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## Compare Chinese and American Restaurant Dining Culture

### **Introduction**

Humans require nutrients from various foods to survive and remain healthy. The amount of energy required vary based on the race, age, level of physical activity, and sex. People living in different locations take nutrients from various sources of food which makes nutrition a cultural biological process, instead of simple biochemical and psychological process as viewed by many people. Food intakes directly influence the biological function. China has a long history with its food though there have been significant changes. Despite the changes, Chinese have remained proud of their food. There are varied aspects of differences between the Chinese dinner and American dinner including the dinner procedure, the way food is served, instruments used for dinner, and structure of the dishes (Foreigners in China par. 2). Food closely relates to the lives of people and is viewed as an important element of the Chinese culture. While focusing on the food, the Chinese often focus on the colour, smell, taste, and shape. With the eminent reality of diverse cultural backgrounds, it is worth analysing the differences between the Chinese and American eating habits.

### **The Nature of the Chinese and American Food**

China has huge resource base due to its vast land. The Chinese restaurants often find the ingredients within their realms. The Chinese chef often use many ingredients to cook, and, in some cases, they use flowers and insects. In this situation, it is the responsibility of the chefs to collect and deal with the materials they need for food preparation. Most ingredients in various menus need special measures to be used in cooking. So, the Chinese restaurants often

use the fine motor skills, though the hands give better measurement than machines. In case the chef may desire cook a wonderful meal in the Chinese restaurants, the best method is to focus on the steps of the traditional chefs: working by their hands. In the American restaurants, the chefs prefer using modernistic measures as they use machines to cook common material proceeds as Foreigners in China (par. 3) opines. Variations in the materials always result in different cooking methods since the Chinese chefs can decoct, fry, stew, and steam the materials in their possession. In addition, they can cook similar foods in different ways. Most Chinese restaurants often try to make the best cuisines to attract more customers. In addition, presentation on the plate is an indispensable issue for the Chinese customers. Therefore, chefs often use their imaginations in making the cuisines look like what it is and the painting. One of the examples is congee with shredded calamari which is placed in a little boat plate. Chinese cuisines also have special names. On the other hand, the Americans also cook earnestly and fry all the way though it does not match that of the Chinese's restaurants. Even though the presentation on the plate is always colourful, it has been eclipsed with the Chinese cuisine.

The major difference between the Chinese and American foods for dinner in the restaurants lies within the ingredients and spices used in cooking. Based on the Chinese saying, "people view food as the most important," thus, Chinese restaurants focus on the decoration of the food since most of them believe that the deliciousness of the food depends on the view one give on the food. From the ancient times, as Zili (8) notes, most Chinese restaurants have used different flavours of saltiness, sweetness, sour, bitter, and spicy to attract customers. To make the food more attractive, the Chinese restaurants often choose the ingredients and vary the cutting styles. There are basic Chinese food ingredients that should be available in almost all the restaurants and are used to prepare Chinese common recipes including garlic, green onions, cilantro, and chillies (Yan par. 1). From the differences in

cuisines, it is evident that the American food contain more meat and starchy food. To get the fresh vegetables, the Chinese restaurants often buy fresh food supplies on a daily basis. For the Chinese restaurants, vegetables are like pak choi or bok choy, soy bean sprout, and Chinese cabbage and eggplant, which are unfamiliar among the American restaurants but commonly used in preparation of typical Chinese food (Foreigners in China par. 3). Most Chinese foods have sauces and condiments such as oyster, chilli paste, spice powder, soy sauce, and sesame oil used in improving the smell of food and spiciness.

### **Dinner Procedure**

In dinner procedure, Americans have starters, main course, dessert, and coffee. The starter is vegetable salad or soup with the most typical main course includes beef, chicken, or fish.

