

Dim Sum? More Like Git Sum!

By Ross Cheung

Background. *Dim Sum* is a style of dining, predominantly but not exclusively Cantonese (Southern Chinese) in which a group of people dine on shared bite-sized dishes served in steamers or small plates. It can also be called *Yum Cha*, or literally “drinking tea”, which signifies the importance of tea in this meal; these two terms *Yum Cha* and *Dim Sum* are often used interchangeably. It’s typically served for lunch or brunch though in modern times it has become more common to see it for dinner.

Because of the cultural significance of *Dim Sum* to Cantonese families, it’s often an occasion for larger social and family gatherings. On weekends around brunch or lunch times, one can typically find *Dim Sum* restaurants packed with large groups of friends or families, and a *Dim Sum* restaurant that isn’t packed on weekends is probably a fake restaurant for tourists or *Gwai Loh* anyways.

In this larp, you play an extended family who have met to partake of this ritual. You’ll work out your interpersonal rivalries and competitions to one-up each other, while at the same time navigating the complex set of social etiquette rules that have cropped up around *Dim Sum*, for the worst thing that could happen is that you can shame yourself and your family, and then lose face.

Number of Players: The minimum number of players is 2, while the maximum is the number of people that can safely be squeezed around a single table at a *Dim Sum* restaurant. For the largest *Dim Sum* restaurants I’ve seen as many as 12-20 people be seated around a circular table with a lazy susan. If you have more players than that, you can workshop the larp together, and be seated at different tables; run a different larp for each specific table.

One player-facilitator should be familiar with this script, and be able to explain it to everyone, and walk everyone through the workshop. After everyone is familiar with the structure of the larp, the player-facilitator can step into character as the larp should run itself.

Location: This larp is designed to be played at an actual *Dim Sum* restaurant with food being served and consumed in real time. This may be difficult for many reasons, such as logistical reasons (e.g. you’re running it in your house or at a con), or geographical reasons (e.g. you don’t live in or near one of the following cities: Hong Kong, Macau, Guangzhou, Vancouver, Toronto, Singapore, Sydney, New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Houston, London, or some other large international city) or player reasons (traditional *Dim Sum* admittedly isn’t very vegetarian friendly). When finding a substitute

venue, the biggest criteria is that there is tea with tea cups, and food that can be shared family style. Food that is served on platters with serving spoons are sufficient.

In that case I recommend the following substitute venues to run this larp:

1. Some other Chinese restaurant that allows food to be served family style. The highly popular Shanghainese-by-way-of-Taiwan dumpling/noodle chain *Din Tai Fung* is one the author has found to be one of the gentlest introductions to Chinese cuisine out there for player bases who are nervous and possess palettes that are very Western-centric.
2. Some “Americanized-Chinese” restaurant. Quite a lot of these were founded by Cantonese immigrants over the past 100 years in eras of greater racism and due to the stigma cast upon it by a majority white population they’ve drastically changed their menu to reflect what they perceive is a western palette, and yet the majority of these still possess to varying degrees something of the same Cantonese tradition that led to Dim Sum.
3. Some other restaurant where the food can be served family style. Though something may be lost in authenticity, the actual type of food being served isn’t strictly speaking needed for the functioning of the larp. Though most western restaurants are individual order restaurants, one can make any of these restaurants family style.
4. Provide your own food and tea. Whether or not you can home-cook food in this style (and if you can, you should definitely choose this option as *Dim Sum* chefs go to school and train for years to make such exquisite *Har Gau* or *Siu Mai*), or you’re running this at a con and are bringing food from outside, remember that the food needs to be shared family style, and there must be tea to be poured in teapots.

If you are waiting in line for the dim sum restaurant, which can take over one hour in a major city, this is a great time to go over the background information, rules, and workshops. Either way, I highly recommend doing all of the background and workshops before sitting down, and designating actual “play” time to begin when one sits down at the table to eat, and end when the players get up to leave. Workshop can be done outside in the parking lot or nearby, possibly at a nearby Boba tea shop.

