

## Chinese Table Manners

The main difference between Chinese and Western eating habits is that unlike the West, where everyone has their own plate of food, in China the dishes are placed on the table and everybody shares.

The meal usually begins with a set of at least four cold dishes, to be followed by the main courses of hot meat and vegetable dishes. Soup then will be served (unless in Guangdong style restaurants) to be followed by staple food ranging from rice, noodles to dumplings. If you wish to have your rice to go with other dishes, you should say so in good time, for most of the Chinese choose to have the staple food at last or have none of them at all.

Perhaps one of the things that surprise a Western visitor most is that some of the Chinese hosts like to put food into the plates of their guests. In formal dinners, there are always “public” chopsticks and spoons for this purpose, but some hosts may use their own chopsticks. This is a sign of genuine friendship and politeness. It is always polite to eat the food. If you do not eat it, just leave the food in the plate.

People in China tend to over-order food, for they will find it embarrassing if all the food is consumed. When you have had enough, just say so. Or you will always overeat!

Chinese table manners are mostly concerned with the use of chopsticks. Otherwise generally Chinese table manners are rather more informal.

- Chopsticks are traditionally held in the right hand only, even by the left-handed. Although chopsticks may now be found in either hand, a few still consider left-handed chopstick use improper etiquette. One explanation for the treatment of such usage as improper is that this can symbolise argument, as the chopsticks may collide between the left-handed and right-handed user.
- When communal chopsticks are supplied with shared plates of food, it is considered impolite to use your own chopsticks to pick up the food from the shared plate or eat using the communal chopsticks. An exception to this rule is made in intimate family dinners where family members may not mind the use of one's own chopsticks to transfer food.
- The blunt end of the chopsticks is sometimes used to transfer food from a common dish to your own plate or bowl (never your mouth).
- Never wave your chopsticks around as if they were an extension of your hand gestures, bang them like drumsticks, or use them to move bowls or plates.
- Decide what to pick up before reaching with chopsticks. Do not hover around or poke looking for special ingredients. After you have picked up an item, do not put it back in the dish.
- When picking up a piece of food, never use the tips of your chopsticks to poke through the food as if you were using a fork. Exceptions include tearing larger items apart such as vegetables. In informal use, small, difficult to pick-up items

such as cherry tomatoes or fish balls may be stabbed but this use is frowned upon by traditionalists.

- Chopsticks can be rested horizontally on one's plate or bowl to keep them off the table entirely. A chopstick rest can also be used to keep the points off the table.
- Never stab chopsticks into a bowl of rice, leaving them standing upwards. Any stick-like object facing upward resembles the incense sticks that some Asians use as offerings to deceased family members. This is considered the ultimate faux pas on the dining table.
- Chinese traditionally eat rice from a small bowl held in the left hand. The rice bowl is raised to the mouth and the rice pushed into the mouth using the chopsticks. Some Chinese find it offensive to scoop rice from the bowl using a spoon. If rice is served on a plate, as is more common in the West, it is acceptable and more practical to eat it with a fork or spoon. The thumb must always be above the edge of the bowl.
- It is acceptable to transfer food to people who have a close relation with you (e.g. parents, grandparents, children or significant others) if you noticed they are having difficulty picking up the food. Also it is a sign of respect to pass food to the elderly first before the dinner starts
- The host should always make sure the guests drinks are sufficiently full
- When people wish to clink drinks together in the form of a cheer, it is important to observe that younger members should clink the edge of their drink below the edge of an elder to show respect.
- Make sure the spout of the teapot is not facing anyone. It is impolite to set the teapot down where the spout is facing towards somebody. The spout should always be directed to where nobody is sitting, usually just outward from the table.
- Don't tap on your bowl with your chopsticks. Beggars tap on their bowls, so this is not polite.

### **Chinese Banquet Etiquette**

Although your Chinese host will not expect you to know everything about proper banquet behaviour, he will greatly appreciate it when you are displaying some knowledge of the subject, because it shows that you have respect for Chinese culture, etiquette and traditions.

Banquets are usually held in restaurants in private rooms that have been reserved for the purpose. All members of your delegation should arrive together and on time. You will be met at the door and escorted to the banquet room, where the hosts are likely to have assembled. Traditionally, and as in all situations, the head of your delegation should enter the room first. Do not be surprised if your hosts greet you with a loud round of applause. The proper response is to applaud back.

Seating arrangements, which are based on rank, are stricter than in the West. This is another reason why you should give your host a list of delegation members and their rank. Guests should never assume that they may sit where they please and should wait

for hosts to guide them to their places. Traditionally, the Chinese regard the right side as the superior and the left side as the inferior. Therefore on formal occasions, including meetings and banquets, the host invariably arranges for the main guests to sit on his right side.

