

More Hugs Please, We're Chinese



Ng Han Guan/Associated Press A woman and child hugged each other near a portrait of Sun Yat-sen, first president of the Republic of China, in Tiananmen Square ahead of May Day.

Of all the changes to sweep China since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 — stock markets, private cars, fashion — one thing seemed not to have changed: No hugging. Chinese were physically reserved.

That's changing now.

Recently, it seems like everyone is hugging. Friends are hugging. Family members are hugging. In hugging between Chinese and non-Chinese, it was non-Chinese who once foisted physical affection on the Chinese. Today it may be a Chinese initiating contact. The tables are turning.

My children's Chinese piano teacher hugged my Irish mother-in-law the first time she met her, last year. My mother-in-law was moved, but the Irish, like the English, aren't really known for overt displays of physical affection, and the surprise was written on her face.

Teachers are joining in. In Nanjing, the Liuhe District Experimental Elementary School began a class in emotional intelligence last fall, concerned that children lacked it and would thus be held back in the world, the newspaper Modern Express reported.

The third graders' homework: Hug your parents tonight. Sixty schools in the district now have emotional intelligence classes, the newspaper said.

Most friends I've asked say the change is due to exposure to the West, especially huggy North America. But other Asian nations — even formal Japan — may also be involved, according to a recent article in *China Daily* headlined "Students Use Hugs to Ease Tension" that described "hugging activities" between

China Daily headlined [Students Use Hugs to Ease Tensions](#). It described hugging activities between a group of Japanese studying in Beijing and Chinese passers-by, in which the students hugged about 200 Chinese in an effort to warm feelings between people of the two nations sparring over territory in the East China Sea.

The initiator, Watanabe Kohei, said, “The Chinese were a bit shy in giving hugs,” but friendly.

Not everyone is joining in. Hugging is still not appropriate in a professional context — unless everyone is drunk. The website [eDiplomat](#) is probably right to advise foreign diplomats not to hug their Chinese counterparts. “The Chinese dislike being touched by strangers,” it warns. “Do not touch, hug, lock arms, back slap or make any body contact.”

In a post titled “Why We Chinese Don’t Hug,” the blogger Zhuhai Ah Long [attributed](#) the reluctance to sexual frisson. Hug a member of the opposite sex, and, “What if ripples start undulating in the girl’s heart?” Plus, he said, Chinese prefer quality to quantity.

“We want each time that members of the opposite sex touch to be a thrill,” he wrote. “If we’re hugging all day long, hugging people who shouldn’t be hugged, then the thrill will evaporate, and that’s just a waste.”

In 2003, Lu Ming, a Chinese author based in the United States, wrote a book titled “Chinese Lack Hugs.”

“Back then people really hugged very little, even in families,” he wrote in an email. “I cannot remember being hugged by my father and mother.”

“That’s changed now, and I think it’s good,” he said. “We can use body culture to overcome Chinese people’s tradition of reserve. Limbs are also a language and a form of contact. A sincere hug makes people feel warm and comforts them.”

Mr. Lu attributes the change to increasing international contact, the media, Chinese living overseas and reading foreign literature. He made a point of hugging his mother and sisters when he visited China.

“When my mother was still living and in good health, I would hug her, and she was very moved. And my sisters would say, ‘You are already Westernized,’ but they liked it. Life is very short, and you don’t know when you will see someone again.”

Arriving in Berlin from China recently, I watched as two generations of Chinese hugged at the airport, a younger couple greeting an older couple who had been on my flight.

The older couple appeared to be the young woman’s parents. Mother and daughter hugged. That wasn’t too surprising. Women are huggier than men, everywhere. But then the young man stepped up to the older man and hugged him. And the older man hugged him back, stiffly, but smiling.