The structure of the larp

Go over the background cultural information with the players, either reading it aloud or having the players read a paragraph each. Have the players choose characters archetypes and fill in the required details, and build relationships. Review the “List of Do’s and Do Not’s” as much as is needed; don’t sweat it if some of the rules are forgotten by some people. Do the Passive-Aggressive Insult workshop.

Actual play begins when the players sit down to *Dim Sum*, and ends when the bill has been successfully played. There is no formal debrief listed in this script, but I highly encourage an informal wrap up and debrief, either at the table after the bill is paid, outside of the restaurant or venue, or somewhere else (like a nearby Boba Tea shop).

Setup

Player calibration: As a group, decide on the following matters:

The polite fight: Traditionally *Dim Sum* ends with a ritualized dance/competition to pay for the entire meal. Whoever wins the fight to pay for the entire meal accomplishes two important feats: they gain great face by doing an act of complete generosity to everyone else, while at the same time showing their wealth. In practice, having a player actually pick up the tab may be inconsiderate based on players actual means of paying for the bill.

My recommendation is that you establish as a group that whoever in-character picks up the bill and wins the “polite fight”, afterwards during debrief meet as players and sort it out so that each participant pays their share (in American parlance, “going Dutch”). There's nothing stopping the players, if everyone consents, to play it straight and have whoever grabs the bill at the end to actually pay the bill.

Subject matters to opt out of: Go around and ask if there are subject material anyone doesn't wish to appear in the larp. For example, death of a family member, homophobia, racism, sexism, bullying, etc. Agree as a group to steer away from these subject matters in the actual play of the larp. Yes, this means that if the players are not comfortable with sexism, then that aspect of the Confucian Social Hierarchy will be ignored.

Other safety techniques: For example, cut and break, OK Check-in. It is to the discretion of the facilitator whether this is needed; strictly speaking this larp isn't designed to evoke intense play. However, the addition of rules like the OK Check-in and cut and break, even if they're never used, tend to lead to less breaking of character on the part of the players (see: <https://larpwright.efatland.com/?p=339>).

Background Cultural Setting Information

Go over these with the players.

Status (alternatively, **Face**): You are overly concerned with these two concepts. You gain status by generally making yourself look good (as determined by your archetype) and by following the list of “Do's” on the “List of Dim Sum Do's and Do Not's”. You lose status by doing things on the list of “Do Not's”, and by generally being made to look bad by others. People with higher status are able to win disputes and generally lord over people with lower status.

Status in this larp will be measured in a relative sense and otherwise upheld by the honor system; if you feel like you are gaining status, behave accordingly. If you feel like you are losing status, act deferential to people who are of a higher status.

In general, approach this with a soft “Play to Lose” mentality; your characters obviously want to gain status, and the larp is designed to incentivize this play, but you as players may find more dramatic play if

you allow yourself to lose status. In other words, let your characters try to win, but accept and welcome failure and loss of status.

[Optional variant: If you want to play a more “Play to Win” version at the cost of more bookkeeping, go ahead and actually keep track of status as if you were collecting points. Have some system of gaining objects as you gain status by collecting an object to keep score and more objectively determine who is of a higher or lower status. For example, those salted peanuts that are used as appetizers, or marbles or gaming tokens you brought with you ahead of time, work great for this purpose.]

Traditional Versus Modern: Human beings may have an innate tendency to follow tradition, but things change over time. This is especially true today where great changes in social forces, economic mobility, and modern liberal ideas about equality come into contact with existing thought. Thus, though rules listed in this section seem set in stone, some people have a greater ability to bend or even break the rules, than others.

Anyone who chooses the Elder or Real Adult archetypes must choose to follow the Confucian Social Hierarchy and the rules of Dim Sum to the letter. Anyone who chooses the Child Archetype can choose to ignore any of the following written social rules without consequence to their overall status. Note that this does not make them immune to receiving verbal criticism for breaking social rules.

