

In the middle of the room into which we were shown stood a round table laid with a white cloth and five covers. Each cover consisted of two very small china bowls, one containing a sharp brown sauce, the other crushed nuts in sugared water, a small ornamented four-cornered tin plate with a deep spoon of the same metal lying on it and two ivory sticks. Two of the covers also had a dessert plate each, a knife and two forks, the one European, of iron, the other Chinese, of tin, with two long prongs. The meal usually begins with tea, sweets and fruit, followed by a kind of hors d'oeuvres served upon 12 small plates or in miniature china bowls on feet placed in the form of a square in the centre of the table with an empty space in the middle. The contents of the bowls, served in minute pieces, are tasted in turn, each bowl from which you eat being placed in turn on the empty spot in the centre of the table, after which the bowls remain as a table decoration. The series of dishes starts with swallows' nests, sharks' fins or some other delicacy that is placed in a tin bowl in the space between the other bowls. If the host wishes to show special favour, he helps one of the guests, even on the other side of the broad table, with his two ivory chopsticks, which he handles with surprising skill. This is by no means easy, seeing that most of the dishes are very flabby, often being slippery and oily sharks' fins or sea-snails cut into long, narrow strips. Sometimes the host's dexterity is so great that he will carve, or rather divide, a duck boiled in water or a piece of pork floating in gravy, with his chopsticks. The dishes succeed each other in surprising numbers. A series of 24 dishes floating in gravy is followed by an equally long procession of dishes all roasted in dripping, after which comes a succession of small patties with different kinds of filling and so on. Once or twice during a long dinner there is an interval, the table being cleared of all the bowls, whereupon operations begin all over again. The dinner ends with 12 bowls being set upon the table again in a square with a large bowl of soup-like broth in the middle. A bowl of dry boiled rice is placed before each guest and he can add the broth to suit his taste and flavour it with the contents of the bowls. Judging by the energetic slobbering that ensues and the delight with which the diners pounce upon the contents of the bowls, notwithstanding the dinner they have just devoured, this must be an especially popular Chinese dish or rather the usual Chinese dinner. As soon as the bowls have been emptied, the guests depart immediately. The dishes are served up with good taste and are more remarkable for their artistic appearance than for their flavour. Europeans, who live here, tell me that you get accustomed to this kind of food and can even train yourself to enjoy a Chinese dinner. At first many of the dishes seem repulsive. The sameness in the taste, in particular, is wearisome. Everything has the same flavour of steam and fat. The waiting is exemplary. Dish follows dish without a moment's delay and all are the exact temperature that they should be. A group of ministering spirits surrounds the table, and if the host or a neighbour does not see to it that your plate or wineglass is never empty, there is always an attentive servant at hand. The liquor that is drunk, apart from European wine with which the mandarin often regales a foreigner, is potato spirit, frequently highly spiced, served hot and pleasanter to smell than to taste. If European liquors are served you may be condemned to drink brandy, some horribly sweet liqueur or else warm champagne or other wine all through dinner. From time to time you are handed a towel, wrung out in hot