After the main course, Americans serve some sweet foods, which range from pastries, cakes, fruits, and ice cream (Foreigners in China par. 6). Once the table is cleared, Americans serve coffee that forms the last course. On the other hand, the Chinese dinner is characterized with tea, starter, dishes, main course, soup, and fruits. The appetizers are cold dishes and include vegetables or meat cooked and allowed to cool down. Distinctly, there are ingredients used to flavour the dishes: soy sauce, hot pepper oil, and vinegar. If there is a group of people sitting around the table, the Chinese food culture requires ordering of various dishes that are too many to enumerate (Zili 4). Clearly, this forms the key differences between Chinese foods and American food culture. Food structures and concepts from the base of distinction.

Yin-Yang theory among the Chinese consider meat as imbalanced food. Thus, meat often lack in most Chinese main meals. When Chinese have a big banquet containing several dishes, they might be unable to eat much rice. However, a bowl of rice or noodle would still be available. The Chinese serve soup with main dishes which also forms the difference between the Chinese and America's eating culture (Yan par. 7). Fruits are considered the major typical dessert in any Chinese dinner which makes most restaurants have an assembly

of different types of fruits which they arrange using a defined pattern. In large restaurants, the commonly used types of fruits are pears and watermelon. Among the Chinese, these fruits make them feel clean and assist in clearing the mouth.

### **Serving the Food at the Centre of the Table and Giving Each Person a Plate**

Another major difference between the Chinese and American dining culture is the position on the table in which the dishes are served. In the American restaurants, since every person uses a big plate, each visitor is served with his/her plate. Moreover, in the America's restaurants, each person orders from the courses for himself/herself. However, among the Chinese, the dishes are served at the centre of the table for all people to share. Accordingly, each participant uses a small spoon to enable him/her to hold the food picked from the shared meal. The foods, as Yan indicates, are taken from the table at the centre into one's plate during the meal and one takes as much as one can finish (par. 8). Notably, this custom is applicable to appetizers. On the other hand, noodle and rice are the main dishes of the Chinese which each person serves in his or her plate.

When several people go out for dinner at a restaurant, it is imperative to consider the Chinese way of having dinner as it helps to ensure that each person enjoys the diversified meal. The trend enables each person to order various kinds of dishes to make it possible for all to share. Although the Chinese are identified by some of these practices, they have led to troubles and embarrassments among some Chinese restaurants operating in America. This is a challenge because the American customers only order for the dishes they need and leave other Chinese food in the menu (Zili 7). The other types of foods that do not fit within the menu are cut off. In addition, there are some Chinese restaurants that provide different menus to the Chinese customers from American clients. To some extent, some of the restaurants have been able to adapt the American way of cooking to meet the needs of their market.

Evidently, this forms the base of the reason why the Chinese restaurants in America have become westernized.

### **Differences in Chicken Meals: Breasts vs. Necks and Feet**

The way Americans and Chinese view chicken dishes differ based on their cultural orientations. In most American supermarkets, the costly parts in a chicken are breasts while other parts are cheaper. Nevertheless, parts such as chicken necks and jaws are discarded. On the other hand, Chinese culture views chicken differently. According to *Foreigners in China*, Chinese consider meat close to the bones to be tastier than those with huge meat chunks (par. 3). While visiting the restaurants for dinner, most Chinese often have taste for chicken parts with less meat like necks and feet. In such restaurants, chicken parts such as necks and jaws are considered more expensive than the other parts. Most American restaurants serve their dishes especially fish with bones and in an event a client finds bones in their meals, they would consider such an act horrible. On the other hand, the Chinese often serve fish as a whole. Therefore, they view removal of bones while eating as part of eating.

### **Quite vs. Noisy Oriented Eating Habits**

The American eating environment is characterized with quietness while that of the Chinese is noisy. Conspicuously, it is known that Americans are active in the common day, but when at the table eating, they become quiet. The Chinese people are quite opposite. The arrangement in the Chinese restaurants is that people sit around the table to share the meal which is different from the American style of eating. Food is considered both an object of enjoying and intermedia of exchanging the feelings. Americans are people in buffet; they are used to rejecting the wine and dishes modestly (Zili 6). Most Americans think that drinking and smoking is a bad behaviour. Therefore, they do not like others to smoke, especially in social places such as restaurants. In China, most people drink and smoke. To some extent, it seems an odd phenomenon to have a social intercourse like dining in restaurants without smoking

and drinking. Among the Chinese, there are still a few bad habits on the dining tables which result in noisy atmosphere.

