

# The Differences of Chinese and Western Food Cultures

Xiong Zili

Foreign Language College, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China

**Email address:**

870334842@qq.com

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**Abstract:** Food plays a crucial role in the growth of society and human civilization. It is an essential premise for human existence. However, different states have different food and food habits. That is because they have different cultures, especially food culture. This thesis expounds the differences in terms of food culture between China and western countries. By analyzing these differences, we can improve our ability in cultural communication. Food culture is a special cultural phenomenon. This thesis endeavors to analyze the cultural differences in terms of Chinese and Western food cultures from the perspectives of concept, content, etiquette, and the eating ways of food, and points out that with the development of cross-cultural communication, more communication and interaction will arise between Chinese and Western food cultures and they will develop together.

**Keywords:** Concepts, Contents, Etiquette, Eating Ways of Food Culture, Chinese Food Culture, Western Food Culture

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## 1. Introduction

Culture is a historical representation and it is a part of civilization. This thesis represents the main differences of culture of food among various Chinese and Western food. By contrasting these differences, we can strengthen our ability in communication of culture.

The contact in terms of different countries becomes much closer via the link of global economy. At the same time, the communication of culture grows more crucial in the huge gaps among the cultures of China and the West. The distinctions of cultures grow apparently evident, whereas food cultures among Chinese and Western is an important portion of it. Food is a quite special representation. So the introduction of aspects of food culture takes an important position in cross-communication.

It's known to us that culture varies from a country to a country. This thesis gives importance to the different cultures of food among China and western countries. Food culture in China, mainly involves the culture of food in the Han nationality in this thesis. As we all know, China has 56 ethnic groups, and each of one has its particularly unique food and food habits. The culture of Han nationality is the mainstream in China in terms of reasons of history, politics, and economy. Food culture in western countries, in this thesis, is mainly concerned with the food culture of America because the fact

that its pattern and influence of culture have taken the dominant place in the west, and generally accepted and recognized by world people.

## 2. The Concepts of Food Culture

### 2.1. Formalization and Simplification

There are many fundamental differences concerning the party ideas between China and western countries. Chinese emphasize ostentation of the food when they invite guests to dinner. They need to prepare for at least eight dishes, but those dishes do not include the appetizers, snacks, dessert, and the staple food. Abundant and valuable food can reflect that hospitality of masters, and the amount of the food are more than the host and guests can consume, otherwise it can't show hospitality of host. This phenomenon probably results from the traditional values in China. As a result of the influence of traditional concepts, so that the people in China give more prominence to the quality and quantity of food. And the most typical kind is the "imperial banquet". It is said that the banquet which treats the examiner when they finish the imperial competitive examination. The master is often the highest official of that domain. So the occasion is splendid, and the banquet is extremely luxurious.

In the west, splendid western banquet is usually less than six dishes, and of which just two dishes can be regarded as

food, and the rest is the ornament. At ordinary banquets, the food is simpler. In United States, once in a while, everyone makes contributions to the dinner when they get together. It is named "Potluck", i.e. each one takes one dish, and let everyone share food. Another meeting is called "Party". Host just provide drinks, wine and simple food, for example cheese, French fries and sandwiches. Obviously they regard eating as a chance to exchange something, to renew old friendship and to make new friends in party, of course, it is the place to get information that they are interested in. So the food is vital, but it is not the most important, and it is no need to show off. Western party do not focus on food excessively. But they pay more attention to forms of liberalization and diversification. So host usually create relaxed and harmonious atmosphere, so that guests can enjoy feeling of freedom and joy.

## **2.2. *Quiet-Oriented and Noisy-Oriented Eating Environment***

The eating environment of western dinning is relatively quiet, conversely; the eating environment in China is noisy. As we all know, the westerners tend to be active in common days, but when they sit down to the table and start to cut their own food, they are quiet. However, people in China are opposite. In China, all the people sit around the table and share the meal. The food is not only the object that we can enjoy, but also the inter-media that we can exchange our feelings.

It's known to us that people in buffet, in western countries, are not used to reject the wine and dishes modestly. Therefore, if they feel like something, they may enjoy more. Besides westerners give prominence to individual independence. Nowadays, many westerners, especially, the Americans think smoking or drinking is not a good behavior, so they do not like others smoking and drinking, especially, in their house or dwelling. But in present China, many people not only drink but smoke. It seems that it is an odd phenomenon that social intercourse without smoking or drinking can't function in China. Dinning-table still exists a few not good habits in China, for instance, dead-drunk and smoking. Although they know well these bad manners, they still cannot get rid of them. So these bad habits, listed above, give rise to noisy atmosphere.

