The best and worst of Chinese service

26 Jan 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

At **Pearl Liang**, in the lower concourse of Paddington Central, west London, the Chinese waiter could not have been friendlier as he took our order for salt and pepper bean curd, Shanghai dumplings, soft shell crab and stewed pork belly, among other dishes, without pen and paper. He then repeated these back to us correctly before asking which size of glass we wanted our Pinot Noir to be served in. (Photo courtesy of the restaurant's website.)

The service was similarly engaging at **Alisan**, the renowned dim sum restaurant that sits in a somewhat incongruous setting within 300 metres of Wembley Stadium. I can vouch, from bitter experience, that the food can be far more exciting than the football. And particularly so before an afternoon match, when sea bass congee, scallops and yam croquettes, pak choy buns, prawn and bean curd cheung fun and, for those who can take the heat, diced tripe with chili are just a small selection of what's on offer.

This style contrasted markedly with what we have come to accept as the norm in many Chinese restaurants, and which we experienced the other day at the **Princess Garden**, close to Selfridges. We walked past an unmanned reception desk, and then had our enquiry - addressed to the man behind the empty bar - met by a shrug of the shoulders and a tilt of the head towards the restaurant. There we stood for several minutes as the waiting staff tried to look through us before they announced that it would be '15-20 minutes' before they could seat us. We decided not to put them to the bother.

These contrasting styles of service can happen in any restaurant anywhere but I believe they do tend to be more extreme in Chinese restaurants. Ever since 1976, when I was first introduced to the most authentic Chinese food in Taipei, I have always had the impression that there are as many differing approaches to service in Chinese restaurants as there are different dim sum dishes on their menu.

To discover why, I retraced the steps of my original Asian sortie 36 years ago to Hong Kong, taking in Shanghai and Beijing and returning to London. This time, however, only by email and phone.

Paulo Pong, wine merchant turned restaurateur in Hong Kong with whom I have shared several bowls of beef noodles at **Kau Kee**, Central, each well prepared and equally brusquely served, ventured two explanations.

The first was that, as in the UK until recently, a waiter's profession has never been highly respected, and so, lacking respect, Chinese waiters have chosen in turn not to respect their diners. And although service standards have generally improved over the years, there never seems to be any guarantee as to how one will be treated. In Beijing I have been made extremely welcome despite being the only Englishman among a table of Americans and been on the sharp end of things alongside two fluent Mandarin speakers.

He believes that the situation is gradually improving because of the impact of bloggers, who are, certainly in Hong Kong and Singapore in my opinion, more obsessed with food than anywhere else in the world. And with the increasing number of new restaurant openings, particularly at the more expensive end, he believes that this vital issue of customer service is finally being addressed.

For Michael Peng, who patrols the narrow passageway of his family's excellent **Hunan** restaurant in Pimlico, London, an initial part of the problem is that Chinese is a far more direct language than English. He is constantly reminding his staff to add a thank you, smile or make eye contact to ensure that directness is never misinterpreted as rudeness.

And he also believes that even the most caring Chinese restaurateur starts with a professional disadvantage in that they want to hire principally Chinese staff but this means that they must have residence permits. The only option in many cases is to hire Chinese overseas students, young and inexperienced and most with no real desire to be working in restaurants other than to pay the rent.

And while Peng agrees with Pong that Chinese restaurateurs must invest more heavily in training, he also believes that one answer lies in working with a mix of Eastern and Western waiting staff.

Australian restaurateur Michelle Garnaut has followed suit at her restaurants, **M** on the Bund, Shanghai, and **Capital M**,

Beijing, where she is assisted by Espen Harbitz, her Norwegian general manager. The widely travelled Garnaut believes waiting staff in China are as professional and pleasant as anywhere and, with more hospitality schools across the region, this situation will only improve.

Chinese ingredients and techniques have made a significant impact on many Western menus over the past decade. It would be very beneficial if during the auspicious Year of the Dragon a greater Western presence had a similar beneficial effect on the management of Chinese restaurants.

Pearl Liang www.pearlliang.co.uk
Alisan www.alisan.co.uk
Hunan www.hunanlondon.com