.com](http://Korean-Arts.com).

