

HORVÁTH, Izabella

Confucius and Laozi at a Formal Chinese Dinner Party

Perhaps more than any other people, Chinese consider giving and receiving food more important than anything else in life. I would go as far as to say they are obsessed with eating. There is a Chinese saying—and there are thousands of them: “People have three emergencies,” and the first of the emergencies, of course, is eating. I let my readers guess what the other two emergencies are

An outsider in a new culture has to be a patient observer to find answers to questions. Often even asking direct questions to gain answers will not produce explanations. At least this has been my experience living in China for over ten years as a western wife of a Chinese man. I have to confess in all honesty, that I spent a lot of time being confused and befuddled by the habits, customs and just everyday life in China. But as every ethnographer knows, asking direct questions from ‘informants’ is not the only, or the most effective way to find answers. Therefore, there was nothing for it but to sharpen my observation faculties, which was often an exhausting endeavor. I could not have acquired any of the understanding without the patience and forbearance of my husband, Du Yaxiong, specialist and National Expert of traditional Chinese folk music. For this I give him my most sincere thanks.

This paper is about delving into the deeper meaning behind one of the most common customs in China: the formal dinner party. I wish to recount it, since I am sure among the readers there will be those who have had, or will have, an opportunity to attend a formal Chinese dinner party. It behooves us westerners to gain a better understanding of Chinese culture, and learn why one seemingly simple activity is not so simple. Chinese do not correct mistakes made by westerners; they only smile politely and keep their own council. However, they notice and remember.

Brief background of Chinese eating customs

Sharing food is probably one of the most universal activities in all societies. It is a great social binder. In China, however food preparation and eating has really taken center stage in daily life. Nothing can illustrate this more eloquently than the fact that in dynastic times the most important person in the land after the emperor was the imperial chef!! According to the record by Sima Qian - who is honored in China as the father of Chinese historiography--Yi Yin, a slave and a cook, was instrumental in helping prince Tang of Shang (1766-1760 BC) overthrow the corrupt Xia emperor by engaging Tang in conversation while demonstrating him his cooking skills (Sima: Vol. 1, p. 11). We can but surmise that prince Tang was a connoisseur. When with the advice of Yi Yin, Tang became the first Shang emperor, he appointed Yin to be prime minister.



(fig. 1) Portrait of Yi Yin, the imperial cook who became the Shang prime minister. (photo: <http://www.seeraa.com/china-culture/yiyin-cuisine.html> accessed 4 -21- 2015)

The traditional expression *da shifu* 大師傅 (grand master) always means cook. In other words, the greatest master, possessor of knowledge, is a person who knows how to prepare food.

Thus, from times immemorial, formal dinner parties in China have been considered to be most important and common social occasions. On the surface, there seems to be nothing special about this. However, in China not many decisions get made without first sitting around a big table with good food while engaged in lively discussions. Eating is also closely connected to economy and politics. Here I am specifically referring to the “economy” and ‘politics,’ among those who are attending a particular dinner party. This is the occasion where new information is exchanged, old relationships rekindled, decisions made, and most importantly, new connections—or as the Chinese say-- *guanxi*, are established.

Probably the most prolific business in a Chinese city is the restaurant business. These range from the hole-in-the-wall small fast food dumpling-seller’s place to entire buildings dedicated to the ritual of eating. One cannot take many steps in the streets without bumping into a place that sells food. In Hangzhou and Beijing, the two cities in which I spent most of my 10 years, as well as in most of the other cities I had visited, there are buildings of three to five floors used as a single restaurant. The ground floor has the main common dining area, and the other floors have elaborate private rooms and banquet halls, each room complete with its own restroom and lounge, where private dinner parties are held. It is not rare for a restaurant hall to be the size of quarter of a football field—and this is just on the main floor.

