

On Differences of Table Manners between China and West

Xiaoling Yang

Foreign Language School
Nanchang Normal University
China

Abstract

The social lifestyle of different countries form different diet culture and table manner, which is an important part of non-language culture. Table manner culture is a part of the diet cultures, reflects the difference between Chinese and western culture. The paper from the perspective of different etiquette about dining in China and West, analyzes the differences and causes of table manners between China and West, aims to promote cross-cultural communication activities between China and West through learning more about the differences between Chinese and western cultures.

Keywords: table manners; differences; reasons

I. Introduction

Manners are different in every country. Some manners that we consider are polite in China are not necessarily polite in other countries. We are more familiar with the dining separately in the West and dining together in China. Chinese people advocate the values of collectivism, so Chinese people like to eat together that the table atmosphere in China is lively and harmony. And the Chinese hosts like to serve the dishes for their guests. But in the West, as western philosophy tends to focus on individualism and personal development, individualist values predominate in western countries. So, people just like to eat the food on their plate. What's more, it is not a mistake although western people can't understand the way we serving dishes to guests. This is just a cultural difference between China and West.

Likewise, table manner culture is a part of the diet culture, and the difference between Chinese and western cultures. Sometimes, different etiquette is an important reason of misunderstandings between different cultures, leading to the failure of intercultural communication. Learning the differences and the origin of table manners between China and the West in the aspect of various religions belief, values and cultural connotations, not only can enhance the understanding of the target language culture, but also can perform well during cross-cultural communication, so as to avoid the misunderstanding caused by improper behavior or manner. In addition, communication etiquette becomes more and more important as the bridge and ties to link communication among people. Avoiding abruptness and rudeness, which ensure the activities of diplomacy can successfully. Therefore, understanding table manners habits and characteristics is of great importance to promote the development of Chinese diplomacy.

II. Differences between Chinese and Western Table Manners

As is known, there are many differences in diet concept, eating habits and eating atmosphere between Chinese and western table manners. For example, if you are quiet on the table, it will make the master feel that he does not entertain you well. On the contrary, western people only communicate with the guest who sits next to him, and the voice of the conversation is very light. Because others will think you are `impolite supposing you talk loudly on the table. So, in order to promote the exchange and integration of Chinese and western table manners, reducing the conflict and misunderstanding, the following is about the analysis of the differences between China and West in the table from the aspect of seating arrangement, tableware placement, meals order, table language and food culture.

2.1 Seating arrangement

Whether it is in China or in the western countries, masters are always pay attention to their guests' seating arrangement.

According to the works of Mencius: “There should be affection between fathers and sons, affiliation between monarchs and courtiers, distinction between husbands and wives, order between seniors and juniors, and trust among friends.” In China, people advocates to compare the status of the noble and the humbler, arrange the guests’ seat according to the order between seniors and juniors. On the basis of traditional culture “the east is noble” and “the direction of facing in the main door is noble”. That is why the seat towards the east or facing in the main door is always arranged for the noblest guest. Chinese people usually use the table whose shape is round. That means reunions, harmony and peace. And there is a distinction between the status of the noble and the humble. The seat directly facing the door of the round table is the main seat, and the order of table is loftiest, it is generally offered to the elderly, the main guest or the people who has high status. The seat on both sides of the main seat is secondary seat and its importance is second only to the main seat. It means that the status of the people who sits on the secondary seat is only next to the main seat’s people. The farthest seat from the main seat, the last seat near the door, is the lowest in round table. It is generally offered to the male and female owners or people who accompany guests to sit down. If it’s a family dinner, the seat is usually arranged for children. If it’s a department banquet, it will be seated by the people whose position is lower. Therefore, the order of seating arrangement has presented a thinking of distinction between the noble and the humbler to some extent.

Ladies first are always preferred as a traditional social rule in the West. If it is a party which invites male and female together, the most honorable seat is reserved for the hostess, while the host sits opposite the hostess. The right is generally considered as superiority in the West. In other words, seat on the right is higher than the left. Western food is usually served with a long table, and guest will center on the host and hostess. Man and woman should be seated crossly rather than adjacent to sit, and man should let the woman sit on his right side rather than in the aisle. At the period of seating, man should pull the chair for lady, and sitting after the lady.

