Food Service Styles In Chinese Hotels: Tradition and Tourism Pressures Merge

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Tourists often want to experience their hosts' culture, including cuisines. Their reactions can be negatively influenced by vastly different customs which confront them. What can be done, for example, when traditional food serving styles violate the tourist's sanitation standards? The authors discuss a Chinese case study—and tell what hoteliers in China have done to make food serving more desirable, with minimal compromise to culinary traditions.

Dietary preferences and serving styles vary and contribute to the unique traditions and beliefs of people in a common culture. Experiencing different cultures is, for some, a strong incentive to travel. Learning about new foods and the way they are served and consumed is an intricate part of the experience that many tourists like to enjoy.

> Take the case of a busload of foreign tourists arriving in a strange country...At the table, 'strange food' is served. These dishes look exciting to the adventurous, but the question remains: How should these foods be eaten properly?...The tourists take a minute or two to observe the local residents...shortly, the tourists are enjoying their newfound cuisine with awkward movements...the tourists learn the 'social accepted way of dining.'[1]

The basic ingredients from which food items are made, the methods of preservation, and procedures used to cut up and prepare foodstuffs used by the Chinese are unique. So, too, are the amount and types of food variety at each meal, the tastes that are liked or disliked, and the customs of serving food.[2] Chinese food, then, involves a complex set of variables that is highly distinctive when compared with many other food traditions, largely because China has been reluctant to adapt to other cultures since the Han Period (Approx. 100 B.C.).[3]

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The traditional Chinese breakfast is a bowl of hot rice gruel cooked with small, tasty tidbits or served with pickles and tea. The local cereal grain is the primary part of the meal; everything else reflects either local customs or economic status.[4] The noon meal is a smaller version of the evening meal: a rice or wheat dish, vegetable, and fish or meat, if possible, and soup. In a family meal, small bits of foods are selected from a common serving plate or bowl with one's own chopsticks and are eaten over one's own rice bowl. Each person's rice bowl is held with the left hand, thumb resting on the top rim, and always close to the chin; rice is scooped into the mouth without waste. Each diner uses chopsticks which, after personal use, are also used to serve foods to other diners.[5]

Tourism Development Creates Problems

The long-established Chinese eating habits and serving customs were challenged when the Chinese Communist government adopted a policy in 1978 which encouraged cultural and economic ties with the outside world.[6] Since then China has witnessed a growth of foreign tourist arrivals from 360,000 (1979) to six million (predicted in 1992).[7] The number of hotels that provide lodging and food service to foreign tourists has increased from fewer than 200 (1979) to 1,300 (1991).[8]

Until approximately 1980, most meals prepared for foreign tourists were a Chinese banquet, often hosted by a Chinese official. At these events, the traditional family style of treating friends at meals was readily applied with little modification.[9] Serving procedures, especially the use of personal eating utensils to serve others from common serviceware, bothered many guests and, especially on long tours, mealtimes became much less than enjoyable.[10]

Chinese hosts recognized this problem, and hoteliers and others who hosted meals for foreign tourists were asked by national tourism authorities to respect their guests' own customs.[11] Hotels started to change their food service patterns. For example, dishes with less meat and more vegetables were served.[12] Attempts were made to provide table settings and serving procedures that more clearly accommodated the guests' own dining customs.

Efforts to better serve guests accelerated when foreign hotel companies were allowed to enter the market to compete with local hotel operators in 1982.[13] Revenues from outlets in these hotels serving Chinese food were a major contributor to their organizations' bottom-lines.[14] It was, therefore, in the hotels' best financial interests to please their guests and, in so doing, to encourage "repeat visits" through the continued growth of the tourism industry. Drawing on their own abilities to adapt the cultures and traditions of other Southeast Asian countries, these hotels were able to incorporate Chinese hospitality into their service style while maintaining their own (and their guests') desired quality standards.[15]

During the mid-1980s, China's National Tourism Administration sponsored a nationwide campaign for local operators to learn from

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those foreign properties. Meanwhile, Chinese managers were also sent abroad to enhance management skills.[16] As a result, serving formats and procedures, along with many other services in Chinese hotels, are now more acceptable to foreign (Western) guests who better appreciate their hosts' friendship and hospitality at Chinese meals.[17]

Study of Current Procedures Is Helpful

There are no empirical studies to describe the major food serving formats and procedures which have evolved since the early 1980s and which are currently used in Chinese hotels. Considering that changes occurred within a period of only a dozen years, this is not surprising. However, since China is becoming a more popular tourist destination, and since more international hotel chains and restaurant companies are turning their attention to this huge potential market,[18] such a study can be of help to the industry.