## **2.3. *Collectivism and Individualism***

In China, orientation of collectivism can be dated back to old time. As the proverb says, "If he wants to establish himself, he should help others to establish themselves firstly," in which collectivism is represented obviously. People are expected to be complementary and adhere to the group's norms and values. Goals of group of people usually outweigh personal goals, so the basic value, in a sense, is to seek harmony with other people.

This collectivistic orientation also has a major impact on food culture in China. Normally, Chinese would like the tendency of "sharing" when they get together, whether at home or outside. When the dinner gets started, the host as usual shows a menu to guests asking them what do they like

before dishes are ordered. When the dinner is over, guests as usual want to pay the bill unless somebody has claimed early. The "sharing value" manifests almost everywhere from start till the end of the dinner.

However, in western countries, for instance, Britain and America, especially the people from the United States attach more priority to the individualism. They pay emphasis on personal value and dignity, thus, a few people will ask other people's private affairs. The two different value orientations also showed in the food. Chinese dinner usually takes a sharing way. They share food on the table. When the westerners take a party, they emphasize their "own", i.e. everyone eat food in their own plate, so they don't think about the taste of other people's food. Getting to dinners, they just eat their own food, and go Dutch.

# **3. The Contents of Food Culture**

## **3.1. *Exquisiteness and Nutrition***

In China, people attach more priority to pursue the taste than the nutrition of food. They think that the nutrition is less important. The reason why eating is the most important in China is that productivity is not good for many years and people don't have enough food to eat. Besides, people often hold the point that the taste is the most vital among color, aroma and taste. However, a portion of the nutrition may lack when people pursue the taste of food.

People attach more attention to pursue the nutrition than to emphasize the color, aroma or taste of food in western countries. The diet in western countries is a quite rational diet, hence, they put the nutrition to a higher place compared with color, aroma and taste. They view food with a realistic attitude, and emphasize nutrition of food, as a consequence, the pursuit of nutrition grows the highest point in western diet. The key standard in evaluating food is whether nutrition of food is abundant or rich and whether it have the scientific data about components of food. People in western countries often believe that food is just a means of keeping them alive, thus, they pay more priority to nutrition of food. For them, the only thing they concern is the nutrition that must be maintained. So they spend much time paying attention to how much calories, vitamin, should be taken in a day. As for westerners, the taste is minor. If heating up the food will lose a certain nutrition, so the medium food, or raw food is quite appreciated.

## **3.2. *Complicated and Simple Name of Food***

The exchange of culture of food, an important point of international exchange of culture, is related to people's ordinary life between China and the West. The wonderful Chinese cuisine have attracted many a foreigner, and the complex names of dishes which reflect Chinese cuisine culture, at the same time, they are not easy to know what the dish is according to name of food. Many Chinese dishes often involve much historically cultural information. Such as "Dong Po Pork", it's named by a famous writer Su Dongpo. And "Kung Bao Chicken", the dish is made by a particular recipe from an official, because official

position of the official named “Kung Bao”. Some of the dishes related to history, such as “Farewell My Concubine,” it is the history about Xiang Yu, the king of the West Chu and his lover Yu Ji. And Fotiaoqiang refers to the smell of this dish that make monks spring out of the wall.

In contrast, the names of the Western food are much more simple, and it is usually clear when people see them at first sight. For instance, the worldwide KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) restaurant, from the name of KFC, we know it is a restaurant about chicken. And the food, such as Fried chicken leg, spicy chicken wings, French fries, and burgers. Some dishes appeared in other western restaurants such as Italian noodles and pizza, and toasted steaks, fruit salad are the same as that. To Chinese, it seems that it will reduce the application of culture, but it conforms to the taste of Westerners. And it corresponds to the fast-paced work and life of the Westerners, simplifying the process of eating and drinking.

### 3.3. Diversity and Singleness

Food culture in China is probably much older than the food cultures in other countries in the world. Few cultures are the same as culture in China. The most typical example is the manner of greeting used among people in China. When they meet each other, they always say: “Have you eaten food”. This greeting plays an important role in people’s daily life that it, inevitably, becomes a way to show off because of face (or “mianzi” in China). So the extravagance and exquisiteness are the major features in Chinese food.

“Face” in China concerns the dignity and respect from others. Losing one’s “face” may hurt and injure one’s self-respect directly. The feast is also influenced by the system of “face”. It is no longer occasion just for gathering or eating in society, but to some extent, it’s a great chance to show off influence and earn dignity for the host. The more abundant or rich food is, the more self-regard the host owns; the more dishes in a feast, the more heart-warmed hospitality can be shown, and the more “face” host can get. In this sense, official banquets in China have one thing in common: there should be enough food on the table. Otherwise the host will be viewed as a not generous person, and he will can’t gain his “face”. So, the system of “face” leads to, explicitly, the diverse food.