2.2 Tableware placement

In China, there is tableware including chopsticks, bowl, cup, plate and so on. The layout of tableware is relatively simple. The plate is placed closest to the body, water cup is placed on the left side of the plate, and wine glass is on the right. Small plate should be put on the above of big plate, and bowl should be placed ahead to the left of the body, then spoon should be put in it. Meanwhile, chopsticks have occupied an important position in Chinese food culture since ancient times. Chopsticks are essential on the Chinese table. It should be careful not to lick the residue on the chopsticks, and put down your chopsticks when talking to others. Don’t stick chopsticks in the food or use them to beat anything. It is important to point at others with chopsticks and use chopsticks to pick teeth or get something other than food.

In the West, people tends to use knives, forks, spoons, cups and so on, and the tableware placed more complicated than China’s. People often put tray in the middle, fork on the left and knife on the right. The tip of the knife must be placed up and the edge of the knife should be placed inside. If the knife and fork or other tableware is fallen to the ground, it is a decent way of asking the waiter to help you picked up than picking it up by yourself. Put the spoon on the plate, staple food on the left and tableware on the right before dinner. Meanwhile, you will find that the placement of cups is also exquisite. The order that the glasses are placed variously according to the type of wine, from left to right is spirits wine glasses, wine glasses, champagne glasses and beer glasses.

2.3 Food Culture

There is a Chinese saying, “food is the basic of the people, taste is the basic of the food.” in China. In the Book of Rites, Confucius has also talked “dining between male and female are the most basic important requirement”. It can be seen that the Chinese people attach great importance to diet. In the same way, Mr. Sun Zhongshan had said that, “it is show that the skill of cooking is not good if you can’t distinguish the taste well”. So the charm of Chinese food is “taste”. Chinese people often say whether a dish is delicious depending on its color and flavor. Chinese people are emotional thinker, that is, people are more sensitive to food than the rational. And people often comment on a dish depending on whether it’s delicious or not rather than its nutrition when they taste the food. Because of paying attention to the taste of food, Chinese people will often ignore the basic nutrition of food. The traditional foods like spring rolls and deep-fried dough sticks, the nutrients of the foods are lost after frying or prolonged stewing. On the other hands, due to Chinese people regarding the “taste” of dishes as very important, so here are five kinds of cooking methods: steaming, boiling, roasting, frying and stir frying. Therefore, there are eight major famous cuisines, or eight styles of dishes. They are Shandong cuisine, Sichuan cuisine, Cantonese cuisine, Fujian cuisine, Su cuisine, Zhejiang cuisine, Hunan cuisine and Anhui cuisine. It makes Chinese food standing in the world food.

But in the West, their dishes are more reasonable than China's in terms of nutrition. The western diet concept is very reasonable and they attach great importance to nutrition balanced collocation, pay attention to science and nutrition. In the West, people usually care about how many proteins, fattiness, vitamins and calories their food contained, and they also consider the absorption of food for nutrition. On the contrary, they don't care whether the dishes and the taste are good or bad. Because these foods are nutritious and can satisfy the needs of their body functions, they still eat even if the food seems to be unappetizing. For example, Westerners usually eat a cup of milk or oatmeal, a few slices of bread, a fried egg plus a few slices of meat in the morning. And scientist points that such breakfast is very healthy and meet the nutrition and enough energy needs of the body.

2.4 Tableware use

The difference about the use of tableware between China and the west is always very distinct. Chinese use chopsticks, spoon, bowl and plate. Chinese tackle any food with chopsticks and spoon. Meeting changes with constancy can describe Chinese tableware. Chinese feel proud about it for long and regard it as a symbol for advancement. Except use for eating, it is also to be linked to this antique people's god. Westerner cut food with forks, knives, spoon, bowl and plate. They cut food with knives and forks while serving food in plates. And they have a special spoon for soup.

The most iconic tableware between China and the West are chopsticks and knives and forks have an effect on the lifestyle also shows two different kinds of wisdom. It's naturally that different region have different culture and influences these people in there. Diet is important in our daily life and also influences the tableware between China and West. Since ancient times, Chinese subsisted mainly on agriculture and our staple food is rice and noodles that we can be easily placed food in mouth with chopsticks. But in many Western countries, their ancestors are hunting lifestyle and their staple food is kinds of meat that they have to cut big animals up with edge tool. These two almost the opposite cultures tend reflected in the diet and naturally be embodied in the choice and use of tableware.