These huge restaurants are always busy, and the dishes can be ordered in advance. In Hangzhou *Lou Wai Lou* (Building Beyond the Building), *Shan Wai Shan* (Mountain Beyond the Mountain), *Waipo Jia* (Grandma’s Kitchen), and (*Lu Cha Canting*) Green Tea Restaurant are my favorite restaurants. All are

huge, with pleasant interiors, good service, and great food, with many specialties. Hangzhou is famous not only historically, but also for its lovely West Lake¹, on which there are multi-storied 'floating restaurants' (figs. 1 and 2). On these 'restaurant ships' customers can enjoy the view of the city-lights at night while leisurely floating on the waves.



(fig. 2) Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. The "floating restaurant" with two floors on the famous West Lake. (photo by I. Horváth)

¹ West Lake has innumerable beautiful legends of which I collected 22. (See TALES OF WEST LAKE. Xiling Yinshe Publishing House, Hangzhou, PRC, 2009.)



(fig. 3) Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. "Floating restaurant" with three floors on the famous Grand Canal. (photo by I. Horváth)

Chinese people are very sociable and rarely eat alone. Consequently, restaurants have only one or two tables for two, and most tables are rather big, usually round, seating between 6-12 people (figs. 3 and 4).



(fig. 4) A Chinese restaurant in a hotel with tables seating 10 people. (photo by I. Horváth)



(fig. 5) Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. Graduate students of Hangzhou Normal University celebrating their MA degrees in Music Education (2010). There are ten diners at this round table. (photo by I. Horváth)

The table size varies in Chinese restaurants in the west, since Chinese restaurant owners have adapted themselves to the common western customs of couples eating alone. Formal Chinese dinner parties, however, take place mostly in restaurants, often in their private rooms, and rarely at anyone's home. Of course, some family celebrations are exceptions. Yet, because even today most homes are too small for a party of 10-12 diners, birthdays, New Year celebrations, and spring and autumn festivals are most conveniently celebrated by the extended family in a private dining room in a restaurant. Families can number anywhere between four to as many as fifty, depending on the occasion.

Confucius and Laozi at a formal dinner

Westerners have very limited knowledge about China. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which are the distance between China and most western countries, the Chinese language, and the fact that until about twenty-five years ago, the country was rather inaccessible to the rest of the world. That said, it is an understatement that Chinese society is subtle and not easy to understand for a westerner. Jacques Martin in his book, *When China Rules the World* points out features of Chinese society which are diametrically the opposite to those in the west. Martin probably gives one of the best descriptions of Chinese culture written by a western expert (Martin: 2012). Among other things, he clearly points out the tremendous influence that people's attitude toward history and ancient philosophy had on Chinese society (Martin: 2012; 247-248). The book is a milestone toward westerners' better understanding of China.

Having said the above, we can safely say that as far as China is concerned, "what you see is not what you think you saw" — as it were. Also, at this point it is a perfectly appropriate question to ask, "Just what do the two great Chinese philosophers, Confucius and Laozi, have to do with formal Chinese dinners?" Actually, the two philosophies— Confucianism and Daoism have permeated the entire social fabric of Chinese society and that includes the Chinese concept of food and eating etiquette. Not only is the formal dinner a social event, it is also an event that takes place according to norms and beliefs which are the basis of these two philosophies. Yet, at first glance these are not obvious, least of all to a foreigner. Only after careful observation and not a little bit of studying, can we get an inkling of what takes place at a dinner party, but most importantly -- why.

The most important function of any, but mostly of a formal dinner party is to establish and maintain *guanxi*, (pronounced *gwen-shi*), between a host and an honored guest. It is an intricate, though informal system of relationships based on the indispensable and understood principle of reciprocity. *Guanxi* lasts a lifetime. Confucius has this to say:

Tse Kung asked, saying, 'is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life? The master said, 'is not RECIPROCITY (caps in original text) such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others (Analects 15.23.)



(fig. 7) Portrait of Confucius, 19th c. rubbing after the work of Wu Daoxian.
(<http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/132184/Confucius> accessed April 22, 2015)

Not only is *guanxi* a basic value in Chinese society, but it is also conducted properly, according to Confucian teachings. Chinese today are not always conscious of the depth of influence of Confucius, save for those who are better educated, yet they all follow these customs. Chinese respect history, tried-and-true tradition, and generally subscribe to maintaining peaceful relationships. According to Confucius, proper behavior among people leads to a harmonious society (Analects 6.27). It is also the way of the Dao, the main theme of the Dao De Jing -- a small but influential book by Laozi -- to live in balance and harmony with everything and everybody.