### **Chinese Dining Rules and Culture**

Within the state ceremonies, China has always attached great importance to etiquette, which they consider fundamental portion of their food culture. In Chinese, good dining etiquette and table rules shows one's good self-cultivation and leaves a good impression to the host. For instance, one is required not to clear the food in the dishes or plates, as doing so is a rude way of informing the host that he/she did not serve enough of the food (China Travel par. 8). However, one should also not leave entire food uneaten, as that indicated high levels of carelessness and irresponsibility. At the same time, at the table, the Chinese share meals communally, and to ensure ease in sharing, rectangular and square are used, but round tables are used if the groups are large. With the large round table, the Chinese dining rules require the use of large tables with Lazy Susan turntable for facilitating serving or passing the dishes (China Travel par. 10). Essentially, Chinese culture does not allow tapping of foot while on the table since it is considered rule and indication of poverty. Therefore, those tapping their foot are viewed as non-stable. Moreover, there is a saying among the Chinese that goes, "a man tapping his foot is poor and a woman tapping her food is indecent."

Similarly, there are rules guiding the use of chopsticks. Chinese culture encourages using sticking chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice as traditional ways of venerating the ancestors. Such practices are considered to symbolized death and could be a sign of bad luck. In a dining table, one should not tap the bowl with chopsticks. At one point in China, the beggars tapped their bowls to attract the attention of people, and to some extent, the customers do so to the waitress when they have a feeling the service is slow. Thus, tapping the bowl is an insult to the host (China Travel par. 4). In case there is a host, Chinese culture require guests to eat after the host has had the first bite of the meal.

Research into Chinese food culture indicate that worthy cuisines does not originate from a single tradition, instead from amalgamation, selection, and organization of different traditions. For example, there are foods, recipes, and dishes that were imported into China. Therefore, through globalization and continued interaction with the other cultures, the Chinese dishes and dining culture have changed drastically (Yan par. 5). Besides, to accommodate the menus, dishes, and eating habits of the other cultures, Chinese restaurants have been able to adjust their practices with a view of consolidating their customer bases. The Chinese traders and emigres also came to China with their customary food and cooking methods, and later returned to China with new foods and recipes. Moreover, the foreigners entering China came with their food. Evidently, the amalgamation of these practices changed the Chinese cuisines and eating habits. For instance, toasting with baijiu has become a common practice among the Chinese diners. These are practices borrowed from the western cultures through continued interactions. In most Chinese diners, it is easy to hear words such as “gambai”, which translates to draining the glass (China Travel par. 11; Foreigners in China par. 9). Chinese cultures do not expect women to consume beverages with alcoholic contents while it considered rude for men to decline taking alcohol. Therefore, for the Chinese, if a male person prefers to abstain from taking consuming alcoholic beverages, it is vital to attribute such to the moral and health reasons. In addition, splitting of the bills do not exist among the Chinese and if one is the guest of honour, he/she might decide to settle the bills (Zili 7). The dining rules also do not allow much questioning of the host instead encourage thanking them after the meal.

### **Collectivism and Individualism**

In Chinese culture, the concept of collectivism dates to the old time. The Chinese believe that if one wants to establish himself/herself, he/she should assist others to establish first.

Therefore, it is imperative that people are complementary in nature and adhere to the norms

and values of the group. The goals of group often outweigh personal goals, which makes the basic value to be seeking harmony with others. Collectivism has impacted on the Chinese restaurant dining habits. Specifically, Chinese like the tendency of sharing, and before dinner starts, restaurant attendants bring the menu and ask what they would wish to take before ordering. When the dinner is over, one person clears the bills (Zili 7). In the Chinese dining culture, sharing value is manifested from the beginning to the end. However, in America, people attach more priority to individualism since they emphasize on the personal value and dignity. The Chinese dinner often takes the sharing way: they share on the table. On the other hand, the Americans emphasize on their “own” which means that each person eats food from his/her plate (Foreigners in China par. 6). Therefore, they do not think of tasting the food of others. At the same time, meeting of bills is an individual’s affair.