Chinese always eat together that partly due to chopsticks and they like to sit around the table while eating like a big family. It makes Chinese keep stronger traditional family values than Westerner. And, the opposite eating system in the West because of knife and fork. This extends their free spirit, and independent nature.

III. Reasons for the different table manners between Chinese and west

People don't grow to maturity without regulations, it will do unsuccessful if you do not follow the rules, and the state will not be peaceful without patriarchal etiquette. Every kind of traditional etiquette can reflect the culture it represents. So, different table manners in China and the West are influenced by many factors, such as climate, religions belief, lifestyle, values and cultural connotation and so on.

3.1 Climate

As we all know, China lies in the southeast of the Asian continent. The southeast of China is near the ocean and the northwestern part is a large area of desert. And the topography of China is high in the west and low in the east, showing a ladder-like distribution. The area of mountains and plateaus is vast and the distance from east to west is about 5000 kilometers. Therefore, the combination of temperature and precipitation is varied, forming a wide variety of climate. Due to the geographical differences in each region, people in all regions usually live according to actual conditions. Therefore, Chinese staple food is usually rice and pasta. However, many western countries have a temperate maritime climate, which influenced by the westerly winds and warm current from the ocean, so that the sunshine time is short and the whole year is mild and rainy, suitable for the development of animal husbandry. So Westerners are used to eating meat.

3.2 Religion belief

The Chinese cultural traditions for thousands of years are reflected in Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. The Buddhists believed that people needs to be compassionate and help others out of trouble. For example, the tableware "chopsticks" are made from nature, and the cost of chopsticks is cheap and its workmanship is simple. Moreover, the whole use of chopsticks is collective work, which can't be completed without either party. It shows that the Chinese nation is centered on collectivism.

But in the West, people generally believe in Christianity. The Christian doctrine believes that god created man and the basis of Christian ethics is original sin. Adam and Eve, the human ancestors, committed crimes because they ate the forbidden fruit, and passed on to their descendants, which becomes the root of all evil.

Therefore, the theory of original sin has been developing into the original sin culture in Western countries, which has a profound influence on the Western people's psychology. So, Western countries advocate democracy, freedom, equality and individualism. And Christians are forbid to eating bloody food and offerings. In the past, Christians have a simple ritual before dinner, crossing their hearts to thank god for the gift. So, Westerners notions of superiority are not as strong as China's in table manners.

3.3 Lifestyle

Culture and life are inseparable. Chinese people advocate eating and chewing food slowly. So three meals a day are usually hot and pay attention to the color and aroma. And China has gradually formed a variety of cuisines, such as Sichuan, Guangdong, Shandong and other regional cuisines and snacks, which more adapted to the use of chopsticks and other tableware. But in the West, people pursuit freedom and their sense of rhythm are also strong. So they usually eat cold breakfast and dinner, only hot for lunch. Due to the Westerners' fast-paced life, the fast-food industry is prevalent in the West.

3.4 Cultural Connotations

Since ancient times, China has been deeply influenced by Confucianism. Confucius regarded "kindheartedness" as the highest moral standard, and Taoists advocate the idea of "harmony with nature, quiet and inaction". And Buddhists advocate delivering all living creatures from suffering compassionately. So, China has formed the ethical standard which is the core of Confucianism, including love, justice, etiquette, knowledge, integrity, tolerance, filial piety, fraternal love and so on. However, most people in the West believe in Christianity. They think God created all things, and God is omnipotent and unique. So, Western countries advocate freedom, democracy and equality, proclaiming the power of the individual, focusing on personal values and individualism.

IV. Conclusion

Chinese food and western food are one of food cultures. Culture is bound to communication and transmission. Despite different social histories, different ethnic cultures and different geographical features, different diet backgrounds have been existed between China and the West. However, the connotation of "eating" won't change because of these differences. It has become the consensus of Chinese and western food to emphasize variety of food, balanced nutrition, rational matching and health. If we have a good understanding of the differences of table manners between China and West, we will avoid cultural conflicts and some contradictions, and ensure the progress of exchanges smoothly. Understanding the differences of table manners between China and the West, as well as the reasons for these differences, is a good way to understand the local culture. That permits expressing ideas accurately and properly in cross-cultural communication. Similarly, it can avoid communication obstacles and misunderstandings caused by inappropriate ways or behaviors. It can also further improve the success rate of economic and cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and West, promoting the development of both sides.

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