

Sensei Says

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While I'm on the subject of writing about the etiquette of eating, I can't neglect to cover an important part of every Asian meal - hot tea. As you might know, there is an art called cha-no-yu devoted entirely to the proper way to make, serve, and drink tea. Americans know this art as the "tea ceremony." I am not suggesting you make it your life's work, but there are a few things that every martial artist should know about the customs surrounding this drink.

It is considered bad luck to pour your own tea, but this superstition applies only to the first time the tea is poured in the cup. After that, it is acceptable to pour your own tea without fear of evil swooping down upon you.

In your enthusiasm to be polite, don't rush to pour the tea for your instructor. The tealeaves need some time to steep or you will just be pouring a serving of hot water into the cup. So, before pouring tea for others, it is acceptable to pour a small amount of tea in your own cup to see if it is the proper color. Do not taste the tea, just study its color to determine if it is dark enough. If you are unsure what is the proper darkness, ask before you pour (the color is different for different types of tea). In most restaurants in America the tea is already brewed before it arrives at the table. You can easily tell by opening the lid and looking to see if there are any tea leaves in the pot. If there are no tealeaves, you can begin pouring right away.

Always pour tea for the most senior member of the group first, continuing in approximate order of seniority based on the convenience of reaching them to pour. Hopefully, when you are finished, someone will save you from a life of misfortune and pour yours for you. Seldom will you be allowed to pour all of the cups for a group. Someone else will undoubtedly insist on taking over the duty. In this instance you should not insist to do the work - remember it is a noble act they are doing. (And fighting over possession of a hot pot of tea just isn't a clever thing to do!) When someone pours your tea they are bestowing good fortune on you. Even your teacher should be allowed to do this task for you with no feelings of guilt on your part. However, this courtesy ends with the pouring of the first cup.

Now the job of the student begins. The teacher's cup should never be empty and should never be allowed to get cold. Keep an eye on the teacher's cup and, without being a nuisance, keep filling the cup before it reaches the halfway mark. The tea will begin to get cold if a long time passes and your teacher has not been sipping. Add a little more to warm it. If you overfill the cup you will be unable to add more later to warm it. Therefore, unless it seems the recipient of your courtesy is extremely thirsty, leave some room in case it is necessary to add a little hot tea later.

Of course, none of this is easy if you are not sitting in a convenient location. Before choosing the seating arrangement you should consider who will take care of the teacher (or honored guest) during the meal. If you are unable to sit close by, try your best to make sure a student knowledgeable in etiquette is sitting near the teacher. If not, a little pre-meal coaching is in order.

When a person does not want any more tea poured for them they might put a hand over their cup. It is the most proper of etiquette to stop immediately and not pour hot tea all over their hand! Sometimes a person will turn the cup upside down when they have finished - to make sure no more tea is poured. It is also best not to attempt to fill an overturned cup!

When pouring tea, be sure to use one hand to hold the teapot and the other to hold the lid on.

It is your choice whether to see the cup as half empty or half full; but, in Asia, the serving of tea is steeped in tradition and getting a handle on the etiquette will help you simmer down, enjoy the meal, and stay out of hot water.

- Alan Best