Based upon the personal observations and experience and upon current review of training materials from several Chinese hotels, three hypothesized, "generic" models of serving formats were developed and a survey questionnaire was designed. Thirty-seven hotels were selected based upon geographical location, management by both international hotel companies and local operators, property size, and class; 17, mostly upscale properties, responded. Feedback was used to further define the three basic service models and to learn about the models' applications for alternative meal periods and banquet events.

Three Basic Serving Styles Are Used

• **Model One: Gongcanshi (Traditional Family Style Modified):** Gongcanshi is an improved version of the traditional family style of food serving which requires minimum labor. Food items that have been ordered are brought to and centered on the table simultaneously. Diners serve themselves one or more of the dishes at any time during the meal. They may also serve each other; in this sense, it does not deviate from traditional family styles. The improvement lies in the addition of service chopsticks or spoons with each course and two or more sets of public chopsticks and spoons. Guests then use the public chopsticks or spoon rather than personal utensils to transfer food to their plates. Each table setting includes a serving (china) plate, napkin, chopsticks and stand, spoon, tea cup and saucer, dipping saucer (condiment mix saucer), soup bowl and porcelain spoon, and glass for beer or soft drinks.

The advantages of the Gongcanshi method are as follows:

- Gongcanshi provides a relaxed family atmosphere for guests with less interference from servers. The availability of public chopsticks and spoons enables the host to serve other guests or, alternatively, guests can serve themselves without violating sanitation standards.

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- It is an easy service style for a small party, two to six guests.
- It is less labor intensive: fewer servers are required. One server can handle a section of at least six tables.
- It does not require sophisticated serving skills.
- The traditional family style of service is preserved with only minor modification.

The disadvantages of the Gongcanshi method are as follows:

- Guests receive less personal attention.
- Serving food from the centered dishes to a personal plate can be a burden for a guest who is not comfortable using chopsticks. The guest may not be able to serve/consume food items such as whole unfilleted fish, chicken, duck, or other items which are brought to the table.
- Since food is brought to the table all at once, the table will likely look disarrayed and untidy by the end of a meal.

To overcome these disadvantages, some hotels require servers to be sensitive about their guests' special needs. For example, if a guest has difficulty using chopsticks, a server may offer a knife and fork. (In fact, depending on types of clientele, some hotel dining room table settings include a fork for each cover.) When the table is too small to comfortably hold all ordered food, the server may ask to remove dish plates that have little food remaining. The server may also offer to help serve such food as unfilleted fish and whole chicken.[19]

• **Model Two: Zhuanpanshi (Chinese Lazy Susan Service):** Zhuanpanshi was initially introduced to accommodate dining for package tour groups. Since early tourist groups tended to be large (often a minimum of 15 members), usually more than one table was required; each was set for eight to 12 guests. As a feature of the package tour, groups were typically offered set menus (table d'hote meals), with four to six cold dishes and four or more hot dishes. Hotels initially attempted, often without success, to apply the Gongcanshi service style for banquet events, bringing all menu items to all the tables at once. With limited kitchen and labor capacity, this was not practical. Serving one course at a time was not satisfactory nor was it convenient for a guest to stand up to reach a dish placed on the other side of table. A revolving Zhuanpan, or lazy susan, was a logical solution.

Each cover for a Zhuanpanshi table setting is similar to that of Gongcanshi. Installing and removing the Zhuanpan from a table requires extra labor hours and causes storage problems. Therefore, many hotels have made it a relatively inseparable part of the table in dining rooms used for tour groups or big parties. As a result, Zhuanpanshi is mostly applicable for table d'hote lunch/dinner and middle-priced banquet services. In a typical service style, all cold dishes are first placed on the Zhuanpan; these are removed after the course is completed and replaced with hot dishes.

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The advantages of the Zhuanpanshi method are as follows:

- It is the most satisfactory serving format for table d'hote meals and is especially useful for accommodating large package tour groups.
- It has a potential for more applications such as an a la carte lunch/dinner for large parties.
- It can accommodate almost all foods. Portioning food such as whole duck, chicken, or unfilleted fish before placing it on the Zhuanpan eliminates a potential problem. When this is done in front of guests it is actually a performance which is appreciated by the guests.

