A Comparative Study of Differences between Chinese and Western Table Manners

Jiayi Wang

Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, China.

How to cite this paper: Jiayi Wang. (2023) A Comparative Study of Differences between Chinese and Western Table Manners. Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 7(4), 668-671. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2023.04.006

Received: April 20, 2023
Accepted: May 17, 2023
Published: June 14, 2023

*Corresponding author: Jiayi Wang, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, China.

Abstract
With the development of globalization, having dinner is not just for people’s basic need, but also for social communication. Nowadays, decent etiquettes on dinner table are more and more essential. Against different cultural backgrounds, China and Western countries may have different table manners. With the influx of Western culture into China, Chinese traditional etiquette has been constantly impacted by Western culture. To diffuse Chinese traditional etiquette and effectively integrate it with Western etiquette is more conducive to the cross-cultural communication. Hence, based on Hofstede’s dimensions of cultural variability theory, Kluckhohn’s value orientation theory and Edward T. Hall’s space theory, detailed discussion and comparison of differences between Chinese and Western table manners, including tableware, dining atmosphere and seat arrangement, are mainly talked about in this paper. It aims to analyze the cultural causes of these differences. It is essential to distinguish these differences and take an objective and respectful attitude to cooperate.

Keywords
Table manners, Hofstede’s dimensions of cultural variability theory, Kluckhohn’s value orientation theory and Edward T. Hall’s space theory, cultural differences

1. Introduction

According to what has been mentioned above, it is apparent that there are various differences between Chinese and Western table manners. In order to make them more coherent, before analyzing possible cultural factors, it is necessary to list concrete differences in terms of the listed points respectively.

1.1 Tableware

For one thing, the use of tableware has personnel characteristics both in China and western countries. In China, tableware is relatively simple and free. People usually use chopsticks, spoons and plates. Before beginning, it’s polite to place chopsticks on the right side of plates. Compared with Chinese tableware, it’s more complicated in western countries. They have a series of strict rules about tableware’s position and usage. On dinner table, there are various kinds of knives, forks, cups, spoons and so on according to the usage. For example, tablespoons prepared for tasting soup are forbidden to eat cakes. Then, all of the tableware should be placed from outside to inside in accordance with the order of serving dishes. What’s more, the number of tableware is supposed to be the same as the dishes’ number.

For another, the meaning of tableware display is different. At a Chinese banquet, if one is having a pause in the process of dining, he would lay his chopsticks aside on the plate; when he has finished his meal, he would vertically lay the chopsticks on the bowl. At a western banquet, crossing the knife and fork would mean that one is not fi-
nished eating, just pausing for a break; when finishing eating, one would place his knife and fork together across the top of the plate, with the sharp edge of the blade facing in.

1.2 Dining Atmosphere

In western countries, the dining atmosphere is quiet and romantic. With the dim light and soothing music, people concentrate on delicious food on their own plates and seldom speak aloud. However, interaction is an integral part of Chinese dining culture. Chinese people prefer to chat and interact with each other while sharing delicious food because we believe that the lively atmosphere on the dinner table reflects the hospitality of guests and the warmth of the host family. If necessary, we would like to place tasty food on the elders’ or leaders’ plates to show their respect. Affected by this custom, it comes into being a special table etiquette called “drinking culture”, which means people narrow down their social distance and make negotiations by toasting on the dinner table.

1.3 Seating Arrangement

The arrangement of the seat is an important form of using the spatial position to express each person's status and the relationship between people and land (Bian & Gao, 2004). In western countries, people like to choose a long table at a big party. Host and hostess sit at both ends and guests of honor sit beside them. In general, the more important the guests are, the closer they will sit to the host and hostess.

In China, people are accustomed to sitting around a large round table. The best seat normally faces south or the door. Diners often spend a few minutes figuring out who should sit in the best seat. And only the host or the most respected one gets the honor to make the order.

2. Causes Analysis

Table manners are influenced by various complex factors, such as historical and geographical backgrounds, national characters and so on. In my opinion, thinking modes in different cultures is one of the most important factors. Therefore, in this paper, I demonstrate some reasons from the perspective of culture.

