



Chinese Food Culture

A Brief Introduction

Food as a Cultural Symbol

- As with any culture, food is an integral part of Chinese culture. By understanding dining customs in China, you can gain insight into Chinese culture as a whole as well as some of the difficulties your host student will have adjusting to American food and dining customs.



Dining Customs in China

- **Communal rather than individual:** family members are seated around a round table with a lazy Susan. Dishes are to be shared rather than enjoyed individually.
- **Food selection:** There are many choices of dishes in a meal. It is common practice for individuals in the community to select food from the lazy Susan and place it on another's plate. The community heavily influences food choices.

Dining Customs (Cont'd)

- **Hierarchy:** the eldest member of the household (or the host) sits at the “head” of the table (the seat facing the door). Other members are seated around the elder(s) in descending order according to age and gender.
- **Children are central to the family** and often receive a lot of attention, with some families catering to the child’s food choices.

Chinese Breakfast Foods

- Congee
- Scallion pancake
- Steamed egg custard
- Steamed buns
- Breakfast foods tend to be salty and savory; they are very rarely sweet like pancakes or cereal.
 - Many people eat pickled vegetables for breakfast
- All of these foods are hot!



Leek Egg Pancake

Key Food Differences

Chinese Food

- A wide variety of dishes
 - [8 schools of cooking, many of them very flavorful](#)
- Nearly always served warm (few cold dishes)
- Rarely contains any form of dairy
- Most dishes include meat or meat broth
 - China's economic development means that more people can eat meat with every meal, and they celebrate this!

American Food

- Can be bland – some dishes have few spices
- Sandwiches, cereal, salad, other cold foods are common main dishes
 - Convenience is a major factor in the foods we eat
- Lots of dairy in diet, including milk, cheese
- More vegetarian and vegan dishes available

Food Concerns

- Students may struggle with cold food! They are used to warm or hot dishes with every meal and may ask you to cook every meal. Students often prefer hot breakfast and food they can heat up for lunch if they can't buy food at a cafeteria.



Pineapple Pork

Food-related Culture Shock

- Food is very different in the US!
- Food differences may contribute to homesickness in many students.
 - If you had been to China, you would know why!
- Making food familiar to the student may help them feel more at home.



Soy Sauce Braised Potatoes

Resources

- Cambridge Foodies (all photos are from this delicious blog):
<http://cambridgefoodies.blogspot.com/>
- Guide to Chinese Dining Etiquette:
<http://youtu.be/jkyE2rPac3s>
- Ask your student what they like to eat and learn from them!



Sour Spicy Potato Shreds