(Fig. 6) Portrait of Laozi, the author of the Dao De Jing. Stone statue from the Huaqing Palace of the Tang dynasty (ca. 680-709). (photo from Xian Museum by I. Horváth)

Proper behavior results in establishing good relationship with everybody we meet. This unsaid rule of behavior is the basis of *guanxi*. In other words, thoughtfulness and unselfishness allows one to discover and provide the need of another.

Having many friends is extremely important in Chinese society. An extended network of family, friends, and acquaintances is the insurance of reciprocal benefits, and often survival. I call this 'doing things in committee.' This results in making decisions in groups, most often, though not exclusively, while sharing a meal. In other words, decisions are made by first "discussing" an issue with family and those members of *guanxi* who may be able to help in a particular situation. In China the idea of "two heads are better than one" is truly practiced and has been expanded to "the more heads the better." It is understood that the *guanxi* will try hard to find a solution to a person's problem. This concept is ingrained in every person from babyhood.

And this brings us to the formal dinner parties. Big dinners are generally given by a host of whom help is required. The one who has a need is the guest of honor ² but has an elevated social status that gives the host 'face.' The other guests are the *guanxi* and friends of the host, and depending on the particular situation, it could include anyone from the director of a museum to the driver of the company car. Each of the other attendees are carefully chosen because they will be directly or indirectly involved with fulfilling the need of the guest of honor. In turn, the guest of honor will become the member of the *guanxi* of those attending -- including the chauffeur. These reciprocal relationships are powerful, all pervasive, and extremely effective channels through which business and social affairs have been conducted in China since time immemorial. It is rarely talked about, but this well-oiled mechanism is well understood and continuously employed. Dinner parties are especially well suited to keep this network running smoothly.

I remember one of the first big dinner parties I attended in 1995 in Hailar, Inner Mongolia, where my husband and I were invited to give lectures by the Hailar Culture Bureau. Our host, Mr. Chen, who at that time was the head of the Culture Bureau's history department, was the host, and he arranged the

² A dinner party can be given by a host who needs a specific help, but this paper will deal with the guest of honor who is given help by the host.

dinner to welcome us. About 10 people sat around the big round table, and the dinner lasted for about three hours.

At that time I did not know why there were so many guests. Only afterwards did I discover that the other guests invited by our host were a number of his *guanxi* and included writers, poets, journalists, students, and chauffeurs, who came to 'look at' us, discover who we were, and what we were going to lecture about. The next day these guests — having noted our expertise and status — brought others — their *guanxi* — to the lectures. Other guests at the table were other friends, one of whom knew the best watermelon vendor for the picnic the following day, the man who was to lend the minibus to take the group on the picnic, and another who knew the best way to reach the immense Mongolian grassland's most scenic areas where the picnic was to be held. They were all there to 'take care of' us, the guests of honor, to the best of their ability. It was Mr. Chen's job as host to arrange the lectures, the hotel, the travel, and the picnic by calling on his *guanxi*.

In 2013 I wanted to visit Anyang, the capital city of the ancient Shang Dynasty (1675-1050 BC), its archeological sites and the museums, all of which are important sources for my research. When we arrived, our host, Mr. Zhang, the father of my husband's student, arranged a welcome dinner party for us. We were the guests of honor. That evening Mr. Zhang's *guanxi* included his three brothers-in-law and his sister-in-law (fig. 8). The brothers-in-law represented Mr. Zhang's wife who was unable to attend, the dinner, though she came to meet us the next day.



