

The Secret of the Chinese Banquet

“I’m sorry, I can’t go out to dinner at with you tonight. I have to go to a banquet. I have no choice.”

My friend Leung sounds as happy as if he’d just told me he was off to have a root canal without anaesthesia. But I know he’s telling me the truth, not just making excuses. For the dark secret of Hong Kong’s world-famous eating culture is this: Nobody likes Chinese banquet food.

“Banquet food is always too salty, too rich and too greasy. And the dishes are always more or less the same.” This is not a person speaking, it is actually the translation of a Cantonese dialogue I had to memorize from an early lesson (“At The Banquet”) in my language classes. Little did I know how useful the phrases in this chapter would be: “This dish is too fattening and has too much MSG.” “Do you think this abalone comes from a can?”

Before I ever went to China, I imagined that the banquet represented the epitome of the Chinese culinary experience. I remember how I drooled with envy when I saw the photos of President Nixon in Beijing, being feted by Mao and Chou En-lai over multiple courses of steamed wild greens and exotic fungi, pickled cucumbers and Peking duck. Someday, I too, would be reciting flowery toasts over the delicacies at such a sublime table!

Imagine the shock when I discovered, after moving to Hong Kong, that banquets were the D list of foodie occasions. At the typical banquet--held for a wedding, a family get together, or a political or cultural association gathering, you’re sitting down to a meal with dozens, if not hundreds of other guests--a situation that favors mass production and standardization over artistry and experimentation. “At a typical banquet you’ve got grandma and maybe your boss and also your buddies, and they don’t all like the same things, so in order to make everybody happy, you have to make sure everyone knows exactly what to expect,” explains my friend Jane.

So banquet food follows the script, right from the opening salvo: The Grand Parade of Pigs. The restaurant lights dim, a squadron of waiters bursts through the kitchen doors balancing platters heavy with roast suckling pigs, their eyes replaced by little red electric bulbs that blink on and off and on again. (Since this wacky performance piece is the standard intro nowadays for every Chinese banquet from Toronto to New York to Hong Kong, nobody pays any attention to it.) Then course after course quickly follows (usually 8, since 8 is the lucky Chinese number). A big soup of chicken and pork, with a faintly medicinal herbal fragrance (Soups, in Chinese culture, often do double duty as health tonics). A giant fish, steamed --usually until rubbery. Then, finally, little bowls of noodles and fried rice signal the meal’s end. (In a polite touch, the host saves the starchy staples until the last course, so that guests may fill their bellies with more expensive foods first).

“What’s important is not the food, it’s that we all come together to eat,” my friend Po Ying

observes to me one evening as we stand up and reach across the table to “gaap sung” -- cherry pick a bit of tasty steamed mushroom with our chopsticks from the top of a heaping platter. The greens, as usual, are soggy, the chicken too tough, the soup’s watery. Yet everyone’s happily eating like there’s no tomorrow. That’s when I realize: the Chinese banquet is more like a plot than a meal, and its back story is a cultural memory, not too distant, of privation, hardship, empty larders. The food may be imperfect, even awful. But the most important flavor at a Chinese banquet is the taste of abundance.