



May 2003

*Global branding corporate communication brand transcreation v*

# *Dining Etiquettes*

**East Asian Dining Etiquettes and Taboos**  
A Business Primer

**Lehrmäch**

# *East Asian Dining Etiquettes and Taboos*

So... you are about to partake a dining experience with business associates from East Asia. Yet, you are somewhat lost on the precise cultural nuance to observe. You generally know that Asian cultures are uniquely different from we Americans... but exactly what etiquettes do they follow ?

Looking at the menu, it is filled with words totally beyond the English language. Whether the cuisine is Chinese "Mapu Tofu" (spicy bean curd), Korean "Dol Sot Bibim Bap" (hot skillet fired rice), Japanese "Tonkatsu" (pork cutlet on rice), or Vietnamese "Com Bi Suon Nuong" (grilled pork chops on rice)... the challenge of pronouncing these dishes pale in comparison to the subtle unwritten cultural etiquettes demonstrated by each ethnic group.

Fear not ! Here is a quick list of "Do's and Don'ts" when entertaining East Asian colleagues from Japan, Korea, China, Singapore, Vietnam. The list contains short descriptions of the activity, suggested cuisines not too exotic for American palate, along with the ethnic region observing such etiquettes.

## **Chopstick Usage : East Asia**

- *Traditional dinner served "family style" on public plates for all parties to partake.*
- *Do not rest your chopstick on any public plate, for it is considered bad manners.*
- *Rest the chopstick on top of your own bowl or plate.*

When the meal is completed, place your chopstick on top of bowl or plate towards the right side, parallel to the table.

## **Chopstick Flip Usage: China, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam**

- *Some Asians demonstrate high formality when taking food parcels from the public plate.*
- *They will use the chopstick's "thin ends" to place food into their mouths.*
- *However, they will invert the chopsticks and use its "thick ends" to pick up food parcels from the public plate.*



*Contrasted with American culture, Asian dining is usually served family style, inclined to be a social liaison rather than a business discussion event, hence it is best to follow local protocol and enjoy the company, cuisines, and ambiance.*



*Chinese cuisine Ma'pu Tofu (spicy pork & tofu dish) with rice on a personal serving dish, thus permitting the diner's chopstick to rest on its plate.*



*Korean cuisine Dolso Bibimbap (assorted meat & vegetables) in hot skillet iron bowl, it can be partaken as either personal dish or family style.*



Vietnamese cuisine Banh Xeo on personal serving dish. Lettuce leaves used to wrap the omelet-like dish for dipping into side pungent sauce. It is common to partake some Vietnamese cuisines by using one's hands instead of table utensils.



Ever ubiquitous Chinese Niu Rou Mien (beef noodle soup), generally served in personal serving dish with soup spoon and chopstick.



Asians can be quite particular of their tea preferences, such as Oolong, Green, Jasmine, or Chrysanthemum varieties. Most restaurants serve tea brewed in a tea pot, but some establishments serve tea in traditional means of free float tea leaves in individual cups for optimal tea aroma.

The "thin ends" have touched one's mouth, while the "thick ends" have not. Therefore, this mannerism is well lauded.

### Food Offering : China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore

- During the commencement of dinner, the host may take food parcels from the public plate and place it onto the guest's plate.
- This is considered a gesture of hospitality and friendship.

### Food Offering : Japan

- It is considered "bad omen" or "ill fortune" for anyone to pick up food parcels from the public plate and place it onto anyone else's plate.
- This "pick-up" action will inadvertently remind the Japanese guests of cremation ceremonies during their funeral rites.

### Chopstick Insertion : Japan

- Do not insert your chopstick into the rice bowl and leave it there for any reason, for it is considered a very "bad omen".
- Symbolism of vertically inserting the chopstick into a rice bowl, reminds the Japanese of burial mounds and grave markers.
- If you must rest the chopstick, place to the side or on top of your bowl or plate, perpendicular to table edge.
- However, it has been observed that devout Japanese Buddhist families, in the privacy of their homes, have used this gesture to "say grace and remembrance" to deceased family members before beginning a meal.



Affection imagery of inverted chopsticks in rice bowl, for Japanese guests this symbolism immediately conjures negative reaction of traditional Asian grave markers and cemeteries.