(fig. 8) Anyang, Henan province. Start of a formal dinner party. From left to right: the author; Mr. Zhang, the chief of police of Anyang city; his three brothers-in-law; Mr. Zhang's sister-in-law. Notice the glass turntable at the center with four cold dishes. (photo Y. Du)

When Mr. Zhang, who is the chief of police in Anyang, and we arrived at the restaurant, we were led to a small private dining room and waited until the other guests arrived. In a big private dining rooms for a big party, seats along the wall are provided for chatting or waiting until all the guests arrive. No one sits down until the host points out the seat for each guest. The arrangement is according to tradition and is the privilege of the host. For any guest to choose his or her own seat at the table, even if tired,

without the invitation of the host would be very impolite. Politeness and consideration for others is a Confucian value of proper behavior (Analects 7.17).

The guests of honor — in this case my husband and I -- always sit facing the entrance — the place of honor -- and the host often sits opposite. The host chooses to sit close to the door, so as to manage the smooth arrival of the courses, and ensure that all the food is the best quality. This shows his respect for the guest of honor. If the host also has a high social status (in this case Mr. Zhang who is a local government official), he can sit next to the guest of honor. To the right and left from the host are the more important (honored) guest, that is, those from his *quanxi* who have important social status, or may have major roles in taking care of the needs for the guest(s) of honor. In a big dinner party of ten guests to a table, those farthest from the host are the guests who have least contact or less important roles in relation to the guest of honor.

The procedure of the seating always goes with a little deferential ceremony when the guest of honor profusely thanks the host for his kindness, and demurs to sit at the place of honor. However, eventually he accepts and only then will the host continue to appoint the seats of the other guests. Ritual, according to Confucian ethics, and humility according to Daoist philosophy, is in operation here.

Each person must be treated publicly according to his/her social station, which is actually the acknowledgement of his achievements. Though today Chinese society is focused more on socially elevating workers and farmers for their contributions, in many respects learning and knowledge have remained paramount values since the times of Confucius (Analects 7. 21). Because we were academics, the host showed us extra respect by ordering the most famous and expensive local dishes.

Although western Communism has been embraced by China in the past sixty years, even today, Confucius is not only honored (and worshipped, see fig.11) as a philosopher, but also as a great teacher and advocate for education. Long ignored officially, today, he has been 'rehabilitated' for his views regarding knowledge and learning. This value is reflected in his Analects (Analects 2.15):

*The Master said, 'Learning without thought is labor lost;
Thought without learning is perilous.'*

'He was the first teacher in ancient China who accepted students from every walks of life, without social rank. This was an unusual practice, since in his time only nobles and royalty were entitled to education:

The Master said, 'From the man bringing his bundle of dried flesh for my teaching upwards, I have never refused instruction to any one.' (Analects 7.7)

and,

The Master said, 'In teaching there should be no distinction of classes.' (Analects 15-38)

The only requirement was that the student show a genuine desire to learn:

The Master said, 'I do not open up the truth to one who is not eager to get knowledge, nor help out any one who is not anxious to explain himself. When I have presented one corner of a subject to any one, and he cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat my lesson.' (Analects 7.8)

The influence of Confucius on Chinese society cannot be overrated. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that his tomb and the surrounding cemetery where his descendants are buried, as well as the extensive memorial palace. These are locations of pilgrimage for millions of people each year. The extensive cemetery, the palace, and his tomb are in Qufu city, Shandong province (fig. 9).



(fig. 9) Tomb of Confucius. Qufu city, Shandong province. The stele marks the tomb of Confucius with fruit and flowers on the sacrificial altar. (photo I. Horváth)

When I visited the impressive complex in 2011, I witnessed his descendents (78th generation) from Taiwan paying homage to him in an elaborate ceremony, complete with food sacrifices and speeches by senior family members (figs. 10, 11).



(fig. 10) Tomb of Confucius. Qufu city, Shandong province. The tomb of Confucius, with members of his descendents preparing for a ceremony to pay homage. The box contains the fruit sacrifice. (photo I. Horváth)



(fig. 11) Tomb of Confucius. Qufu city, Shandong province (2011). Ceremony held in front of his tomb by Confucius' descendents from Taiwan (men standing on the red carpet). (photo I. Horváth)

At a formal dinner party the hosts of high social standing may delegate the chores of looking after the timely arrival and quality of the food to one of his or her *quanxi* who then sits closest to the entrance of the dining room. In this case, the sister-in-law of Mr. Zhang was appointed to fulfill this position. This delegation of a duty is also a sign to the guest of honor (my husband and me) that the host, Mr. Zhang, has a rather high social standing in society.

