



Original article

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.

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