However, the quantity of feasts is much less important in western countries. Because the belief in food in western countries, primarily focus on the role as necessity for human survival or a means of communication. For instance, the host usually does not prepare food and drinks except some simple food like cheese, sandwiches, fruits, etc. in a party. For most Westerners, this is a good chance to communicate or strengthen relationships or make new friends. What they primarily care about is the free, harmonious and happy atmosphere, the better freedom and relaxation they can get at the party.

## 4. The Etiquette of Food Culture

### 4.1. Different Tableware

The most apparently evident difference is tableware among

people in China and western countries. Chinese use chopsticks to clip food when they eat food, but westerners like using knife and fork to cut food. Different ways of eating food is not a casual phenomenon. It mainly derives from different cultures. Since old times, Chinese regard farming as their own living way. This is the so-called “he surfaces faces upwards toward the loess back”, and it reflects the cultural phenomenon. In this culture climate, people usually take the grain as staple food.

However, the forefathers of many western countries lived by hunting owing to some factors of ecology and history. So meat was their main source of food and gradually became the staple food. In order to survive in the brutal environment, they tried their best to be masterful at hunting, and used some weapons to kill animals. That leads to the sense of aggressive adventure. Compared with chopsticks, knife and fork represent the violence and cruelty to food. The method of eating in western countries actually shows human’s conquest over nature.

### 4.2. Different Time Value

China is a nation with P-time (Polychronic-time). People in China are often a little later than the time that is scheduled when people take part in some activities. As usually, they would be about half an hour late. So the host will prepare some games, for instance, playing cards or mahjong or chatting as well as tea and various desserts like candy, cakes, peanuts and melon seeds and so on. All these are used for the guests who have arrived on time to kill time. Both the host and guest get accustomed to that and would view the kind of lateness as a normal behavior.

However, this conception changes along cross-cultural communication sometimes. Increasing Chinese people, especially the young people, are slowly affected by the M-time in western people.

Time perspective of the westerners is not the same as Chinese. Western countries are the nations with M-time (Monochronic-time). They believe that time is money. Once they decide the party time, they will go to party punctually. If they are late for a short time as a result of special things, it doesn’t matter. But if they are late for a long time, host will think they give less importance to the party. This behavior not only offend host, but give offense to other guests. In this case, what they should do is make an apology.

### 4.3. Different Seating Arrangements

In China, the seat facing south in a feast is usually viewed as the most essential, whereas the seat facing north is relatively less vital. It is because of traditional Chinese culture. As we all know, China is a nation that it has a long history of more than five thousand years. Whatever the dynasty, the emperor as usual sat facing south during all kinds of ceremonies or discussed state affairs with ministers. At the same time, the ministers were all facing north when they sat with the emperor. Gradually, the word “south” has been upgraded into a position relatively high in mind of Chinese, and it represents the top

authority, power and position. While the position of the “north” is much lower. Therefore, in a formal feast, the seats that face south, undoubtedly, will be kept for those who are respectable or powerful.

However, in western countries, when in seating arrangement, people firstly list the gender of guests, then the seat will be arranged. The rules of seating arrangement are as follows: host and hostess take a seat face to face, and lady of honor have a seat on the right of host as well as the gentleman of honor seating on the right of hostess. There is something we should know are that a couple should seat in the same side but another people should seat between them, and man’s seat is according to status not age. Besides, man should open door for woman and let her go first. Before sitting down, man should pull chair. In a short, lady is first.

## 5. The Eating Ways of Food Culture

### 5.1. The Collective Eating Way

The cultures among China and western countries have great differences. Such as the eating ways of culture of food, China is affected by traditional culture at large. Chinese people usually use round table, sitting circled the table, in order to form an atmosphere of harmony and solidarity, and sharing the abundant and rich food. This is called the collective eating way. The collective eating way in China can make a harmonious atmosphere, and people have a toast and clip dishes between friends and families. From this, we can feel the traditional virtue.

### 5.2. The Individual Eating Way

In the western countries, when inviting guests or eating with families, westerners usually eat their own food, so this is the individual eating way. While westerners get used to the long table, and eat separately. On the face of it, it seems a little cheerless, but, in essence, representing the concept of health and frugality. It not only guarantees the food to be eaten up, but also is good for people’s health.

## 6. Conclusion

As for the differences among Chinese and Western food culture, it’s important for people firstly to know and

understand the concepts of food culture, which include formalization and simplification, quiet-oriented eating environment and noisy-oriented eating environment, and collectivism and individualism. Then it expresses the contents of food culture, which cover exquisiteness and nutrition, complicated and simple name of food, and diversity and singleness. In addition, it expounds the etiquette of food culture concerning different tableware, different time value, and different seating arrangements. Last but not least, mastering the eating ways of food culture is of importance, which contains the collective eating way and the individual eating way.

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