All the food was ordered by Mr. Zhang ahead of time, and the cooks and waiters who were to take care of the dinner were standing outside the private dining room. They were all smiling as we filed into the room. This was also a demonstration, that the host is an important customer at the restaurant. The staff knew it, acknowledged it, and was doing their best to make the dinner a success. The staff thus belongs to Mr. Zhang's *quanxi*, and a successful dinner would give him "face" in front of his guests, at the same time ensuring that Mr. Zhang could be counted on for his continued patronage of the restaurant.

In China if more than four people eat together they prefer a round rather than a square table. Dinner parties can have as many as twelve people around a huge round table. The shape of the table is also significant. A round table provides an egalitarian arrangement of diners, and actually ensures that the dishes that are placed in the center on a turntable are equally accessible to all. This is something that cannot be achieved if the table is long. The equal accessibility of all the dishes by all the diners is an important aspect in Chinese society. Food is considered the source of life, which sounds obvious, but nothing is as important in China as the act of eating. In a country where historically famine was by no means a stranger, people learned to appreciate the value of food. They have a certain reverence for it, which for westerners can be a little mystifying.

Since the host chooses whom to invite, he shows his respect for the guests by sharing food with them equally. At the same time, all the guests are face-to-face with each other, and all can take part, or listen to, the conversations. This allows for comfortable flow of information and relationship building. This becomes an 'equal opportunity' dining experience, where the guests have the chance to get to know each other, taking mental notes of each others' character, status, and circumstances for future reference. In other words, building *guanxi*.

The dinner usually begins with a number of cold dishes as small appetizers. Hot dishes follow, and last comes the soup. Chinese usually eat fruit at the end of a meal, and sweet deserts or coffee are not part of dinner. However, beer, wine, liquor, juices and tea flow freely — often all at the same time. Hosts often pour out the first glass of hard liquor and offer it to the guest of honor in the gesture of welcome. When he pours, he usually pours in such a way that the liquid overflows onto the floor or tabletop. This also signifies his largesse, specifically that he is not stingy with expensive liquor, and does not mind wasting some of it. There are several welcoming toasts to the guest of honor by other diners all through dinner. These range from thanking the guest of honor for accepting an invitation or coming for a visit, and invite the guests to return soon. This is no idle talk. If the guest may be ungracious, this invitation will not be voiced.

At an elaborate dinner party the number of courses served can be between twenty to thirty. But the law of Dao rules, which means that there are no set numbers of dishes to be ordered. The number depends on the pocketbook and 'face' of the host. All hosts want to outdo themselves in quality and

generosity. A host can 'lose face' in front of the guests for being stingy if the table does not have enough food on it. Stinginess would also mean, by Confucian standards, the lack of respect and improper behavior toward the guest, losing face, perpetrating ill will, which is to be avoided at all cost. Ill will is not a way to build good *guanxi*, and would place harmonious situations in jeopardy.

At a formal dinner party it would be a great faux pas to order food only for oneself separately. The ordering is done by the host ahead of time. Depending on the occasion and if the host knows the guests, he sometimes asks the guests what their preference or favorite dishes are so he can order them. Though the rules of Confucianism are always in operation, the Chinese are grand masters of flexibility and 'thinking on their feet,' elegantly adjusting to situations. Going with the flow is Daoism in practice:

*What is and what is not give birth to one another,
What is difficult and what is easy complete one another,
Long and short complement one another,
High and low incline towards one another,
Note and noise harmonize with one another,
Before and after follow one another (Eno: Chapter 2).*

In Anyang, Mr. Zhang, our host, could not order according to our taste since he had never met us, and as we travelled all day from Hangzhou to Anyang, he wanted to show extra thoughtfulness with a readily prepared, sumptuous dinner of choice delicacies and locally famous northern dishes. I must say that they were some of the best food I have ever tasted.

