

MEET THE PARENTS

By Jiang Yuxia

With the approach of Chinese New Year, a majority of Chinese are going back to their hometowns for the year's most important reunion. For unmarried couples, it is tradition to bring significant others home to introduce them to the family for approval.

For expats dating Chinese, this is a big moment – meeting the parents. The first introduction could be a dreadful experience for unprepared *laowai*, or it could be a pleasant memory with the proper effort put into winning over the family.

Great Expectations

Richard Hay, a Beijinger in his 40s, met the parents of his then-girlfriend (now wife) directly after a 10-hour flight from London. He recalled the experience, now 10 years ago, as a dramatic, horrific encounter.

Visiting Beijing on summer holiday, he decided it was a good idea to meet up with his girlfriend's family since he was in the country. Expecting a causal meeting, he arrived at a big dinner of 10 family members, with the poker-faced father and smiling mother sitting at the center.

Hay struggled to master picking up food with chopsticks. Then came the language problem. He spoke little Chinese, and his girlfriend, who was

too busy and excited talking with her family, had no time to translate. He just sat and smiled.

"The thing that I found really strange was that people kept asking me when we were getting married," he said. He hadn't expected such questions from the family of a woman he had dated for less than a year.

"If you're meeting the [Chinese] parents, it means you two *cheng le* (have made it), which also means marriage is in the near future," said Xu Yue, who offers relationship advice to both Chinese and expats while spending her time in Beijing and New York. "Although the Chinese culture is constantly evolving away from these traditions, meeting the parents is not to be taken lightly."

Though Hay was accepted by his girlfriend's parents on the first meeting, he was later told the mother spent a night weeping over the prospect of her daughter marrying a foreigner.

Lost in translation

Language can play a key role in the meeting, wrote Jocelyn Eikenburg, an American writer and blogger from Ohio, in an e-mail interview with Metro Beijing. She is married to a Chinese from rural Zhejiang Province. Eikenburg's husband thinks her ability to speak Chinese helped change his parents' minds about him dating a

► How to impress at Spring Festival family introductions

foreign woman.

"While I wouldn't say that all Chinese parents necessarily have negative stereotypes about foreigners, some do. If you can communicate with them, that goes a long way in winning over parents," said Eikenburg, who pens the blog "Speaking of China" about cross-cultural dating and relationships.

Eikenburg, who first came to China in 1999 to work as an English teacher in Henan Province, was invited to her then-boyfriend's home for the Spring Festival of 2003 after they had been dating for less than a year.

Before the meeting, she learned that her now-husband's parents were fine with their son dating a foreign woman, but not marrying one. She grew extremely concerned, but went ahead with the meeting.

"I definitely felt the pressure to win his parents over, especially with my husband's father, who was the one who vocalized the opposition to our relationship," said Eikenburg. "At first, I really didn't have much of a conversation with either my husband's mom or dad – beyond them asking me if I wanted some-

thing to eat, or showing me around the house, for example."

Then came the ice breaker.

"Once I took out the [family] photos and began talking with his father, I felt so relieved and excited to finally connect with someone in the family," she recalled.

Be yourself

The first meeting for Rob Welham, a British photojournalist and writer, went smoothly even though he couldn't speak a lick of Chinese.

Welham and his Chinese wife visited his parents-in-law in Kaiyuan, a small village in Yunnan Province, shortly after they got married in the UK in 2006. Despite his appearance – he wore a long ponytail and dark-colored glasses – he was immediately liked by the family after being introduced to them.

"They are nice people and her mother was particularly excited. My wife did all the translation for me and her mother and I spent much time going through her collection of Mao memorabilia, and she gave me a lot of badges," said Welham, who now resides in London with his wife.

Tips from our experts:

Timing

Don't give in to pressure to meet the parents around Spring Festival if you and your partner are not ready. Communicate your relationship status to your partner as early as possible.

Gifts

Don't forget to bring gifts for the whole family, paying special attention to gifts for the elders of the family. Ask your Chinese partner for suggestions. When in doubt, pass out those beloved red envelopes (*hongbao*) to anyone who is either not married, not working or younger than you.

Etiquette

Being a good guest can go a long way. Remember that at dinner, the most important (and oldest) family member always sits in the chair facing the door.

The youngest should pour tea throughout the meal, making sure no one's cup ever goes dry.