It is the host's responsibility to serve the guests, and at very formal banquets people do not begin to eat until the principal host served a portion to the principal guest. Or, the host may simply raise his chopsticks and announce that eating has begun. After this point, one may serve oneself any food in any amount, although it is rude to dig around in a dish in search of choice portions. Remember to go slow on eating. Don't fill yourself up when five courses are left to go. To stop eating in the middle of a banquet is rude, and your host may incorrectly think that something has been done to offend you.

Drinking takes an important place in Chinese banquets. Toasting is mandatory, and the drinking of spirits commences only after the host has made a toast at the beginning of the meal. It is likely that he will stand and hold his glass out with both hands while saying a few words. When he says the words *gan bei*, which means bottoms up (literally empty glass), all present should drain their glasses. After this initial toast, drinking and toasting are open to all. Subsequent toasts can be made from person to person or to the group as a whole. No words are needed to make a toast, and it is not necessary to drain your glass, although to do so is more respectful. Remember that hard liquor should never be drunk alone. If you are thirsty, you can sip beer or a soft drink individually, but if you prefer to drink hard liquor, be sure to catch the eye of someone at your table, smile and raise your glass, and drink in unison. Beer or soft drinks can also be used for toasting. Also, it is impolite to fill your own glass without first filling glasses of all others. This applies to all drinks and not just to alcohol. If your glass becomes empty and your host is observant, it is likely that he will fill it for you immediately. When filling another's glass, it is polite to fill it as full as you can without having the liquid spill over the rim. This symbolizes full respect and friendship.

It is a matter of courtesy for the host to try to get his guests drunk. If you do not intend to drink alcohol, make it known at the very beginning of the meal to prevent embarrassment. Even then, the host may good-naturedly try to push you into drinking. One way to eliminate this pressure is to tell your host that you are allergic to alcohol. In the course of drinking at banquets, it is not unusual for some Chinese to become quite drunk, although vomiting or falling down in public entails loss of face. After a few rounds of heavy drinking, you may notice your hosts excusing themselves to the bathroom, from whence they often return a bit lighter and reborn for more toasting!

When the last dish is finished, the banquet has officially ended. There is little ceremony involved with its conclusion. The host may ask if you have eaten your fill, which you undoubtedly will have done. Then the principal host will rise, signalling that the banquet has ended. Generally, the principal host will bid good evening to everyone at the door and stay behind to settle the bill with the restaurateur. Other hosts usually accompany guests to their vehicles and remain outside waving until the cars have left the premises.

After you have been entertained by your Chinese associates, it is proper to return the favour unless time or other constraints make it impossible.

## **Serving the Meal**

Regular Chinese meals are served all at once, but a banquet is about bounteousness, a host's generosity and prosperity, and the joy of celebration, so the food is brought in many successive courses. In a further display of exaggerated courtesy, the host apologizes in advance for the meagre and ill-prepared meal about to be served. Hot towels are distributed at the beginning and end of the meal.

## **What is Served, or Beyond the Grain**

In a dramatic reversal of everyday habit, banquets consist solely of special dishes. The meat and vegetables that serve as side dishes at regular meals become the focus, and fan, or grain, which is normally so important that every last grain must be consumed, is relegated to the very end of the meal and guests need only to pick at the fan, indicating their supreme satisfaction. To eat one's rice at a banquet might hint that the host failed to provide enough food.

## **What is Drunk**

Alcohol is very rarely served at everyday meals, but it plays an important role at banquets. In the West, the type of alcohol must match the meal according to set customs, and often the guests' special preferences must be accommodated. This is not the case in China, where the host often decides on one sort of alcoholic beverage, either a wine or liquor, which will be served throughout. Wine glasses are traditionally filled at the start of each course. The banquet will probably be marked by guests challenging each other to drinking games throughout the evening.

## **Commencement of the Meal**

The meal begins with a toast by the host, after which there is a long moment while the guests engage in the ceremony of beginning--the degree of politeness exhibited by a guest at this stage increases with every moment he waits to start eating. Throughout the meal, the host displays great solicitousness for the guests. Guests may refuse offers of food or drink two times or more without being taken at their word - or, of course, without really meaning their polite refusals.

## **The Courses**

The first course is an even-numbered selection of cold dishes, eight or ten are traditionally served. After the cold course comes a showy soup such as shark's fin soup or bird's nest soup. The guests help themselves to the dishes at a banquet, but the soup is served by the host, and much drinking and toasting accompanies. Following the soup comes a decorative meat dish. More courses follow--lobster, pork, scallops, chicken. Between the courses, a variety of sweets are brought out. Peking duck with scallion brushes, hoisin sauce, and thin pancakes is often served in the middle of the festivities. Traditionally, the final course is a whole fish, which is placed on the table with its head is pointed toward the guest of honour. Throughout the meal, the guests pay elaborate compliments to the food.