Confucian Social Hierarchy: A long time ago, a bunch of Chinese people stabbed each other for several centuries and in the end the ones still standing decided to adopt the philosophy of the respected thinker Confucius. Thus, despite thousands of years of social and political change, and a mistranslation by some Jesuit priests, Confucianism is still one of the prevalent Chinese cultural forces today. This means many things, but one big value is the idea of filial piety, or “孝”, pronounced *Xiao* in Mandarin, or *Haau* in Cantonese.

What this means is that there’s a very strong codified social hierarchy that suggests a number of relationships about who should give deference to and otherwise obey others. These include:

- *Parents over children* - Children are expected to show respect and to parents and grandparents.
- *Husband over Wife* - the relationship that leads to the most charges of sexism, and the one that most clashes with younger modern generations awash with ideas of equality and feminism, and increasing education levels and upward economic mobility of younger generations.
- *Elder over younger* - When all else fails, whoever is older has social status relative to whoever is younger. Typically this is done by age in years, but also in terms of generation, which occasionally leads to confusion about who takes precedence. Note that being brother or sister does not mean equality; elder brothers are above younger brothers on this hierarchy.

Benevolence/selflessness: In addition, traditionally the needs of the individual are secondary to that of the group as a whole. This is in contrast with American culture that is highly individualistic. If you’re spending too much time thinking of “me”, think instead of what would benefit the group as a whole.

The Do's and Do Not's of Dim Sum: As *Dim Sum* has become a social custom with such an extended history, an extensive list of social customs have sprung up. Doing things on the “Do” list will gain you status and the admiration of people around you. Doing things on the “Do Not” list will lose you status and earn you the silent judgement of your peers.

Go over this before sitting down; feel free to review it as much as necessary.

Do:

- Let people above you on the Confucian hierarchy take the first bite, before you.
- Pour your neighbors tea before pouring yourself tea.
- Serve other people food. Don't ask, put food on their plate. You're not forcing food upon them, you're being generous.
- Make sure other people have a larger share of the food than you have had.
- Use chopsticks to pick up everything, and serve yourself food off the main platters.
- Order food for other people. Even if it's secretly for yourself, you can pass it off as ordering for other people
- Pay for everyone else at the table, and the end of the meal.

Do Not:

- Have an angry outburst. Losing your cool results in loss of face and everyone silently judging you.
- Serve yourself tea or food, before or without serving your neighbors.
- Allow yourself to be served food by your neighbor. However if someone beats you to this, smile graciously and accept it.
- Eat the first bite of food before someone higher up on the social hierarchy does.
- Take the last piece of a *Dim Sum* platter for yourself.
- Let someone else pay for you, thereby depriving you of the right to get the check and pay for everyone.
- Order food for yourself. Don't be selfish!
- Spill anything or drop anything you're holding with chopsticks (it's a sign of weakness)
- Use a fork (it's another sign of weakness)
- Drink anything besides tea. Soda or water are signs of weakness.

Characters

Pick a generational archetype. There can be at most one elder, perhaps two for a sufficiently large group. Try to have roughly even numbers of the other categories. The Elder is great for whoever doesn't want to worry about hierarchy as you're always on top. The Children is great for whoever doesn't want to worry about the list of “Do's and Don'ts” as you can generally ignore rules.

Fill in the details:

- Determine each character's relationship to each other. It should be one of the following categories: grandparent, parent, friend, spouse, child, sibling, aunt, or uncle
- Choose a name. If you don't know Cantonese don't try to make one up; many, many people choose a westernized name like "Adam" or "Judy".
- Choose at least one flaw or secret that would cause a loss of status (e.g. you're getting divorced, are single, became an artist, got an A- on an exam, etc). Feel free to come up with more than one, if you especially want to play to lose.
- If you have time, brainstorm how you are doing academically (for the Children and Sort-of-Adults) or professionally (the two Adult archetypes), or in terms of your personal life (are you married or in a relationship).

