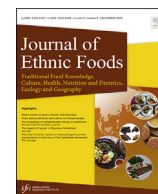


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Food, eating behavior, and culture in Chinese society



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ABSTRACT

Humans need to obtain nutrients from foods in order to survive and be healthy. The requirements of energy and nutrients are different due to differences in race, age, sex, and physical activity level. People living in different places take nutrients from different kinds of food; therefore, nutrition is a cultural biological process rather than a simple physiological and biochemical process. Food intake can directly influence one's biological function through life, as its results are on a biological level. When people eat, the process can be influenced by economic, politics, culture, and many other factors.

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1. The social functions of food

Food is not only the source of nutrition for human, but also plays various roles in our daily life, beliefs, and socioeconomics.

1.1. Establish and maintain interpersonal relationship

Food has many symbolic meanings; it not only expresses but also establishes the relationship between people and their environment as well as between people and what they believe. Therefore, food is an important component of a society.

Food consumed by one person alone is not a social food. However, when it is consumed by a group of people together or eaten in a religious ceremony, the sociality of food is identified. In human society, food is a means for people to establish and express relationships between one another. This relationship can exist among individuals, community members, religious groups, and ethnic groups. For instance, in the Spring Festival in China, people eat dumplings to express the relationship between themselves and God (Fig. 1).

In Chinese society, people usually treat others with meals in order to make new friends or enhance established relationships. Cantonese breakfast is known as *morning tea* and lots of people talk about business and exchange information while having morning tea together.

1.2. Express the degree of interpersonal relationship

Different foods convey different meanings among the eaters and indicate the closeness of the relationship. In Chinese culture, service of expensive and rare foods usually shows the respect to the guests. A formal dinner includes 4–6 cold dishes, 8–10 hot dishes, served with soup and fruits. A usual family dinner serves close friends. Close friends or colleagues usually go to food stalls for dining and drinking. Eating a lunch box together is a normal work relationship, and intimate lovers will have candlelit dinner together.

1.3. Represent social status

Foods can be used by people to express their social status. Rare and expensive food is frequently used to represent wealth and high social economic status. These foods are normally animal food and rich in protein, and are hard to obtain because of the rareness, expensiveness, or the need for importation. This custom is mainly related to the upper class living style, for instance, bird's nest, shark's fin, bear's paw, and lobster in traditional Chinese society.

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China, France, and Italy are famous for their cuisine, delicious food, and food culture.

Eating behavior, once formed, has continuity. When people moving to other regional or countries, will continue keeping their traditional eating habit, taste, and cooking methods, unless in very special cases, otherwise it is hard to change.

In China, rice is usually the staple food for people living in the south of China, while food made of wheat flour such as steamed bread, bread, and buns is the staple for people living in the north (Fig. 2). Even when travelling or moving to a foreign country, people tend to eat the food which eating usually as the first choice. Many Chinese people in foreign countries, even after years of migration, still maintain the habit of eating Chinese food, which is very difficult to change.

1.5. Celebrate important event

Owing to its function to express the central position in the representation and relationship, a dinner or banquet can be used as a symbol of the important events in human life, such as wedding, baptism, and religious belief. The symbolic significance of food eaten in religion is more important than the nutritional value; for example, the consumption of these foods can determine and reestablish the relationship between man and God, and between people.

People eat special food to celebrate important events or festivals, such as Americans eating turkey for Thanksgiving in the USA,



Fig. 1. People eat dumplings to express the relationship between themselves and God in the Spring Festival in China.

1.4. As a group characteristic

Food can not only indicate the social status, but also can be used as a character of one group, divided by regions, families, races or religions. Each country has a State Banquet. Some countries such as

Fig. 2. Rice is usually the staple food for people living in the south of China.

while specific food will be served for specific social events in China, for example, rice dumplings for the Dragon Boat Festival, moon cakes for the Mid-autumn Festival, and dumplings for the Spring Festival (Fig. 3).

Food customs will be affected by different society and culture each other. For example, the traditional food for celebrating one's birthday in China is noodles and peaches. Influenced by western culture, many people eat cake, light candles, and sing birthday songs at their birthday party. Interestingly, some people combine the traditional and western ways together, eating noodles and cake at the same time.