The disadvantages of the Zhuanpanshi method are as follows:

- Placing every dish on the Zhuanpan tends to draw attention to the server and foods, which can involuntarily interrupt the guests' conversations.
- Portioning requires a high level of serving skills.
- The Zhuanpan is typically made of glass. If food, sauce, or soup is dropped on it during service or portioning, it can become messy and unattractive.

• **Model Three: Fencanshi (Western Style Adopted):** Fencanshi is probably the most creative serving format used today in upscale hotel restaurants in China. It is a combination of Chinese food and serviceware and French or Russian service. Parts of the French and/or Russian service formats and procedures were adopted to facilitate or enhance the service of Chinese food. Because of this feature, a new term has been added to Chinese food terminology: Zhongcanxiqi, translated as "Chinese Food Eaten in Western Way."[20] This service style is almost exclusively used in formal or upscale banquets, although a few hotel restaurants use it for a la carte dinners as well. These banquet events require special food items often not listed in regular menus and the best personal service available. Fencanshi satisfies both. Special features of a food item can be emphasized by placing it on the table before taking it aside for service to each guest individually.

The Fencanshi table setting is a combination of Gongcanshi and Zhuanpanshi. Serviceware for each cover is set exactly as that of Zhuanpanshi banquet setting, and the center pieces are arranged just like that of Gongcanshi. However, the serviceware and center pieces used for Fencanshi are the best of a hotel. Chopsticks and stand can be made of mahogany wood, jade, or ivory. Base plate and spoon are silver or silver-plated. There is usually a flower basket or vase centered on the table.

Fencanshi is of two styles: cart service, which is an adoption of French service style, and tray service, which is an adoption of Russian service style. Serving procedures are similar to that of Zhuanpanshi banquet service.

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A mobile cart is required for this service. Carts typically have two shelves, with the lower shelf holding service plates and soup bowls and the upper shelf used for portioning of food. This service style needs two servers for one table. A course is wheeled from the kitchen and placed on the table. The course is removed from the table onto the cart. Food is then portioned onto a serving plate and placed in front of a guest. The service cart is then moved around the table clockwise and the portioning process is repeated.

In Fencanshi tray service, food is carried, usually on a silver platter, from the kitchen, presented to the table, and then served to the guests using a "traditional" Russian style.

The advantages of the Fencanshi method are as follows:

- Guests receive the greatest personal attention. It is most suitable for upscale or formal banquets.
- Portioning food away from the guests does not distract them and the process is less likely to interrupt their conversation.
- Guests, especially those from Western countries, feel more comfortable in terms of hygiene. Meanwhile, they are shown and can still appreciate the basic and distinct features of Chinese food.

The disadvantages of the Fencanshi method are as follows:

- It is the most labor and equipment intensive serving style. More service personnel are needed per guest.
- Serving skills are extremely demanding; servers need relatively extensive training.
- The tradition of Chinese food is least preserved.[21]

Serving Models Must Be Flexible

These three basic serving formats are used with some variation. In fact, some hotel restaurant managers apply the service formats and procedures almost interchangeably.

The most simplified method, Gongcanshi: Traditional Family-Style Modified, is most typically used for a la carte breakfast and lunch/dinner occasions. Zhuanpanshi, Chinese Lazy Susan Service, is the predominant service style for table d'hote breakfast, lunch/dinner, and banquet events. The more formal Fencanshi, Western Style Adopted, is used for most formal a la carte lunch/dinner and banquet service.

Traditionally, meal patterns and serving habits are first formed in private homes before they are introduced and adopted by restaurants and other dining places.[22] Interestingly, this does not seem true for the eating and serving customs in Chinese local restaurants which do not typically serve foreign guests and for many Chinese families in their homes. Rather, since the early 1980s, significant changes in eating and serving customs have taken place first in hotel restaurants. Local Chinese restaurants and families are now beginning to accept and use these serving formats, especially Gongcanshi

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and table d'hote Zhuanpanshi.[23] That culinary customs and traditions formed over centuries can begin to change so quickly is amazing — and that it has been driven, at least in part, by hotel restaurants catering to tourists, is equally remarkable.

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