

不可以 **Bù kěyǐ** Not allowed

12. Rules to Follow and Rules to Break

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(1) One blazing hot day in Shanghai, I was walking down a long street in search of an address that in the end I never did find. I paused for water and to rest for a minute on a low brick wall of a shopping mall plaza. Immediately, a guard came running over and cried hysterically, “Bié zuò!” “Don’t sit there!” I jumped up, startled. It was another run-in with another rule. At the time, I still lacked the vocabulary to question why. So I picked myself up and shuffled dutifully along, hoping for luck at the next mall.

(2) During our three years in China, I tried constantly to figure out the Chinese system of rules and regulations. There are so many rules of so many sorts, some transparent and others puzzling, some with good reason, others with no reason at all: no photos; no shoes; no entry; no swimming; no spitting. In Beijing, stand in line on the 11th of every month; in Shanghai, don’t wear pajamas outside (as Shanghai residents are wont to do!); no horn honking in school zones during the college entrance exam period. The rules are only randomly enforced, and the Chinese seem to have an inner compass about which rules to take seriously and which to ignore.

(3) Cars pay no heed to green Walk signals for pedestrians, just as pedestrians head blithely into the streets against red Don’t Walk signals. Crowds ignore bus attendants who scream at them through their bullhorns to stand back from the curbs. People argue with traffic attendants and even policemen who blast their whistles, trying in vain to keep people off the crosswalks and safely on the sidewalks. (4) Airline attendants warn passengers to stay buckled up until the plane arrives at the gate, but most passengers jump up to rummage through the overhead bins as soon as the wheels touch the runway. People smoke in front of No Smoking signs, spit in front of No Spitting signs, and sit on the grass in front of Keep Off The Grass signs.

(5) I watched my own behavior gradually change during our time in China. Here are a few examples: I noticed that the gate guard at my neighborhood public-housing compound would let me pass if I made no eye contact and aimed straight ahead for the laundry shop, but he would turn me back if I hesitated and looked as if I were asking for his OK. In a hurry another day, I bypassed the subway security, my bag in hand. (6) No one paid attention, and from then on I gave up sending my things through any x-ray machines. Later, when my fully loaded transportation card didn’t work, I shrugged my shoulders and sneaked under the turnstile. The subway attendants looked casually away. A bus conductor gave me a bye when I was a few cents short for the change box. I felt I was learning to shave the edges.

(7) One day during the Beijing Olympic Games, I was inching through the long lines and the maze of security stops with a chocolate bar in my backpack. Destination: tennis matches. The people in front of me had all manner of chips, drinks and candy abruptly confiscated. I was determined to save my chocolate bar, especially since the pickings for refreshments in the Olympic grounds were notoriously slim. I

had been hoarding my chocolate bar for just this occasion. **(8)** I figured if I was lucky, the guard might not recognize its characteristic triangle Toblerone shape. But the savvy guard spotted it and said “*Táng!*” “Candy!” “*Bú shì táng,*” “It’s not candy,” I insisted. “*Zhè shì yào,*” “It’s medicine.” “*Xūyào wǒ de yào.*” “I need my medicine!” I cried, taking a small bite. He paused with a look that suggested I would be more trouble than I was worth, and waved me through.

Why did I collaborate in petty flouting of the rules, a national behavior to which I had now become an accomplice? I wondered. Why does anyone (and everyone!) shave the rules in China?

(9) The most convincing explanation I heard from my Chinese friends and China hands is that it is impossible to regard the rules in a way we consider “normal.” There are two ways to read the facts: the arsenal of rules is so vast and so vague that no one can even reasonably keep track and obey them. Or, the arsenal of rules serves as a ready reserve in case the authorities might find it convenient to apply them. One of my young friends put it colloquially: there so many rules that no one takes them seriously; they’ll get you somehow if they want to. **(10)** And, he added with a devilish tone, we break rules if we think we can, *just for the heck of it.*

To get my own gauge of which rules were flexible and when I might get away with breaking them, I began to study Chinese body language. There is the obvious body language we all recognize; the French are a bit haughty; Italians stand very close; Americans are always hugging; the Japanese cover their mouths and bow a lot.

(11) There is a lot of Chinese body language one can learn by context: don’t hug; don’t point; beckon with your fingers pointing down; girls hold hands with girls, and boys hold hands with boys; bow slightly (a derivative of kowtowing) when signaling respect; raise your folded hands up to your chest and give a few shakes to mean “good fortune”; when an audience applauds you, applaud back.

In Chinese, where much is spoken in a deliberately vague or indirect way, body language helps fill in the gaps. **(12)** The Chinese are uncomfortable with an outright “no” in conversation, for example, and beat around the bush instead.

A posture, a look, a hesitation, or any one of a variety of subtle moves adds much to shades of meaning. This subtle kind of body language is not something that can be taught; you use your eyes and ears together to interpret a mismatch between what you’re hearing and what you’re seeing, or to catch a soft “I don’t really mean it” undertone. Finally, you just get a feeling, and you know it when you see it.

(13) I was walking along a roaring Beijing highway, heading for the pedestrian overpass to cross to the market in search of dinner. As I was about to take the first step up the concrete steps to the overpass, a skinny young soldier from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), in his oversized pea-green uniform and broad, tightly-cinched belt, stepped right in front of me. **(14)** He gathered himself into a ramrod-stiff pose and stern visage, as if to add a few authoritative years to his very tender-looking face. He planted himself midway across the first step and barked “No!” in fine English. His move was so sudden that I nearly tripped over him.