### **Different Time Value**

China is a country that has Polychronic-time (P-time). Therefore, Chinese are always a bit later in time scheduled when taking part in certain activities. In most cases, they are about half an hour late. So, Chinese restaurants would be expected to prepare some games such as mah-jong, chatting, and cards. Besides, it is important to have tea and other desserts like peanuts, candy, cakes, and melon seeds. Notably, these are means to keep the guests who arrived on time busy (Zili 9). The Chinese are accustomed to such practices and would view such kind of lateness a normal behaviour. Nonetheless, the conception seems to change along the cross-cultural communication in some cases. Time perspective of the Americans is different from the Chinese. Americans have Monochronic-time (M-time) since they believe that time is money. Once they decide on the time to be on the restaurant for dinner, they would be punctual. Engaging in games such as of cards as one waits for food is deemed irresponsible and time unconsciousness on the part of the restaurants.

## **Preparation of Food**

Chinese food differs from the American food from the way it is prepared before cooking. The Chinese restaurants cut their ingredients in bigger sizes before frying or steaming within a short time. Consequently, the Americans cut their ingredients in a bit smaller sizes and cut the portion of the food in their plates using the forks and knives. There are also some Chinese ingredients used in American restaurants such as shark fins, jelly fish, and salty shrimp paste. In addition, there are American cuisine herbs added to the Chinese food such as thyme, rosemary, oregano, dill, and tarragon (Yan par. 5). The Chinese restaurants are also wider than Americans' restaurants. Seemingly, preparation of the American-style food is peaceful since only the required food is bought. The Americans buy fish lump where it is difficult to distinguish the kind of fish. On the other hand, the kitchen of the Chinese restaurants is wild in nature as there is chicken, fish, and duck and full of glint of knives. In the American restaurants, they use forks and knives as tableware while in the Chinese restaurants, the tableware used are two simple bamboo sticks. In terms of preparation, the American and Chinese pasta differ.

In most Chinese and American restaurants, spit roasting and meat grilling have become common. In American restaurants, they use barbecue smokers in cooking chicken, corn, and pork. Frying is considered the most common in America since most of their frequent dishes relate to frying. The local families in America like baking, which is generally applicable to breads, sweet confectionaries, lasagne, and pastries (Foreigners in China par. 5). While the Chinese focus on the colour, shape, and smell, American restaurants lay emphasis on speed, convenience, and cost. Besides, the ingredients used in the Chinese and American foods differ. According to Foreigners in China (par. 8) and Yan (par. 5), the two nations exhibit different cooking styles emanating from the ingredients for recipes to eating arrangements. In most Chinese restaurants, the main dish is rice since it is the main crop of

most Asian countries and applicable in almost each level. Rice exists in two types: *steamed*, which is served with noodles and rice paper in a meal and *tofu*, which is served with vegetarian meals due to its high protein content. Tofu is used commonly in restaurants in regions with traditions based on Buddhism.

### **Conclusion**

In retrospect, Chinese and American restaurant dining cultures are different based on the cuisines offered, ingredients used, and methods of preparation. Foods play significant roles in human growth and civilization though eating habits, meanings of food, and starters or appetizers differ from one culture to another. American cuisines seem delicious, but people tend to love Chinese cuisines. In the modern hospitality industry, the Chinese cuisines seem to be more fascinating compared to the American's since they have unique characteristics which are not offered by other cuisines. As a result, it tends to lure huge number of gastronomists. The taste and cooking methods also vary. In the American dinners, food and wine are important though it is a setoff. When they have their meals, they maintain high level of quietness and observe meal times, while the Chinese accept noise and playing of games even in restaurants. Cultural diversity plays a critical role in determining the way the Americans and Chinese carry out with their restaurant dining concerns.

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