

## CHINESE BANQUETS: 10 ETIQUETTE RULES

Work and social life tend to remain separate in the West, whereas much of a Chinese person's social life will be used to further personal and business relationships. In China some three-quarters of business deals are sealed outside of working hours. Tea houses, Karaoke bars and restaurants can all be locations where discussions and deals are made.

Banquets have traditionally been an essential part of doing business in China, although the practice varies depending on where you are and who you are dealing with. Very senior people who have not previously made an appearance may be present at a banquet. They may be key to the approval of the business in hand but be too senior to be involved in the actual negotiations. The banquet is an opportunity to impress them and get a feel for how things are going.

Below are 10 tips that must be taken into account for banquets with Chinese companies:

**Test Chinese food:** most Chinese are unenthusiastic about Western food, and prefer Chinese food. Typical official entertainment for a foreign visitor will take the form of a banquet with several courses, often consisting of exotic delicacies not usually eaten in the West – or in China, for that matter!

**Arrive on time:** Never arrive late for a Chinese meal. It is common for people to arrive up to 15 minutes early. Lunch is served from 11.30am onwards, and dinner from about 6.00pm. Most official banquets run from 6.00pm to 8.00pm.

**Attention to seating etiquette:** If you are the host at a Chinese restaurant, at the customary round table, your seat should face the door, with the Chinese guest of honor on your right. Guests are seated further away from the host in descending order of seniority, with the most junior having their back to the door. Thought should be given to placing interpreters between guests who cannot speak each other's languages.

**Ask for help if necessary:** If in doubt about the placement of your guests, a friendly invitation for assistance when they arrive often solves the problem.

**Serve food to the guest:** It is traditional (but now less common) for the host to serve food to the guest. If you are the host and offer a guest a second helping, do not automatically take no for an answer. They may just be being polite.

**Try each dish:** Tables are round, and people serve themselves from the serving dish in the centre. The serving dishes are not passed from one person to another. It is good manners to try each course.

**Toast several times:** during the banquets there are several toasts. The most usual toasts are *Gan Bei* (Drink up! in Mandarin) or *Yam sing* (the same meaning in Hong Kong Cantonese). Locally produced wines or baijiu (a strong spirit) are the usual drinks for toasts. However, many people in China have a low capacity for alcohol. If you host a meal, plenty of soft drinks should be available.

**Use Chopsticks:** to serve yourself with food from a plate you should turn the chopsticks round and use the thick ends (the non-eating ends) so that the ends that have been in your mouth do not come into contact with the food on the tray. When you finish your meal, you should put the chopsticks on the table or on a plate with other chopsticks. If you put the chopsticks alongside each other on your empty plate, as in western Europe, it is seen as a sign of bad luck.

**Do no talk about business:** during lunches or dinners you should not talk about business. There is no after-lunch. They also tend to leave en masse as soon as the last dish (fruit is the last) has been eaten. Chinese hosts make it quite clear when the meeting is over and you will not be expected to linger.

**Reciprocate:** if you are invited to a banquet, it is polite to reciprocate. A good time to have a return banquet is on the eve of your departure or at the conclusion of the business in hand. Many senior officials in southern China are moving away from the typical banquet scenario and are now more likely to be found playing tennis (with a top coach) or golf. Find out what form of entertainment your key contacts prefer, as this can help you decide how best to build your relationship with them.



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