1.6. Symbolic significance

In Chinese culture, foods have been used as symbols of meaning in many occasions, to impart different information. Chinese dates mean that the couples can have children early; peanuts, also known as the longevity fruit, mean longevity; oranges and chestnuts mean good luck; rice cakes, promotion year; seaweed is a homonym of *rich*; noodle is *long*, which means health and longevity; and glutinous rice balls means the family stay together. In Chinese wedding customs, the man has to send to the woman's home wine (*long and long*) or fish (*annual and superabundant*). However, egg (*more and more strange*) or lotus root (*a section of arrowroot is separated, but the clinging fiber remains*) must not be used as a gift. In some areas, however, after the birth of a child, eggs dyed red by parents are sent to relatives and friends, to show auspiciousness. Some foods are a symbol of bad luck, such as pear, which sounds like *away*, and eating it could mean *separation*.

1.7. Means of reward or punishment

Food is often used as a means of reward or punishment. For example, when a child has good school performance, parents may

take them to a western fast food restaurant as a reward. While a child does not have good performance, then their parents do not give the child the food they want by way of punishment.

A survey conducted among children's mothers or caregivers found that they often use food as a reward or punishment. The method of giving food to reward the children's correct behavior, and using the method of deprive the food to punish the children's wrong behavior. The survey found that 29% of parents use foods to comfort the child, 23% of parents use the foods as a reward, and 10% of parents take the method of depriving food as a punishment. Sweets and desserts are the most commonly used foods for these purposes, 62% of mothers often use sweets as reward or comfort, and withhold sweets as punishment.

2. Purchase, production, and distribution of food

Cultural differences in cultivation, harvest, production, serving, and consumption of food are significant. Written or unwritten rules exist in every culture, such as who is responsible for cooking and serving, for whom they do the cooking, what kind of people have a meal together, where to eat, in what kind of occasions, serving order, and courtesy of the diet. All the behavior that is related to food consumption is constrained by culture.

2.1. Food preparation

In many societies, women play an important role in food production, selection, purchase, and processing. It is usually women's responsibility to cook; some women are responsible for milking, breeding poultry and livestock, and also sowing and harvesting. As a wife and mother, she is the family food provider. Most of the woman's life depends on fulfilling these traditional obligations. Women engage in the trade of the market, and in the decision making of type, quantity, and quality of food purchased. It is reported that in Kenya 85% of women older than 16 years are engaged in housework, compared with only 54% of men; while 90% of women are responsible for cooking, and 71.4% of women are responsible for the purchase of food. Since women play a fundamental role in their children's food supply, nutrition education for women is significant for their children's diet and health, with consideration of the food nutrition, taste, and sanitation while making food.

2.2. The purchase and production of food

A survey conducted in four cities of China indicated that mothers in 69.8% households are usually responsible for food purchase, while this percentage was only 26.3% for fathers. Food freshness, sanitation, nutrition, and preference of children are the main factors considered for food purchase. Children are also involved in the choice of food and purchases in families: 20.7% of young children often ask parents to buy certain foods, while 49.9% of parents would take children's requests.

Men and women have different social responsibilities in the traditional Chinese culture. There is a saying of 'men outside the home, women inside' to express this. In the family, adult men are generally responsible for external affairs and work, such as farming and harvest; while women are responsible for the household work, such as doing laundry, cooking, and cleaning. In this traditional culture point of view, women are responsible for cooking, a tradition which is continued in many families, especially in rural areas. In urban areas, however, men and women's social division of labor has changed; in many families, men and women take on housework together; in some families, wives take care of food purchases and cleaning, while husbands cook. In other families wives and



Fig. 3. People eat special foods to celebrate important events or festivals, while specific foods will be served for specific social events in China, for example, moon cakes for the Mid-autumn Festival and dumplings for the Spring Festival.

husbands either cook or wash dishes; in certain families, men are responsible for most of the housework, which promotes the word *househusband*.

Compared with other countries, Chinese people spend much more time on cooking, with an average of 2–3 hours every day. Along with socioeconomic and income increases, the lifestyles of people continue to change. Especially in urban areas, people are unwilling to spend too much time in food preparation and cooking; therefore, the frequency of outside eating increases. The popularity of new technologies and new cooking instruments, such as a microwave oven, electromagnetic cooker furnace, and so on, has shortened the time spent on cooking, which saves more time for recreation.

2.3. Food distribution

Generally, within a family, women are responsible for the distribution of food. When adequate foods are available, each family members can get enough food. However, in the situation when foods are in short supply, different members of the family receive different amounts of foods. Usually, the needs of elders and men are met first, while women often might not get enough; therefore, women in the family are susceptible to nutritional problems.