Pedestrians were walking back and forth over the overpass, up the steps, across the top, descending toward us, all indifferent to whatever rule he was trying to impose on me. Everything appeared normal. I asked, “*Wèishénme?*” “Why?”

(15) The soldier shook his head a little and stood firm. I waved my arm upward, and wiggled two fingers as though they were walking. He shook his head again. I pointed to the people coming down the steps behind him. He waved me on in the direction of the next overpass, which was a good quarter mile down the road, meaning an extra half-mile backtrack to the market.

(16) By this point, a small crowd of other pedestrians who also wanted to cross the overpass had built behind me. It never takes long to build a crowd in China. One woman began scolding the soldier, as a mother might scold her son. (There is surprisingly little deference toward people in uniform in China.) Others joined in the complaining. (17) The young soldier, visibly weakening in resolve, shuffled from one foot to the other. He moved slightly to one side and waved us through.

“*Wèishénme?*” “Why?” I asked the woman behind me this time, the self-appointed ringleader of our impatient group. She just looked at me, with an expression that might have said, “Why do you even ask?” She shrugged, and she said in slightly accented English, “No reason.”

(18) I saw more body language another day, when my husband and I headed for the Cultural Palace of the Minorities to see an exhibit about the history and future of Tibet. We guessed it would be an interesting propaganda experience. There was a long line for entry, and an unusual squadron of security guards at the ticket booth. Tibet is always a sensitive topic, and they were probably anxious about potential protests.

(19) The guards asked for our passports. This was disappointing, because we never carried them. The laws say foreigners should carry passports, but the risk of loss or theft never seems worth the risk of violating this seemingly unenforced rule. Not once in more than two years in China had we been randomly asked for passports. My husband managed to produce his American driver’s license, but I had nothing with a photo. I tried my Visa card. No good. My subway card. They laughed.

(20) But then I saw the guard shuffle gently, and I sensed wiggle room. It would be easier on both of us if he could find a way to let me pass without a fuss. I pulled out a magnetic key card, and mumbled a few things about it being to my apartment in Beijing. “*Wǒ Běijīng jiā de!*” “My Beijing house!” Everyone I dealt with on the streets of Beijing seemed to like it when I could produce some evidence that I actually lived there – a card, an address, my mobile phone, a little jabber in Mandarin. (21) And 家, which means both “family” and “home,” is a wonderful word with cultural strength. Preposterously, my key card was a good enough substitute for my passport, and he let us through.

These are examples of petty transgressions, of course. There is also the serious issue of laws, enforcement and consequences at play in China. A back-breaking number of rules course through people’s personal lives and define how they live: the one-child policy, enforced most everywhere except in certain rural areas and

otherwise sanctioned with steep fines; the hometown registration system (*hùkǒu*) hitched to social welfare benefits like medical care and education. **(22)** When city planners or real estate tycoons decide that it's time to raze a block or neighborhood to make room for something new, people who have made their lives in those places are shooed away, with a minimum of notice, choice or compensation. If you have guests in your home for more than a few nights, you must register their names with the police. In schools located south of the Yangtze River, no indoor heating is allowed, since they are theoretically in a "warm" part of China. This area notably includes Shanghai, with its climate roughly like that of Washington, DC, or London.

(23) There are "in trouble if you don't, and in trouble if you do" rules. Before the Beijing Olympic Games, China's officials announced proudly to the world that they would accommodate peaceful protesters in "authorized protest zones" specially set up during the Games. This would demonstrate China's confident openness while on the international stage. But not only were all permissions to protest denied, some of the few brave souls who actually applied for permits were arrested.

(24) There are the cases where following the rules would have borne good consequences. For many years, Beijing banned wildly popular private firework displays during the Chinese New Year holidays, because of the danger from explosions and possibly fires. In 2006, the ban was mostly eased, with some restrictions and some permissions required. Having witnessed a scary midnight celebration in 2008, our first year in Beijing, I for one would strongly endorse reinstating that unpopular ban. **(25)** On that occasion, people were shooting industrial-sized fireworks on the streets without regard for bystanders; burning embers rained down on sidewalks; trees caught fire. During New Year celebrations a year later, things got worse. Gala fireworks were set off next to the famous CCTV tower building in central Beijing (stories on permissions varied). The just-completed 40-story Mandarin Oriental luxury hotel next door caught fire and burned to a crisp. **(26)** The rule of thumb that has evolved around laws in China, "Ask not for permission, but for forgiveness," certainly came up short in this instance.

During our time in China, I was well aware that we were frequently breaking rules – intentionally or accidentally – both legal rules and cultural rules; rules we were aware of and probably rules we never knew existed. Breaking rules in China was an interesting contrast to breaking rules in Japan, where we had also lived for a few years, many years ago. **(27)** In Japan, I felt as though the Japanese were lying in wait for us, confident that they would catch a misstep. (Which they did! Again, there were so many rules, and the learning curve was steep.) In China, I felt as though we were in collusion with the people, the *lǎobǎixìng*, in face of some larger authority.

(28) Although spoken Chinese was too nuanced for me to manage in the subtle world of rules and rule breaking, I have discovered that the body language of Chinese – the shrugs, the looks, the shuffling – go a long way indeed as cues to understanding the parameters of a situation. Learning to read those cues became as important to me for our life in China as all the learning of the grammar and vocabulary of spoken Chinese.