



020126 The Big Jeff and Jeff Banquet

Saturday (Jan12) was the date of the big Jeff and Jeff banquet. We decided to reciprocate for all of the meals that we had been given during the week by throwing our own banquet (I swear that we didn't pay for a single meal all week). Throwing our own banquet proved to be a lot of fun. Banquets in Yantai have a whole series of rules of etiquette that go along with them. I probably don't know all of them or I may be incorrect about some of these. To highlight a few, the dinner is held at a round table with a glass lazy susan in the middle so that all of the dishes can be easily spun around for all the guests to reach. Meals in China are not eaten with individual plates. There are the big plates of food on the lazy susan and you eat with your chop sticks right off of these. You do have a small plate that you can place food onto, or at dinner I will sometimes put food into my bowl of rice so that the rice is covered with the sauce. But otherwise, everyone just shares out of the big dishes.

The seating around the table is an important consideration. The first host sits at the seat facing the door to the banquet room (all restaurants have at least one side room for banquets. The room need not be large, ours was maybe 15 feet by 15 feet, but big enough for the table and the guests.) The first host faces the door so that he or she can welcome the guests as they arrive. The second host sits opposite of the first host. The guest of honor, or the 1st guest sits to the hosts right. The 2nd guest sits to the hosts left. The next two guests sit to the 2nd hosts right and left. The other seats may have significance, but usually everyone just sits down there if they are not the special guests.

When the food is brought to the table by the waitress, she spins the lazy susan so that each dish starts in front of the first host. The first host then serves the special guests using a 2nd pair of chop sticks. In that way, the 1st guest gets the first taste of each dish. After that, everyone is free to take as they please.

Everyone has before them the little plate, a ceramic spoon, chopsticks, a tea cup and a glass for alcohol. You are allowed to drink of the tea as often as you like, but you can not drink the alcohol unless a toast is made. To drink by yourself is bad manners and implies that not enough toasts are being made. This you do not have to worry about because through the course of a banquet, lots of toasts are made. The first host will start the banquet with a toast. Two more toasts will follow and then it is the 2nd hosts turn to make three toasts. After that, anyone can make a toast and I never let a banquet go by without making one. However, the last toast of the night will be made by the first host.

The alcohol that will be drunk can be wine, beer, beijou, brandy, or other liquors. Lots of times, the women will drink wine while the men beer. However, I have also seen the practice of the first guest being asked what she would like to drink. At the Jeff and Jeff banquet, Ms. Hou was the first guest and she wanted to drink red wine so red wine was drunk by everyone throughout the night. When a toast is made, the person who makes the toast determines how much of the contents of your glass is to be consumed. If the toast maker drinks half, you drink half. If the toast maker says gambei, it means bottoms up and you drink the whole thing.

Once the toast is said, you clink the glasses together. One rule is that you always lower your glass lower than the person that you are toasting out of a sign of respect. I have seen people touch glasses on the table in an effort to get lower than the other. For the people around the table whose glasses you can not clink, you clink your glass on the glass lazy susan to signify that you are clinking with everyone.

At a banquet, the goal seems to make sure that your guests are well fed and have as much to drink as they desire. So, Jeff and I ordered something like 13 courses for our 15 guests. It is bad manners for a guest to eat all of the food on one dish. This signifies that the host did not order enough food and the host will feel obligated to order another dish. The last dish that is brought in is usually a fish. We had two. The fish is the whole fish, head included. One custom is to never turn the fish over because it is bad luck of some sort. The final dish is always a starch such as noodles, rice or jaozi.

As complicated as this all seems, a banquet is a lot of fun. Jeff and I invited several of the English teachers from #5, Ms. Hou, Vica, Zhang Tao who is a friend from Yantai and the WT group. We also decided to add our own banquet rules. We had a lot of fun with introductions with lots of clapping. We took everyone's picture as they entered and gave out gifts of whistles. The whistles actually came in handy. More than one person commented that it was odd to see a foreigner at the head of the table. Ms. Hou kept trying to serve me food, so I would blow on the whistle to stop that. We also gave out a door prize. It was a lot of fun to throw a banquet.

Afterwards, we invited everyone out to the New China Disco and to my surprise, everyone came. It would not usually be a destination for the teachers. The Discos in Yantai have been there for a while, but they are mostly seen as hangouts for the bad kids. For example, the students at the WT party on Friday were the good kids who have never set foot in a disco. We all piled into cars and went. The women got in for free, but the men had to pay. Except that Zhang Tao knew one of the guys at the door, so no one paid. (This happens very frequently in China. It all comes down to who you know).

The Disco had changed a lot since I was last there almost two years ago. The building itself is your typical, multistory, dark disco with pounding sound system. The new feature was a bouncing dance floor. The bouncing floor was a lot of fun at first, but then became annoying because you got bounced around more than danced. Most of the Chinese danced facing the front of the hall where the DJ was. Also in the front were four scantily clad women who would occasionally lead the throngs in dances. We bounced around for a while, blowing whistles and having a great time. One of the older teachers who I was surprised at, but happy that she came told me as she danced, "Here I can forget everything!". I know that they had come to the disco just for Jeff and I and so we definitely appreciated it and that they were having fun.

You can watch video from the Banquet at the following address:

Video Links:

Title: Jeff & Jeff Banquet - Video footage of the Jeff and Jeff Banquet --
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URL:

<http://dazzle.mightyeyes.com/content/contentViewer.asp?cID=238D33D0-D745-4707-AEA9-DF45A17F8626&authID=A20EFCA6%2DA143%2D49B1%2DB8DA%2D71EF7127167C>

Windows Media Player 6.4 or later is required to view video

You can download the latest Media Player from

<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/mediaplayer/en/download/default.asp>

Sorry, but the quality may be poor, depending on your connection. I still haven't worked all of the bugs out. Enjoy!

Jeff

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