The dishes were placed in the center of the table for all to partake, and throughout dinner the waiters continually removed the empty dishes replacing them with new courses. As the dishes arrived, they were placed in front of us, as the guest of honor, and we were expected to be first to eat from them before the others touched the foods. All throughout the dinner the host paid close attention to make sure the new dishes are always placed first in front of the guests of honor.

I remember a Chinese friend recalling an incident with a western European visitor who clearly was not aware of her role as a guest of honor. At dinner, as the dishes arrived in front of her, she said, "Ah, these are all for me!" and did not share them with the others around the table. The Chinese, being polite, did not say anything, but were shocked, and quietly ordered more food.

Mr. Zhang, wanting to be a gracious host, and demonstrating his gesture of respect, generosity, and taste, described each dish as to its fame, rarity, and preparation. A man's status can be enhanced by his knowledge of good cuisine. Connoisseurship has always been highly respected in China, as we noted above in the case of Yi Yin. Though for some dishes there is a common big spoon or ladle for soups and sauces, each guest uses his own chopstick to pick a mouthful of food from the common plate and place it on the small plate in front of him. At this point, we must examine the role of the chopstick.

Chopsticks are used not only in China but also in Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia as well as in Mongolia and Tibet. These are all societies that have been influenced to some extent by Confucianism

and Daoism. The flag of Korea clearly shows this connection. The Daoist yin-yang sign is in the center of the flag, surrounded by the four black *bagua* (eight symbols of Taoist cosmology) of the *Yijing* (Book of Changes) (fig. 12).



(fig. 12) Flag of South Korea, with the center blue-red Daoist *yin-yang* symbol and the black *bagua*.

The chopstick, which many westerners consider a ‘primitive eating tool,’ is by no means primitive. It was already in use 5000 years ago, and Shang emperors ordered theirs to be made from ivory. Confucius also preferred chopsticks to knives at table (Needham: 2000; 104). It is a utensil thoughtfully put in the service of carefully developed eating ethics, following Confucian propriety, in this case politeness and consideration for others. The chopstick ensures that any one diner can, and should, take only one mouthful of food at one time. This way no one can grab all the most expensive, or his favorite delicacies for himself, leaving nothing for the others around the table. Of course, throughout the meal, everybody can take food repeatedly with his chopstick from the common dishes. Guests also demonstrate politeness by making sure to taste all the delicacies while moving the turntable around slowly, so all can reach all the plates. The chopstick therefore is also the symbol of good fellowship, sharing, demonstrating polite behavior of self-denial, temperance, and thoughtfulness for others.

At the many dinner parties my husband and I attended, sometimes the host or his wife would take choice morsels with their chopstick and place them on my plate. With this gesture they showed their respect and largesse. However, by giving me only one morsel she also demonstrated to the others that though she wanted to favor me with her attention, it does not mean the other guests have to go without. The use of the round table, the commonly available dishes placed in the center on a turntable, and the use of chopsticks all demonstrate the Chinese idea of good will and sharing — and especially sharing food, the source of life -- as a vehicle of polite harmonious behavior. People who do not share or offer food to friends are considered to be supremely impolite, stingy, selfish, and thoughtless. Indeed, I have never met such a Chinese person.

It is quite a job to be a good host. Mr. Zhang, while having a lively conversation and eating himself, was paying close attention to what the guests of honor were eating. He noticed if I took more than once from a dish, and asked if I would like him to order more. At another dinner party, I was amazed to see one of my favorite dishes on the table. As I savored the dish, the host said he remembered that some months earlier I had praised this dish, and this time he ordered it especially for me. This was a demonstration of the epitome of thoughtfulness.

Proper Confucian behavior is also expected from the guest of honor who has now become a part of the host's *guanxi*. Actually, they become each other's *guanxi*. A guest shows proper behavior by not usurping the role of the host. As mentioned above, seating, ordering, and managing the details of the dishes are the prerogative of the host. A polite guest does not ask for special drinks, or dishes, but waits until his host will notice if his wineglass is empty and have it refilled.