2.1 Relationship of Man to Nature

According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s value orientation, there are three kinds of relations between man and nature: mastery, submissive and harmonious. This theory indicates the basic attitude toward nature in different countries.

Tableware is an epitome of man-nature orientation. Deeply affected by Confucianism, Chinese people believe in the theory that man is an integral part of nature, so their attitude toward food is temperate. Traditional chopsticks are the most typical tableware embodying Chinese harmonious consciousness. There is no main or auxiliary part in the use of chopsticks. Only when the user operates two sticks together with five fingers properly can they taste delicious food (Yu & Ling, 2015). As Roland Barthes commented on chopsticks: “Food is no longer the prey of human violence, but a matter to be transported in harmony.” (Liu Chenghua, 2002).

However, most western countries are influenced by maritime civilization and commodity economy, so they have more courage to take adventures and conquer nature to make profits. That’s the reason why they choose knives and forks as the common tableware to control the food.

2.2 Collectivism and individualism

In Hofstede’s dimensions of cultural variability theory, he has mentioned that people in collectivist cultures are interdependent and think highly of group harmony. On the contrary, people in individualistic cultures concentrate more on independence and competition.

Most western countries are immersed in individualism. It means that the boundary between people is very clear, so they do not like mutual interference. Besides, for people in western countries, eating is just a basic tool to sustain life and maintain health, like adding fuel into machines. They don’t consider restaurants as the best place to integrate and communicate. When they are having dinner, they wouldn’t share plates of food with each other and talk about private affairs.

But it’s an opposite way in China. China is a typical country influenced by collectivism. Since a young age, children have been taught to take care of others and cooperate with them. Harmony is one of the most typical characteristics of Chinese cooking culture. The purpose of dining together in China is to share, relax and accompany
(Yi Zhongtian, 2009). Meanwhile, Chinese people’s idea of privacy is weak. On dinner table, to show politeness and create a harmonious atmosphere, Chinese people prefer to ask some questions related to privacy, such as job and hobbies, even when they meet for the first time.

2.3 Space speaks

People's concept of space is affected by acquired factors. Therefore, in different cultures, people have different communication rules and values related to space. Edward T Hall demonstrates the importance of “space speaks” in his book “The silent language”: “Spatial changes give a tone to communication, accent it, and at times even override the spoken word. The flow and shift of distance between people as they interact with each other is part and parcel of the communication process.”

The non-verbal meaning represented by spatial orientation is closely related to the cultural traditions and local customs of different nationalities (Zhang Dong, 2012). Seating arrangement mirrors spatial conception in different countries. During Chinese long history, no matter in which dynasty, the emperor always sat facing south when they enthroned and deliberated state affairs. South has become a symbol of honor. Hence, in big parties, the most important person often chooses the seat facing south in China.

In ancient Western society, the seat of the most honored guest was on the right side of the host, because people used to hold a dagger with the right hand and stab the person sitting on the left. If the most distinguished guest is placed on the right side of the host, not only will the slayer be unable to kill, but the host will have the advantage of subduing him (Edward T. Hall, 1973). With the development of society, the ancient appearance of stabbing at dinner parties has become extinct. But the rule has been preserved. Today, in western countries, the honored sit on the right side of the host.

3. Conclusion

Table manner is actually a kind of historical and cultural sedimentation and extension. This paper has compared tableware, dining atmosphere and seating arrangement in China and western countries. Knowing the differences, people can understand foreigners’ behaviors better. Facing these gaps, people should comprehend more and remember that every culture is equal and valuable. It’s irrational to justify right or wrong with our own standard. Only by recognizing cultural differences between China and West and making an effective integration can we establish a social cultural etiquette system and achieve the goal of the ideal harmonious society.

My research still has some limitations. On the one hand, the factors causing different table manners are multiple and comprehensive. In this paper, I just analyze the causes from the perspective of culture. On the other hand, the content of table manners is rich and I just choose three appropriate manners to illustrate. So, based on personal interest, I will do further research about cooking culture in China and western countries.

References


