



## Laughter, the Spice of Life

I HAVE A SISTER almost eight years my junior. Although the colour of our skin, eyes and hair are similar, our size, personalities and interests are very different.

Like many women, my sister is very sensitive about her age and weight, which is heavier than mine. Even family members don't dare to ask her about her weight, though I know her age because I remember when she was born. When I was only a teenager, my friends would ask me, "Is your sister older than you?"

Now, many decades later, whenever she visits Hong Kong, my Chinese neighbours look hard at both of us and ask me, "Is this your elder sister?" That question infuriates her. Even though she cannot understand Chinese, she tells me afterwards, "I can guess that they were asking if I am your elder sister. How dare they?" Actually, my face looks older than hers. Yet my sister has a wonderful sense of humour, and we both end up laughing about such questions.

That is one of the cultural differences between Chinese and English people. When the English greet each other on the street, they just say, "Good morning" or, "Good day," even when the weather that day is cold or wet. Chinese people, when they meet, usually ask, "Where are you going?" or, "Have you eaten

rice?" A foreigner who does not know Chinese customs may think: "What right do they have to ask me where I am going – such a personal question?" That is why, when we visit another country, it is wise to learn something about the everyday culture of the people. Otherwise we may misunderstand them.

Before my sister visits Hong Kong, we make a pact: I will not talk about politics, which she hates, and she will not ask me to go shopping for earrings and other fripperies, in which I have no interest. Occasionally we may break that agreement, but we never quarrel and usually burst out laughing instead.

On the door of my refrigerator, I have a magnetic gadget that my sister gave me. It reads: "Sisters by chance; friends by choice." Nice, isn't it? It indicates that we can tolerate each other's differences.

What a happy world this would be if all people tolerated each other's customs, nationalities, religions and political opinions, if we could have a world free of prejudice!