A polite guest does not complain about the food, but takes a bit of every dish on the table, even if he might not like it. A guest who would make demands or orders extra food for himself from the waiter risks losing his own face and insulting the host. A properly behaved guest also praises the dishes, inquires about the preparation and history of special foods, and repeatedly thanks the host for his kindness and attention by saying "Ah, *hen mafan ni!!* (Oh, you went through so much trouble!). The guest of honor also has the opportunity to evaluate the behavior of the host and knows that they are now members of their mutual *guanxi*.

After all this, it is probably needless to say that if an invitation is made for a formal dinner party, the host foots the bill. Often the host already paid the bill in advance, and if the dinner is of especially high quality the guests take due notice and will esteem him for his generosity. It would be considered an insult to him if the guest of honor offered to pay for the dinner, and even more of an insult if the guest were to offer to pay for his own share only.

If someone wants the help from one of his *guanxi*, with whom he has not had contact for a long time, he generally offers a gift. The message is "I am offering you something for the trouble of asking you for help." It is not a bribe, since the help given is often substantial and much more in value than the initial 'offering.'

Friends who ask for his opinion often visit my husband, an expert in music. Years ago one friend we have not seen for a long time invited us to an elaborate dinner party, and gave us some expensive tea and to me a pearl necklace. I later discovered that the friend wanted my husband to listen to his twelve year old daughter play the *pipa*, an ancient stringed instrument, and give his opinion whether the girl had talent or not. The father's spending money on her music education, and pushing her to apply to the music high school attached to the prestigious China Conservatory of Music in Beijing, depended on my husband's evaluation. After listening to her, my husband told him that she was very talented and if she should apply, she would be accepted. That is what happened, and four years later she auditioned and was accepted to the China Conservatory of Music.

Today she is one of the best *pipa* players in China and is a professor at the China Conservatory of Music. The family considers my husband's evaluation of her abilities a critical turning point in the career of their daughter. Thus, whenever they discover we are in Beijing, they roll out the red carpet, so to speak.

While a dinner party seems like a casual affair — people rarely dress up for the occasion — it is governed by old tried-and-true customs that have been in practice for thousands of years. According to Dao and Confucius one must always keep in mind that in any human interaction a win-win solution should be the aim. Favors and help are first given, and at some time in the future the debt can be called in.

The network of *guanxi* is alive and well in China, and is not in danger of being dismantled any time soon. The system works very well. The building of these lifelong relationships is continuous and also takes place during times of sharing food together.

Formal dinners have time-honored rituals that establish status, familiarity, new *guanxi*, and solidify old connections between the host and his guests, as well as among the guests themselves. *Guanxi* would not work if the concepts of Laozi and Confucius had not been absorbed -- but most essentially subscribed to and practiced -- in Chinese society, focusing on benevolence and reciprocity in order to get on in life and maintain a harmonious existence. The 81st Chapter of the Dao De Jing eloquently illustrates the underlying value of *guanxi*, which is the main, though by no means the only aim of the formal Chinese dinners:

Sages do not accumulate;
The more they assist others, the more they possess,
The more they give to others, the more they gain (Lin: 2007).

References:

- ✚ Eno, R. (2010). *Early Chinese Thought. The Dao de jing*. Indiana University, <http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Daodejing.pdf> accessed: April 24, 2015)
- ✚ Jacques, Martin. (2012). *When China Rules the World*. Second edition, Penguin Books, UK.
- ✚ Lao-tzu. (1891). *Tao Te Ching* (translated by J. Legge) Sacred Books of the East, Vol. 39. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/taote.htm> accessed: April 23, 2015)
- ✚ Legge, James. (1883). *Chinese Classics. Part One, Confucius*. [Analects] New York, John. B. Alden Publishers.
- ✚ Lin, Derek. (2006). *Tao Te Ching: Annotated & Explained*, Sky Light Paths, Vermont.
- ✚ Needham, Joseph. (2000). *Science and Civilization in China: Volume 6, Biology and Biological Technology Part 5, Fermentations and Food Science*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- ✚ Sima, Qian. (2000). *Shiji*. Zhejiang Classics Publishing House. Hangzhou, Vol. I. p. 11.