Make up additional details of your character as needed, either before the larp with available workshop/prep time, or during play as needed, to flesh out your character as a living, flawed human. Go with the general rule, if you make an statement, it's true to your character's interpretation of reality. It doesn't mean other people can't have conflicting interpretations about what is real; in the gossipy world of Dim Sum reality is rather fluid, after all. For example, "I'll get my PhD when I defend my thesis in two months." "You've been saying you're two months from defending your thesis, for the past three years!"

The Archetypes

The Elder: You are anywhere above the age of 55. You may be retired, if that's your type (if the larp is set in Hong Kong the mandatory retirement age is 65). According to Confucian hierarchy, you're at the top of the heap and everyone should be respectful to you. Incidentally you believe fully in the Confucian hierarchy and everything traditional about Chinese culture.

You want to bask in the successes of your extended family; thus the outward appearance of your family is of utmost concern.

Gain status by using your position on the hierarchy to point out the flaws of, and otherwise put down the Adults, and spoil the Children with desserts and food.

The Real Adult: You must be married to be in this category, this is non-negotiable. Typically a bit older and more middle aged, though being married automatically promotes you to this category.

You want your children to get married and pop out babies if they are out of college, and to excel in academics and every other area of life if they are in college or previous. You want to show how devoted you are to the Elder and set an example for your kids.

Gain status when you can point out your professional and personal successes over other adults, and especially point out the successes of your children.

The Sort-of-Adult: Typically some combination of below the age of 35, and not married. You're increasingly under pressure from people older than you to get married and start popping out babies. You may also be prone to doing things like taking pictures of your food, much to the confusion of the older generations.

You want to avoid the ire of the Real Adults and the Elder, but your biggest rivals in this status game are your other Sort-of-Adults who are early in their careers and in the spotlight for personal and career successes. You are not restricted to following the cultural rules, but unlike the Children you will pay the full social price for doing so.

Gain status when you can point out your professional and personal accomplishments, including positioning yourself above the other Sort-of-Adults.

The Child: You're below the age of ~18 or so; whether you're in pre-school or in high school matters little in the eyes of the others.

You want more food, especially dessert. You want to win the approval of your parents, and may choose whether you want to one-up or gain the approval of other children.

Gain status when you get more food, especially desserts, than the other Children. Gain status when you win the approval of any adult or elder.

Additional note on cultural representation

In this larp you are playing people who are Chinese, for whom *Dim Sum* is normal and an accepted part of your life. There are certain types of behavior that you shall not do:

- Referencing Communism. The legacy of the Cold War means that white Americans constantly associate everything Chinese with communism. Remember that the reality is far more complicated than that. Additionally Cantonese people from Hong Kong the fact that your homelands was never communist, as opposed to "mainlanders", is a point of pride, which mainlanders often use to claim elitism.
- Making fun of the food as gross or smelly, or calling it exotic. Cantonese food is normal to you; food shaming is the consequence of more than a century of "Yellow Peril" racism and is propagated by ignorance or xenophobia.
- Going out of your way to order "the grossest body part ever". There is no quicker way to out yourself as a tourist.

If anyone is caught breaking any of these rules in the larp, everyone must stop and point at this person and say the words “*Gwai Loh*”. From then on that person is assumed to be a tourist and thus at the bottom of the status pool.

For more on this, see the following article:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/08/31/childhood-friends-called-my-food-chinese-grossness-how-did-it-become-americas-hottest-food-trend/>

The Passive-Aggressive Insult Workshop

Direct confrontation like angry outbursts or overt insults are discouraged and would result in a massive loss of face. As a group, pair up in groups of 2-3, and practice Passive-Aggressively insulting each other. Switch groups as needed. This is a great workshop to do while waiting in line to get a table. The tone of the insults may vary as to how passive they are; that’s great! Practice adjusting and brainstorming as needed.

Examples: “Your child is such an A- student!”

“Nice dress. I saw one just like it at Sears”

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