

EDITOR'S CORNER

To Tip or Not to Tip, That is the Question

There is a very interesting social behavior that I do not fully understand but follow nevertheless. It is the unwritten rule of tipping people after some kind of service in our daily lives. As a professor, I travel a lot and invariably take taxis, eat in restaurants, check into hotel rooms, have luggage delivered, have hotel doors opened for me whether I like it or not, etc. There is always a moment of hesitation and uneasiness on how much to tip – \$1, \$2, \$5, 50 cents (No!)?

First of all, why should I even have to give a tip? After all, I have paid the required fee agreed between me and the establishment such as a dinner, a taxi ride, a shoe shine, a haircut, etc. If the taxi fee is \$10.50 on the meter after the trip, then I should just pay \$10.50 to the driver. Right? Wrong! The taxi driver will be very upset if there is no tip.

I do not know how the practice of tipping started, historically. I assume people gave someone who did an extra nice job in a special situation some money as a sign of appreciation. Soon it became a tradition, then an unwritten requirement. When I was growing up in Hong Kong, I acquired this tipping habit. I went to university in Japan in the early 1960s. Once, after a lovely dinner in a country inn, I left a tip on the table and walked out. The lady innkeeper ran after me and yelled, "You forgot your money!" I said, "No. This is a tip for you." She said, "We do not accept tips. Take it back. Take it back." I gladly did. Now in 2008, I assume some Japanese restaurants might happily accept tips but taxi drivers in downtown Tokyo still do not accept tips.

I think the ultimate tip tradition is during Chinese New Year, where all married adults will have a pocket full of red packages and whenever a kid comes by and says "Happy New Year," you *must* give the kid a red package with money whether you know the kid or not! Or else, you will have bad luck all year. All the kids in China in my day had a great time running around town saying "Happy New Year, Happy New Year" to all the adults for three solid days in the Lunar New Year, and afterwards bragged about who got the most money.

On the other hand, in some professions, such as being a waiter, a bartender, a doorman, a hairdresser, a salon singer, etc., tips *are* a large part of their income. In Europe, many standard menus in restaurants are labeled as "Service complete." No tips are expected. In the U.S.A. nowadays, many restaurants automatically put 15% extra on the dinner bill as "service" charge, but the waiter still expects another 15% tip. That is a bit too much, I think.

The ultimate conflict on tipping I have experienced was when, once in a foreign country, my former student took me from the airport to the hotel in a taxi. As we were about to leave the taxi, a heated discussion in their native tongue started. I asked what was the problem. My student said he gave the driver a 15% tip but the driver demanded a 100% tip. Wow, that was serious. Before some physical event took place, I pulled out some U.S. dollars and solved the problem – luckily, the U.S. dollar was very strong at that time.

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