### **Tea Pour Appreciation : China, Taiwan**

- When a waiter or dining associate refills your tea cup, you can give the usual verbal "Thank You", or use the customary "2-Finger 3-Tap" appreciation.
- As your tea cup is being refilled, take 2-fingers on your left hand and lightly tap 3-times on the table close to the tea cup.
- This is to signify your appreciation for the refill without breaking the current mode of conversation with other dining associates.

Note : Using this gesture for Vietnamese audience may be misinterpreted as an insult, for it projects the impression of "Master vs Servant " relationship.



*Korean Panch'an, small complimentary dishes of kimchi, potato, sauteed roots, and bean sprouts served when one orders Korean cuisines.*

### **Tea Refill Request : China, Taiwan**

- When one's teapot is empty and requires a refill, there is no need to shout across the room or aggressively gesture the waiter for attention, for it is considered bad manners.
- Simply flip open the teapot cover if it is hinged. If it is a porcelain teapot, leave the top cover ajar. This action will non-verbally convey the request to the waiter that you would like the teapot refilled.



*Brewing Asian tea via tea bags is not unusual, but majority of Asian restaurants still prefer traditional method of brewing via tea leaves, hence some leaves would flow into individual serving cups.*

### **Side Dishes : Korea**

- When ordering traditional Korean cuisines, it is customary for the restaurant host to provide complimentary "Panch'an", which are a series of small side dishes (ex. sweet roots, kimchee, salted sea weed, sliced potatoes).
- Because the side dishes are complimentary, you should not ask for refills. It is considered poor etiquette for the customer to insist on refills.

### **Soup Partake : Japan**

- Japanese soups are usually served in small bowls without ladles.
- To partake upon the soup, use both hands to pick up the soup bowl, and bring to your lips to drink.



*Japanese Sushi are a variety of vegetable and raw meat vinegar rice & dried seaweed rolls. If one's American palate precludes from enjoying the raw meat, then partaking the vegetable sushi variants can be conducive to the dining experience.*

### **Tea Finger Dipping : China, Taiwan, Vietnam**

- Occasionally, when the meal has ended and the parties are about to depart, one might observe Asians dipping fingers into their tea cups

to wash away any oil residue.

Do not practice this action in any formal dining setting, for it will be considered ill-mannered. This action is reserved strictly for informal settings among family members and close friends.

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All in all, East Asian societies judge your sincerity more importantly than one's actual accomplishments. Therefore, a sincere attempt at observing the proper etiquettes will bring approving comments from your East Asian associates. Since your sincerity is reflective of your personal character, it will also reflect positively upon the corporation as well. If you are not sure of which etiquettes to observe, simply ask your host for insights, for there is no crime in not being "all-knowing".

On a final note, some years past I was in a Korean restaurant enjoying the traditional cuisines. When my teapot was empty, I simply followed the Chinese tradition of "flipping open the teapot cover" to non-verbally request a refill.

Minutes went by and no waiter came to my table to fulfill the request. Finally, I was able to make eye-contact with a distant Korean waitress and she saw my teapot predicament. She came immediately to my table, looked at the teapot cover, flipped it close, and simply walked off without any refill !

Then, it suddenly dawned upon me that Koreans do not follow Chinese teapot refill customs. Just goes to show...there is plenty for all parties to learn whether one is either East Asian or American in this regard. ●●●



*Fish cuisines are not just part of a Asian seafood diet, Chinese word for fish "Yu" is a homonym for the word Abundance, hence fish icons abound throughout Chinese society.*



*Asian rice noodle soup, served with variety of meats or seafood. Noodle soups of this kind is considered to be "comfort food" or "fast food" among Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and their overseas ethnic diasporas.*



*All Asian societies can enjoy a hearty American steak or lobster dish, but be forewarned that not all western cuisines can be easily partaken since some Asians are lactose intolerant against heavy cream, cheese, milk, or even ice cream.*



*With some Asians being lactose intolerant, inviting them to partake rich Italian - French - American cuisines could result in digestive problems afterwards. Hence, be sensitive to such plight.*

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**ABOUT THE COMPANY**

Lehrmach is a management consultancy with concentrations in transnational marketing, brand transcreation, corporate communication, and online globalization. For additional information, contact [lehrmach@lehrmach.com](mailto:lehrmach@lehrmach.com)

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