Avoid physical contact

In China, unmarried couples traditionally don't touch. That's especially important to keep in mind for foreign women, as they can quickly be condemned as "too casual" or "loose."

Ice breakers

Bring along photos of your family, hometown or travels around the world to get the family interested and talking.

Language

The language barrier can almost be an advantage when the expat is ethnically non-Chinese. Parents love hearing *laowai* try to speak Chinese, and may even help out with some new vocabulary words.

Despite going through a hangover from *baijiu* toasts at the Chinese wedding ceremony of over 100 guests, Welham remembered the experience fondly, and said that he and his wife now visit the in-laws every year.

Being the only foreigner to have married anyone in Kaiyuan, Welham said he just won over the parents

by being "my usual self."

Meeting the parents doesn't have to be as hard as some fear, noted Eikenburg.

"To a major degree, it also depends on your Chinese partner. Having a supportive Chinese partner in your corner, as I did, can really make a difference," she said.

Beauty bloggers turn their hobby into real business opportunities

By Yin Lu

Beauty blogs aren't just frivolous endeavors. They can be big business. Products recommended on the hottest blogs will go viral on the Internet the next day. Skincare shops on Taobao, China's largest online retailer, will rush to put blogger-mentioned products on virtual shelves and label them "recommended by so-and-so blogger."

A beauty blog can cover many things, such as introducing the value of a specific cosmetic item, skincare routines, new trends in the market and so on.

There have been thousands of active Chinese beauty bloggers on the Internet. Most are young women in their 20s or 30s, and outside of their blogging, many do not work in the cosmetics field. The most influential ones have years of experience in blogging, and their popularity did not happen overnight.

Kristi Wang, 30, who works in the manufacturing industry, writes the fairly popular blog "Little K's Beauty Diary." On Sina Weibo, China's most influential microblog, she has more than 120,000 followers.

Wang thinks that being sincere and earnest about blogging is the reason why she stands out above the rest.

"[The secret] is persistence, and my 'tolerable' looks," joked Zhao Jing, 28, a beauty blogger known as "Rose MM." She has about 200,000 followers on Weibo.

Sophia Liu, who started her blog "Sophia, Oui, Moi" three years ago and now has about 19,000 followers, thinks her obsession with beauty products is what has kept her involved.

Popular bloggers need to be adequately financed. They are expected to try out the most prestigious, expensive or newly-launched products, and then report their thoughts back to readers.

Liu admits that she has spent a great deal of money on buying all kinds of products. Zhao said that among the beauty bloggers, many come from rich families.

The beauty bloggers' fame has changed their daily lives. For example, they might be recognized by fans on the street and have to be more discreet about their behavior in order to maintain positive online reputations.

The downside is that when speaking highly of certain products, there will be suspicions about whether the bloggers are corporate puppets.

In response to those accusations, Liu said that she has a clear conscious and won't let the readers down. But some of the accused bloggers actually do things for companies.

"As far as I know, many bloggers charge certain brands money for recommending their products," said Wang. The bloggers are starting to make



Above: Popular beauty blogger Zhao Jing, known as "Rose MM" Left: Beauty bloggers evaluate cosmetic products

Photos: Courtesy of Zhao Jing and Kristi Wang



money out of their fame, too. The top ones can make writing their full-time job, and can even publish books.

Many of them decide to start businesses for overseas purchasing or online shopping so that they can earn some cash for all their blogging efforts. Wang has started her own online store, selling products she selected from abroad. Zhao plans to write a book in the future and open her own buyer's shop.

Knowing the business potential from the popularity of those bloggers, cosmetic brands also invite the bloggers to product launch events or grand openings of stores.

Liu said cooperation between enterprises and bloggers is very common.

"Bloggers get commissions for helping with the promotion of a product," said Liu. "Many bloggers are Public Relations (PR) officers themselves, and many have signed long-term contracts with brands."

With the gradual monetization of beauty blogging, many blogs start to lose their original fan base. Many readers have lost trust in the bloggers.

"When some of the blogs I like become purely commercial, I stop following," said Liu.

However, bloggers have their own bottom lines. Zhao has declined many brands that approached her for some glowing reviews.

"Some people use blogging as a tool for gaining profits, but some just try to influence other people's lifestyles," said Wang. "It all depends on how responsible the blogger is."



Family gatherings during Spring Festival can be a happy, toast-filled time if you know what to expect. Photo: CFP

Page Editor:
wangshutong@globaltimes.com.cn