There are two modes in food distribution within a family: *demand* and *contribution*. The *demand* mode refers that the distribution of food is based on different physical demands of all family members; and who need more nutrition intake is decided by the food distributor. For example, the mother, the distributor, is likely to feed the last amount of milk to a sick infant; while the healthy, although hungry babies might not get any milk. The *contribution* mode indicates that the distribution of food is in accordance with the family members' contribution to the family. Members who earn money for the family receive more compared with their counterparts who do not earn money, while the former has the priority of choosing food and also having the largest amount and the best part of the food, in order to save enough energy to support the family. This kind of distribution is used more when there is lack of food supply, because it is a necessary means to maintain family survival.

Sex difference exists when food distributed within the family. Generally, male members within the family are given more food as compared with the female members. These differences in food distribution in a family would affect the health of family members.

Age can also play an important role in food distribution within a family. Children receive more foods compared with their adult counterparts. Young children, both boys and girls, have the priority to receive food and their food quality is always the best. The older members in a family are very much valued in food distribution. They get first access to food and greater amounts than the other family members. This food distribution partially reflects the traditional Oriental culture virtue of respecting the senior.

3. Eating behavior

Human nutrition investigates nutrients requirements, their function, their contents in different foods, and their relationship with health. As all the nutrients that human needs are obtained from various foods, the behaviors related to food choice and consumption affects the nutrient intake directly, whereas these behaviors are influenced by social, economic, and cultural factors. Therefore, the research areas of human nutrition should not be limited to biological sciences, but should also be extended to eating behavior and its relevant factors. This area of research is as important as chemical and biological studies in the effects of preventing disease, and improving health.

3.1. The way of serving foods

Dishes are placed in the middle of the table for people to share. Members have to wait to eat until the whole family is seated. There are orders of serving rice, porridge, and soup. Usually the elders and the young are first served, followed by men, children, and women. Habits vary in different regions. In some places, the whole family eat together; in others, men and women eat separately; there are also places where women eat after men. Women are also responsible for the housework of cleaning the table and washing dishes.

Separate dining is common in western culture, while in China's dining culture, whether dining at home or eating out, a grouped dining system is used in most situations. While sharing the food, culture and atmosphere are shared. The biggest disadvantage of the group dining system may be the possibility of causing the spread of infectious diseases; therefore, one should promote the advantages of a separate dining system. Nevertheless, due to the conflict against traditional dining culture, eating separately is not likely to be implemented and promoted in China.

3.2. Number of meals

Most Chinese people (94%) have three meals a day, while 5% have two meals a day. However, the situation varies from urban to rural area. One quarter of residents living in the poor rural areas have two meals a day. In some rural areas in the north residents usually have three meals a day in the harvest season, and two meals a day in other seasons.

The China National Nutrition Survey indicated that residents with different ethnic groups differ in eating behaviors. The proportion of three meals per day was more than 95% in Tibet, Korea, Manchu, Bai, Kazakh, and Uighur. In the Han, Hui, Zhuang, and Mongolia the proportion was about 80%, while in Buyi and Yi that were 61% and 51%, respectively. The proportion of two meals a day at the Hani and Lahu were 88% and 82%, respectively.

3.3. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner

The time of breakfast for Chinese people is generally between 6:00 AM and 8:00 AM, and later at weekends. A few people take breakfast and lunch together as brunch. Some people have their breakfast at home, while some of them at a restaurant or the workplace. A few people eat on their way to work.

A survey conducted in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou found that, the proportion of having breakfast every day were 74.8%, 86.8%, and 90.5%, respectively. Some people usually skip their breakfast. The proportion of having breakfast every day in people over 35 years old was higher than their counterparts aged <35 years, while women are more frequently having breakfast than men. The reasons for skipping breakfast including limited time, lack of appetite, and the way to lose weight.

The foods eaten for breakfast vary in different regions. The Cantonese take breakfast as morning tea, including shrimp dumpling, steamed bun, chicken leg, vegetable, fritter, and soy milk. In north part of China, people usually eat bread, porridge, noodles, also including dumpling, fried fritter, etc. Most of them do not have vegetables and fruits for breakfast.

In order to open up the market to meet the needs of human consumption, western-style fast food has launched a series of breakfast products and combinations, including spinach-egg-chicken burgers, egg custard fort, green onion cakes, and green tea.

People usually have lunch between 11:30 AM and 1:00 PM. In small towns and rural areas of China, people go home for lunch. In the large and medium cities, due to the far distance and limited

time, some people have their lunch at the canteen, while some eat in nearby restaurants or fast-food shops. A few bring a lunch box from home, which is prepared and packed the day before.

People usually have dinner between 6:30 PM and 7:30 PM. In urban areas, dinner is usually the only chance to sit together and have a family meal. Therefore, dinner is usually abundant, including

two to four dishes, and one soup. It generally takes 1–2 hours to make a dinner.

Conflicts of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest.